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- 4 Médecins Sans Frontières
- 5 Humans for Rights Network
- 6 Médecins du Monde - Greece

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Mass containment sites for people seeking asylum must be abandoned

“Quasi-detention” sites are harmful to the health of people seeking asylum and must be replaced with safe and stable accommodation

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Prolonged confinement of people seeking asylum in mass containment centres is deeply harmful to their health and can in some cases violate international human rights laws.¹ Despite this, such centres continue to be used in the UK and have until recently been promoted as a way of controlling migration flows. Since 2020, the UK government has used former military barracks and a barge, the Bibby Stockholm, to house asylum seekers. These mass containment sites are not suitable accommodation for anyone seeking asylum, and they are particularly damaging for people with trauma and poor health. The new government must urgently replace these sites with safe and dignified community based accommodation for people seeking asylum, with access to appropriate and timely healthcare. The new government’s recent announcement that the current contract for the Bibby Stockholm (which expires in January 2025) would not be renewed² is a welcome first step in this direction.

Napier Barracks was initially used as a “pilot” for further mass containment centres, but it continues to be used, despite having “a profound and cumulative corrosive impact on physical and mental health,”³ and Wethersfield, a former RAF site in rural Essex, at present holds about 600 men.

Approximately 2000-3000 people are currently held in UK mass containment centres, with plans to accommodate up to 8000 people.⁴ Hotels are also used to house people seeking asylum, but specific challenges are faced by people in large, isolated sites.

Classified as “quasi-detention” by a UK cross party parliamentary inquiry,⁵ these sites share many features with detained settings, including enclosure by chain link fencing or barbed wire, CCTV, and security surveillance, often in remote locations and segregated from wider communities. Residents sleep with up to six people in cramped rooms, experience sleep deprivation, have little or no privacy (even when showering), have limited freedom of movement under surveillance, lack purposeful activities, and many feel unsafe.^{6,7}

Residents report problems accessing healthcare and legal advice on these sites, and these are known to be harmful to health and wellbeing.⁶ In November 2023 medical humanitarian organisations Doctors of the World and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) started providing primary healthcare to Wethersfield residents from offsite locations,⁸ alongside psychological first aid education provided by MSF, owing to concerns about conditions negatively affecting mental health and dignity.

The UK is not alone in using mass containment. Poor access to healthcare is also reported in Greek mass

containment sites,⁹ which have been found to result in and intensify poor physical and mental health.¹⁰⁻¹² Prison-like conditions and inadequate access to appropriate healthcare and other services, exacerbated by poor safeguarding, aggravate interpersonal tensions for people whose lives are in limbo awaiting their asylum decision.^{6,13}

The UK Home Office acknowledges that vulnerable people, including survivors of torture, trafficking, violence, and exploitation, and those with mental or physical health problems, may be unsuitable for such accommodation.¹⁴ Yet survivors of torture and trafficking, people with severe mental health problems, and age disputed children (who may be too young to be held in such accommodation) are contained at these sites.^{3,15} This shows that the Home Office’s own suitability criteria do not provide the protection required.^{3,15,16}

Many residents’ mental health deteriorated as a result of their accommodation, with symptoms including low mood, loneliness, flashbacks, reduced appetite, weight loss, feelings of despair, and difficulty sleeping.^{3,15,17} The then Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration¹⁸ concluded that “hopelessness caused by boredom” among hundreds of men at Wethersfield will “inevitably” lead to harm.^{19,20} In December 2023 an asylum seeker Leonard Farruku took his life on board the Bibby Stockholm. The UK based charity INQUEST raised concerns that “the safeguards intended to prevent especially vulnerable people being placed on the barge, and to ensure prompt re-accommodation following a deterioration in mental health, remain not fit for purpose.”²¹ Several suicide attempts have been made by men held at the Wethersfield site.^{15,22}

In my experience (RM), as a recognised refugee who fled my country to avoid further persecution, I know firsthand the damage that these sites can cause to health. I was held for six months in the Penally Base in Wales and have worked for a year as an interpreter for people held in Greek mass containment sites. From my perspective and experience, these “quasi-detention” sites are not places for people who have experienced trauma and persecution. I fled from prison in my home country, only to find myself in dehumanising and degrading prison-like conditions here in the UK, segregated from society. After a while in the camp, my mental health deteriorated, and I felt depressed and criminalised. I felt there was no reason to leave my room, and I stayed isolated. Other people at the camp with me thought of ending their life.

Clearly mass containment sites are inappropriate for all people seeking protection and are particularly

unsuitable for people who have experienced trauma, including survivors of torture, violence, and trafficking, or have physical and mental health problems. The new government must take the opportunity to replace them as soon as practically possible with safe, dignified, person centred and trauma informed accommodation in the community that provides wrap around support to prioritise recovery needs and access to appropriate and timely healthcare.^{23 24} This should form part of a fundamental reform of the asylum system, which prioritises human rights and integration, as recommended in the recent report by the Commission on the Integration of Refugees.²⁵ Meanwhile, screening and initial assessment procedures and ongoing monitoring and safeguarding must be urgently improved and Home Office policy amended to prevent allocating vulnerable people to mass containment sites, so that people with experience of trauma and those with mental and physical health problems are not placed in this harmful accommodation.

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