Racial segregation and the asylum system: the case of RAF Wethersfield

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About the Runnymede Trust
The Runnymede Trust is the UK’s leading racial justice think tank. From broadening the curriculum to exposing the Windrush scandal, our work is rooted in challenging structural racism and its impact on our communities. Our authoritative research-based interventions equip decision makers, practitioners and citizens with the knowledge and tools to deliver genuine progress towards racial justice in Britain.

About Care4Calais
Care4Calais is a refugee charity that provides humanitarian aid and support in northern France and the UK. Care4Calais has been working at Wethersfield since August 2023, the camp opened as asylum accommodation in July 2023.

Contents
Introduction 2
Contingency Accommodation: An Unjustifiable Model 4
The case of RAF Wethersfield: racial segregation 6
Mental Health 8
Segregation from surrounding populations: a racial justice issue 9
Threats of deportation and racism from staff members 12
Conclusion 12
**Introduction**

There has been a successful delinking in mainstream political and public discourse on issues of ‘migration’ and ‘race’. It has therefore become possible for politicians across the spectrum to claim that policymaking which dehumanises and degrades people seeking asylum, migrant groups and refugees is not ‘racist’.

However, as the Runnymede Trust’s recent Creating the Crisis report illustrates, political discourse in the UK around migration trades heavily on racialised notions of who does, and does not, belong in our society. Whether directly or indirectly, historic and present-day migration policies have relied on the othering of people of colour.

Today, this can be evidenced by the impact of hostile migration and asylum policies on communities of colour. ‘Hostile environment’ policies in the Immigration Act 2014 and 2016 infamously led to the Windrush Scandal, in which Black British citizens were wrongfully detained and deported by the UK Home Office. A leaked government report in 2022 found that the Windrush Scandal itself was a product of thirty years of racist immigration policy-making, which was designed to reduce the number of people of colour in the UK. The present-day discriminatory nature of hostile environment policies are further evidenced in their application. For example, 42% of landlords said that the Right to Rent requirements contained in hostile environment legislation have made them less likely to consider someone who does not have a British passport to rent their property.

In every aspect of the UK’s immigration system, people of colour are bearing the brunt of hostile migration policies. Of the people detained in the UK’s immigration detention system, Black people are much more likely to be detained significantly longer than their white counterparts. Immigration raids that take place across the country typically target

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3 Ibid.


Bangladeshi workplaces, with 60-70% of raids taking place in businesses owned by people of colour.7

The government’s policy to ‘house’ people seeking asylum in so-called ‘contingency’ accommodation is no exception. There are currently roughly 50,000 people seeking asylum who are being housed in this type of accommodation,8 including hotels, vessels, barges and military barracks.9 These sites include RAF Wethersfield, the Bibby Stockholm Barge and Napier and Penally barracks. In Refugee Action’s analysis of the number of people seeking asylum living in hotels requiring urgent safeguarding intervention, 95% were identifiably people of colour.10

In recent months, these forms of asylum accommodation have been the subject of increasing concern. Human Rights Watch and Just Fair, in a recent report, concluded that the current policy to house asylum seekers in temporary hotels and institutionalised settings amounted to a “violation of people’s human rights”.11 In 2021, a cross party group of MPs called for the Home Office to end its use of barracks to house people seeking asylum, condemning the “appalling treatment” of people seeking asylum at Napier barracks.12 Reports on the conditions found in these settings highlight deeply concerning failures, which has threatened both the physical and mental health of their residents. For example, residents of the infamous Bibby Stockholm barge had to be relocated almost immediately after opening due to a deadly outbreak of legionella bacteria in the water system.13

This policy briefing illustrates detention-like conditions found in RAF Wethersfield, a so-called ‘contingency accommodation’ site established by the government in March 2023.14 The Runnymede Trust was provided with testimonies from residents on site, as well as collecting qualitative data from Care4Calais volunteers and employees to inform our understanding of the impact of this form of contingency accommodation on its residents. In this case, people seeking asylum, who are predominantly identifiably people of colour, are separated from the surrounding rural population by barbed wire, guards and ring-fences.

12https://appgdetention.org.uk/lander?x41251
This evidence demonstrates how the detention-like conditions found in RAF Wethersfield or ‘the Airfield’ amount to a form of racial segregation, or ‘segregation by nationality’, as defined by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI). This form of segregation in turn, has exacerbated the racist targeting of the residents of RAF Wethersfield and those living in ‘contingency’ accommodation.

‘Contingency accommodation’: an unjustifiable model

The government’s Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 established a policy of dispersal of those seeking asylum accommodation in the UK.15 Under this model, people seeking asylum are housed in initial accommodation until their application for longer term accommodation (asylum support) is granted. Typically, initial accommodation is provided in the form of a full-board style hostel, where people seeking asylum are housed for a few weeks. Once asylum support is granted, people seeking asylum are eligible for dispersal accommodation, which would typically be provided in a private dwelling within local communities.

However, from 2019 onwards, people seeking asylum have been increasingly housed in ‘contingency’ or temporary accommodation on a long term basis.16 This has come into effect in an ad hoc way, and has mostly been provided through the use of hotel rooms. People seeking asylum are often held in this form of accommodation indefinitely, and their freedom of movement and basic liberties are restricted.17 For example, people seeking asylum are held in rooms where they are unable to receive guests, and are told that if they leave for just a day or two that they will be unable to return.18 Beyond this, the government has begun developing a national portfolio of large scale ‘accommodation centres’, including controversial sites such Bibby Stockholm barge and the ex military barracks at RAF Wethersfield.19

The provision of this accommodation has been created under the guise of reducing spending on the asylum system and of providing the Home Office with additional time to process a backlog of asylum claims.20 Research from the Helen Bamber Foundation counters this narrative when explaining how the backlog is caused by ‘the abject failure, or

refusal, on the part of the Home Office to process asylum claims efficiently’ and grant refugee status or other forms of protection which would allow those seeking asylum to live independently. This has left hundreds of thousands of people seeking asylum trapped in destitution.\(^{21}\)

The policy of constructing large scale ‘accommodation centres’, such as RAF Wethersfield, has been represented as a response to the ‘immigration crisis’. The discourse of political and media elites, especially the rhetoric concerning ‘small boats’, has been a strong contributor in shaping public perceptions of immigration as a crisis issue.\(^{22}\) For example, monthly polling conducted by Ipsos showed that just 5% of respondents felt immigration was a key issue in 2020. From the second half of 2022, until June 2023, this figure increased to 21%. During this period, immigration has been prominent in the media, with headlines often citing net migration figures as well as housing asylum seekers.\(^{23}\)

Against this backdrop, the government has used emergency planning regulations to rush through a portfolio of large scale accommodation centres on converted Ministry of Defence sites. The development of these sites has been justified under the pretext of reducing spending, a point which was emphasised when Rishi Sunak stated that the use of such sites would be provided at ‘half of the cost of hotels’.\(^{24}\) Despite these claims, there have been repeated assessments that such plans could not be delivered. Both the Home Office and the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) have rated plans to deliver such sites as high risk and undeliverable. The IPA has conducted three reviews of the Home Offices work on asylum accommodation and each time rated the plans as ‘red’, meaning that the ‘successful delivery of the programme to time, cost and quality appears unachievable.’\(^{25}\)

The Minister for Immigration, from 2022-2023, stated that the use of ‘contingency accommodation centres’ is intended to act as a deterrent to people seeking asylum. In a statement in the House of Commons, the Minister said:

> “We need to suffuse our entire system with deterrence, and this must include how we house illegal migrants [...] [the government wants accommodation] to meet [asylum seekers] essential living conditions and nothing more, because we cannot


risk becoming a magnet for the millions of people who are displaced and seeking better economic prospects”.

The case of RAF Wethersfield: racial segregation

RAF Wethersfield or the ‘Airfield’ was first developed in 1941 and used as a military site by the US Air Force. In March 2023, the Home Office announced that it would be using the site to provide temporary housing for people seeking asylum.

There are currently an estimated 500 people seeking asylum being housed in the Airfield. Whilst the Home Office does not supply the equalities data necessary to understand the demographics of people residing in RAF Wethersfield, Care4Calais’ own data demonstrates that the vast majority of people currently living in the Airfield are people of colour. Of the 1184 people seeking asylum who Care4Calais has provided services to in the Airfield since its opening in July 2023, all residents are from a West Asian or African nationality. 294 (24.8%) are from Afghanistan, 268 (22.6%) from Iran, 177 (14.9%) from Eritrea. Many of the people who currently reside in the Airfield are vulnerable, reporting that they are victims of trafficking, torture, and physical violence.

Like many of the Home Office’s ‘contingency accommodation’ locations, including the Bibby Stockholm, Napier and Pennally barracks, RAF Wethersfield is located in a rural area. The nearest village is 1.5 miles away - connected to the Airfield only via a narrow road with no pavements. This road then joins the main road into the town of Wethersfield, which has a 60MPH speed limit and only intermittent pavements. This means that even if residents do choose to leave the site by foot, they have a long and dangerous walk to the nearest settlement. The two nearest large towns are Braintree and Chelmsford, which are 11.7 and 23.6 miles away respectively, without any nearby public transport routes to these towns.

As a result, people seeking asylum at RAF Wethersfield are completely confined: surrounded by barbed wire, with sparse internet access and are denied the ability to meaningfully interact with local communities surrounding them.

For M, an engineering student in Sudan who is now living at RAF Wethersfield, the Airfield “is like a prison.” According to M, the isolation in the camp reminded him of his experiences of forced labour in Libya, on his journey from Sudan: “It feels like my old days. It is so isolated from cities and from people.”

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Conditions of isolation and the militarised setting in which residents are housed have a re-traumatising effect on those who have experienced trafficking, detention and persecution at the hands of authority figures. In the words of a Care4Calais volunteer we spoke to: ‘We have people who do have pre-existing problems, who say that the site is exacerbating them. And they’re finding it impossible to sort of recover from any kind of previous trauma they’ve experienced, because they are still being traumatised by the accommodation that they’re in and it just doesn’t offer any space for them to move past it, because it’s still happening to them, because the conditions are the same, the things that they’re feeling are the same.’

These conditions are not limited to RAF Wethersfield and are experienced across the government portfolio of ‘contingency’ accommodation. Through our focus groups we heard from one volunteer at the Bibby Stockholm site: ‘There’s a young man we’re working with at the moment, who said to me today, he was in jail in Ethiopia for 18 months and in solitary confinement for three months and tried to hang himself. And he said that the minute he stepped on the Bibby that level of despair came flooding back and that’s how he felt about it.’

C has been an RAF Wethersfield resident since January 2024. He is seeking asylum in the UK after receiving death threats from ISIS in his home country. He describes the extent of the isolation that he faced at RAF Wethersfield, saying:

“We are kept apart. The fences, the pointy wire, and being in such a remote place with nothing close by. It is hard for people to practise their religion here. Life here is like being in a prison. People call it a prison. A prison camp... There is almost nothing to do.”

The experiences of isolation at RAF Wethersfield are compounded by the terrible conditions. M and C both describe the impact that this has, with people seeking asylum forced to sleep in overcrowded rooms, and offered poor facilities.

“There are six people in one room, and I stay day and night not sleeping. It gives me a headache, and my skin is hot. There are no chairs, just beds. The toilet and showers are so far from the room, and in bad weather it is bad, as we have to go outside to get to them.”

According to C: “The camp is in 2 spaces. The Village and The Building. In the Village there are 6 people in a room. People who do not know each other. The shower/bathroom is in a separate building. 100 people using the same bathroom - cleaned once a day - it is disgusting. I have depression and am taking medication. I could not cope with living with 5 other strangers.”

The poor conditions at RAF Wethersfield reached national attention just ten months after first opening, when 70 asylum seekers were moved off the the site and into hotels after radiological contamination and unexploded ordnance were found. A special development order (SDO) highlighted a number of further concerns about the site, including
contamination risk from dangerous gases, lack of suitable storage for fuel and hazardous substances, and a lack of suitable arrangements for drinking water.  

In other words, people seeking asylum, the majority of whom are people of colour from countries in the Middle East and Africa, are being kept isolated from the surrounding population without clear reason. As a result, they experience extremely poor living conditions, with little to no opportunity to leave. Segregation by nationality as defined by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) is “the act by which a (natural or legal) person separates other persons on the basis of one of the enumerated grounds without an objective and reasonable justification.” In our understanding, the separation/segregation of people seeking asylum, who are mostly people of colour, from society at large, alongside their restriction of movement, and decisions that restrict their engagement with local communities, amounts to racial segregation.

Mental health

The impact of this form of segregation has had a profound effect on the mental health of the Airfield’s residents. Residents at RAF Wethersfield have reported that conditions are inhumane and have resulted in asylum seekers going on hunger strike, or attempting suicide, with a group of 6 or 7 people seeking asylum attempting self immolation.

According to one Care4Calais volunteer, residents are showing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder: “people tell me that they have flashbacks, sweats, memories, sleep loss because of the camp directly, not because of what they suffered before they got here but as a direct result of the camp.”

C, a resident at RAF Wethersfield, has witnessed the deterioration of the mental health of residents in the Airfield due to the conditions and isolation that he faces. He describes how the extent of the segregation from society at the Airfield has affected his own mental health:

“Nothing about my life in the UK so far is about freedom. We risk our lives over and over again. This is no way to treat a human being. I am thanking God I am alive - I am grateful but I am depressed…”


“People are suffering. I have seen people trying to kill themselves by jumping off buildings. One refugee sewed up his own mouth. He told them that he did not want to talk to anyone. That he did not want to eat anything. That he did not want to be here. He did 8 stitches in his own mouth - only then did they transfer him.”

The absence of mental health support in particular is concerning when considering the mental distress that residents are facing. The evidence presented to us shows that as the Airfield becomes more crowded, there is less access to the onsite nurse, who residents must visit before being entitled to specialist support.

According to a Care4Calais volunteer:

“It was confirmed to us in an email we believe to have been sent to us accidentally by the welfare manager… that in order to see a nurse or GP, residents must first see one of the welfare team. This raises significant concerns as it suggests that individuals must first see a non-medical professional, and may have to disclose private matters to an individual who is not a medical professional. We have also heard from men on site that there is always a queue to see the welfare team.”

Reports also show three cases of residents being placed into conditions akin to solitary confinement after complaining that they were experiencing depression.32

Segregation from surrounding populations: a racial justice issue

Detention-like conditions in contingency accommodation in rural areas, such as RAF Wethersfield, serves to ‘Other’ and visibly alienate asylum seekers from surrounding communities. This makes it easier for far-right groups to single people seeking asylum out. This form of racial segregation makes people seeking asylum more easily targets of racist harassment and violence which threatens their safety and dignity.

Care4Calais volunteers describe the absence of any Home Office initiatives to build connection between local communities and people seeking asylum, as reinforcing the extent of segregation facing the camp’s residents: “the impression that I’ve sort of got until now is that the intention has definitely been to create a site that is self contained, and that, in theory, there would never be any reason for people to leave.” Another volunteer continued to describe how “It was very, very clear, the intention was to not let anybody freely be seen or heard outside that camp. That was what they tried to do. They didn’t want local residents having to see or interact with the refugees.”

Whilst residents have access to buses to take to Braintree and Colchester, they are infrequent and unreliable. Residents are unable to move freely in and out of the Airfield, to build connections with the outside world:

“There is a bus to take people to Braintree and Colchester every day. It will take you to stay there for two to three hours. If you miss the bus back you have to stay there until you can catch the next bus – maybe even the next day.

“I do not feel that I am in the UK – before I transferred here to this camp, I felt like I had arrived in the UK. But now I always think about how to get transferred away from this camp.”

By failing to facilitate community interaction in sites RAF Wethersfield, the Home Office is actively manufacturing the conditions for the hostility and ‘othering’ of residents. Concern about this is echoed by findings from the Council of Europe, which highlights the critical role that building connections between refugees, and those seeking asylum, and local communities have in ensuring asylum seekers feel safe and respected.

Local villages have offered to host residents at Wethersfield in their local village halls but report that this has been met with reluctance from the Home Office, who have subsequently failed to provide transport to these villages. This highlights a deliberate effort to erect barriers rather than to create the conditions that might create understanding and promote the safety of people seeking asylum:

According to one Care4Calais volunteer: “The Home Office has rejected these offers [to host people seeking asylum] and will not allow this. Although the Home Office cannot refuse this support, they can stop the men at Wethersfield from getting to the villages and have refused to transport them there. By refusing to enable such local initiatives, the Home Office is perpetuating a very negative discourse around asylum seekers. The residents at Wethersfield are denied the chance to get to know anything about UK society and culture, and instead, feel as though they are being criminalised and detained in a prison.

“On the other hand, local people are being denied the chance to get to know individuals at Wethersfield, which is creating a barrier in accessing information in favour of the rhetoric in the media.”

Alongside this, individuals and charitable organisations supporting people seeking asylum at the site have described how they are deterred from entering, and have struggled to offer their services. As one Care4Calais volunteer told us: “They didn’t want local residents having to see or interact with the refugees, because they promised them this camp won’t affect you. So when I tried to give out aid outside the camp, they tried to ask me to stop doing that.” There are no legal surgeries offered by the government on the site and local

charities are denied access. The remote nature of the site means that residents are often unable to access legal support:

“Wethersfield is in the middle of nowhere. So there’s no local legal aid provider with enough capacity to ever represent everyone in Wethersfield, I think the nearest Legal Aid provider would be in Colchester. There’s no chance that everyone in that site is going to get an asylum solicitor at all. And on top of that, there’s the way that the asylum system is run, there’s no information given to people on arrival. So people arrive, their claim is registered, they are processed, they are sent to home office accommodation. And that is where the information ends. There’s no proactive information coming from the authorities or the home office.”

The scale of segregation practised in RAF Wethersfield and ‘contingency accommodation’ like it, is detrimental to the social and psychological needs of both people seeking asylum and society. There is growing evidence that concentrating people seeking asylum in remote, detention-like conditions, makes people seeking asylum more easily targetable by far-right groups. This is clear from the far right activity outside Napier and Penally barracks, contingency accommodation which shares similarities with RAF Wethersfield. The organisation Hope Not Hate recorded a rocketing of racist incidents outside of large-scale asylum accommodation in 2022, with the number of these incidents rising to over 253 - an increase of over 100% compared to the previous year. During the Covid-19 pandemic, when thousands of people seeking asylum were moved to contingency accommodation in the form of hotels, they became the target of far-right anti-migration groups.

A far-right presence was also noted by Care4Calais volunteers at RAF Wethersfield: “At the beginning… there was a very small far right presence on the day of the people being moved in there. Where somebody said he hoped that we got raped because we were there supporting the refugees.”

In addition to this, research by the Helen Bamber Foundation provides testimony from a resident named ‘Adam’ who “did not feel very comfortable in the local towns because he had heard that people had protested about asylum seekers being housed in the area and feared being attacked.” After a few weeks Adam stopped leaving the accommodation.39

**Threats of deportation and racism from staff members**

The remote, detention-like conditions at RAF Wethersfield have created a culture of fear and suspicion which permeate the site, and which is exacerbated by threats from staff members. These threats centre around people seeking asylums’ belonging in Britain, and their forcible removal from the country. This mirrors reports of the racism faced by people seeking asylum directly from staff members in other forms of asylum accommodation. C, a current resident at RAF Wethersfield, describes the relationship with staff members that he had when accommodated in a hotel, saying: “Some of the staff were…racist and rude. I am used to racism.”

A Care4Calais volunteer told us: “I’ve [met] somebody from Iran who was extremely frightened by [threats of deportation] and had been told that over and over again. And he was like, if I get deported to Iran, I’d be executed. And I’m like, [the employee] cannot deport you to Iran, they don’t make those sorts of decisions. But to them, they are the Home Office, they are making those kinds of decisions in their lives. They’ll say things like my taxes pay for this. Or you know, somebody says, […], if you call the police, what are they gonna do? They’re gonna ask where you’re from.”

Care4Calais workers reported residents of the site, who have little or no knowledge of the status of their claim, are told not to complain about conditions at the camp, at the threat of deportation:

“We quite regularly have reports that the security or welfare teams will make threats to people or silence people’s asylum claim. So, they will say that if you complain, it will affect your asylum claim, or I’ve had one individual say that they had been told that seeking mental health support would affect their asylum claim.”

As a result, the site has been described as: “very tense and high anxiety. Everyone is anxious about what’s going to happen to them next, and I think that permeates the site. It’s a very thickly tense environment for people to live in. And then you have the actual physical setting of sharing rooms, barbed wire fences, having to sign in and out and all of the security.”

**Conclusion**

The detention-like conditions at RAF Wethersfield, and contingency accommodation like it, is a racial justice issue. People of colour are being actively segregated from surrounding populations, separated by barbed wire, and security guards; treated as criminals for

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attempting to find safety and opportunity in the UK. As demonstrated in the evidence provided by Care4Calais, the extent of this isolation in turn ensures that residents of the Airfield are more easily targets of racial harassment, and vulnerable to threats from staff members who work in the accommodation.