Wealden District Council

Rt Hon Dame Karen Bradley MP
Chair of the Home Affairs Committee
House of Commons
Palace of Westminster
London
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By email.

16 April 2026
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Dear Dame Bradley

Subject: Use of Crowborough Training Camp for asylum accommodation

Thank you for your letter of 25 March 2026, in which you seek the views of my Council about the Home Office decision to utilise the Crowborough Training Camp for asylum accommodation.

We realise that accommodating asylum seekers is a huge problem for the government and that there is no easy solution.

We also realise that experience in other places shows that using sites for this purpose will meet strong local opposition and is, operationally, a complicated undertaking. This may explain why, in Crowborough's case, the Home Office was so secretive. The result of this was to create uncertainty and a situation which: carries a high risk of public disorder and injury to people and property; has created distrust in local and national government; and makes most local people very uneasy and a significant number afraid.

Some of this could have been avoided and other elements mitigated, if the Home Office had promptly provided much more information to, and engaged directly with, local agencies, politicians at every level and local people. Not doing so has made the situation much more difficult to manage for everyone, both short and long term, than it needed to be.

I attach a detailed response to your questions on behalf of the Council. However, if the government persists in using these large-scale camps despite all the evidence that these are not the right solution, then in summary, our key recommendations would be:

(a) Proactive communication is essential. The Home Office needs to develop communications and engagement plans in consultation with the local authorities and public sector agencies prior to any announcement being made; and then deliver all the actions in that plan on time and in an open and honest way;

(b) The Home Office needs to put in place proactive measures to ensure all aspects of operating a site are in place prior to any occupation of the site. This explicitly includes but is not limited to providing funding for all local authorities ahead of occupation, work with the voluntary sector should be completed so that support is ready to go from the first arrival, all activities on the site should be in place, transport to and from the site for occupants should be agreed and active, and funding to police and other agencies should be agreed and in place prior to occupation.

(c) The Home Office should have all plans and policies agreed, in place, and practised prior to occupation of the site.

Senior officers and I would be happy to attend a meeting of the committee to explore this further, should this be of use.

Yours sincerely



Cllr James Partridge
Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for
Governance, Waste and Local Economy

When was Wealden Council first informed that the Home Office was considering using Crowborough Training Camp for housing asylum seekers?

Wealden senior officers, and other local public sector partners including East Sussex County Council, were first told this at a confidential briefing on 10 October 2025.

Did you have any discussions with the Home Office about the potential use of the site for asylum accommodation as part of the previous Government's large sites programme?

No. There were no discussions with Wealden about this and we were not told it was being considered.

What level of engagement and communication have you had from the Home Office and Clearsprings Ready Homes on the set up and management of Crowborough?

It is best to split this question into the various phases – pre-announcement, pre decision, the decision and the operational phase. In summary, the level of communication and engagement by the Home Office has been very low. The Home Office have refused to engage with us effectively, share documents and information or engage with our local community and residents.

That vacuum in communication has undoubtedly contributed to heightened community tensions and made the entire handling of this site and situation significantly more difficult for everyone than it needed to be.

If the Select Committee wishes to get a flavour of the situation, we have published all communications that we had with the Home Office on our website. The concerns we raised about the lack of information and communication and the harm this was doing to our communities will become evident very quickly.

http://www.wealden.gov.uk/crowborough-army-camp

We would also ask that the Committee looks at the role of MPs in communication about sites and recommend that the Home Office learns from our bad experience. From the outset, the local MP has made statements to the press and local community that are misleading and seem designed to cause anger and anxiety for political gain. Rather than working with us as the local Council, the MP has made the situation considerably worse.

In terms of the various phases, we can provide more detail as follows:

Pre-announcement

The Council (along with other local agencies) was first notified that the Home Office were considering use of the site as part of a confidential briefing on 10 October.

At that briefing, the Home Office committed to the Council and other local partners that they would develop and share a communications and engagement plan with us before they made their plans public.

This did not happen. Overnight between the 27th and 28th of October, following what we were told was a leak from within the Home Office, Home Office officials briefed members of the press about their plans. They did not inform the Council (or, we understand, other local agencies) of their change in stance.

Pre-decision

The level of engagement as part of the Home Office decision making continued to be very low. The Home Office repeatedly assured us thy would engage with the local community, be proactive with their communication and provide information to the Council and other local partners. However, the only events Home Office officials attended in that time were ones organised by us or the MP, being remote attendance at a Scrutiny Committee meeting and at two public meetings with residents and the Town Council. These meetings and the replies from the Home Office did nothing to allay local concerns.

From early on, the Council was being wrongly blamed for being behind the plans for the camp by elements of the local community (including by the local MP). This caused division and, by extension, real danger for our staff and Councillors (across party lines). The Council was in the invidious position of being entirely cut out of the decision-making process by the Home Office, whilst, at the same time, being blamed for every decision of the Home Office. Despite privately acknowledging this tension, the Home Office did nothing to counter this narrative, allowing community anger with the Council and, in turn, community division, to increase.

Throughout its planning, the Home Office only put in writing the most basic version of its plans, namely the public facing factsheet on the '.Gov' website.

We could not secure a meeting with Minister Norris until 25th November. There, we raised our significant concerns about how things had been handled up until that point and what needed to change to improve things going forward. The Minister assured us that documents would be shared with us in draft form in December but it subsequently transpired that Home Office officials blocked this. Many of the decision-making documents have not been provided to the public or the Council even now. (We have still not received a copy of the evacuation plan of the site, some two months after the site opened – despite regular and repeated requests by us and other local agencies).

In November 2025, the Home Office (working with the MOD and their contractors) started works to make the camp ready for the arrival of asylum seekers. The Home Office refused to share details of these works with the Council in advance, necessitating planning enforcement investigations and further increasing community tension.

The Decision

Throughout late 2025, the Council and other local service providers had been seeking assurances from Home Office officials that local partners would be informed in a timely way of any Ministerial decision to use the site and given a time window between that decision and first asylum seekers arriving at the camp.

In the run up to Christmas 2025, there were lots of rumours that the Home Office might make the decision and open the camp during the Christmas break. The Council, Police and other local agencies pushed the Home Office to be clear about its intentions. Despite the significant rise in community tension that this created, the Home Office did not provide clarity on this until 16th December, over two months since planning for the site began and over a month before the eventual opening.

The Home Office repeatedly assured the Operational Working Group (OWG) of local partner agencies that, once the decision was made, they would be given at least seven days' notice before asylum seekers arrived and that a communications plan would be in place to help manage that event. We were told clearly that asylum seekers were only to arrive at the site during day light and only with notice to the Council.

All agencies (including the Home Office) recognised not only the potential for enhanced community tension and unrest around the event and the need to plan for it carefully and in a coordinated way, but also the importance of balancing the approach to tension for that one day against the concerns, fears ad trust of the community for the following months of operation.

What transpired was the complete opposite. On the 21 January 2026, the Minister telephoned the Council Leader to inform him that he had made the decision to use the camp and that first asylum seekers would be arriving at the camp within days. At 3am the next morning, just a matter of hours later, under the cover of darkness, the site was made operational and the first asylum seekers were bussed into the camp.

As we and our local public sector partners had been warning the Home Office, this worsened community tension and increased the public's doubt about whether they can believe what we or they are told by the Home Office or, by implication, any of the local agencies.

The operational phase

In the two months since the first asylum seekers arrived at the camp, communication and engagement have been slightly better, but large and concerning gaps remain.

Engagement with near neighbour residents has finally started with the first small groups of local residents visiting the site. The Parish forum promised in November met in March. We cannot see why this engagement could not have happened much sooner. It could have significantly helped to reduce community tension.

One of the most difficult ongoing issues is the countering of made-up stories, false rumours and half-truths (Disinformation). The Home Office approach has been to deal with matters with the national press while ignoring the local impact. Put simply, they may stop a story appearing in the Mail or the Guardian, but if it is still on every local social media group, local news outlet and every local conversation then, without a public statement or correction from the Home Office, it will inevitably raise tension and risk being a trigger for unrest.

There is significant local and national interest in the camp. Whilst the Council understands that the Home Office do not want to provide a running commentary on operations, there is a vacuum of information which is just being filled by Disinformation. We have asked the Home Office to consider some form of regular communication channel aimed at supporting the local community through the provision of timely, accurate information. We would encourage your committee to consider the positive impact such regular communications would have in easing community tensions.

To be clear, this does not need to share any personal data, or be hugely detailed, but a broad assessment of site capacity and events. It should both give contact details of whom local people can contact should they have additional enquiries and be kept up to date. It would also provide an opportunity to counter the Disinformation that circulates so readily on social media.

The Home Office will often point to the Fact Sheet on the .Gov website. However, there have only been two versions published in approaching six months (one in October and an update when the site opened in January). The update itself raised questions and tensions in the community – for example, the October version stated very clearly that the site would be used for up to 12 months; the January version removed this timeline - instead saying that it is a "temporary measure". We are told that the factual position has not changed, but as no further communication has come from the Home Office, the community are left to draw their own conclusions.

Has the Home Office asked for information about the capacity of local services that might be impacted by the use of this site for asylum accommodation?

At the first meetings with the Council and other local service providers, we all made it clear that there is very limited capacity to support the proposed number of additional residents in such a short timeframe.

The Home Office refused to share its internal assessment of the impact or its detailed plans to plan for alternative service provision in advance of making its decision.
As a result, working with the other local agencies (Sussex Police, NHS, East Sussex County Council and East Sussex Fire Rescue Service), we produced a Community Impact Assessment (CIA). This was written on the basis of the information shared with partners, orally at OWG meetings (orally, as, despite requests, the Home Office refused to share information in writing). The Home Office provided some feedback on early drafts of this work, but despite the assessment raising continued concerns and gaps in information, the

Home Office refused to properly engage, often directing local agencies to oral discussion rather than putting anything in writing.

Prior to the decision, the CIA represented the best understanding of the local partners about the Home Office plans. It represented the main source of written information, based on our shared understanding of the Home Office oral commitments.

In what turned out to be the final days before the decision to use the camp, the Home Office made clear that they did not agree with assumptions in the CIA – the basis of local service planning – but would not share in writing which parts or to what extent. Local service providers were left uncertain about what the Home Office was planning, risking services being provided in ways that would not align with the operation of the camp.

Following the decision by the Home Office to open the camp, the local agencies agreed to stop work on the CIA. The document was intended to inform the Home Office decision making and so was redundant. As the document contains information owned by the Home Office, who claim it to be flawed, we and other agencies are not in a position to share it publicly.

Is the Council receiving adequate information about the number of people being accommodated at the site?

Unlike some of the local agencies (NHS, ESCC), our services as a Council do not rely on us knowing significant information about the residents of the site. The Home Office have provided a regular update on the number of residents at the camp, on a confidential basis. We do not need more than this, but as stated above, are keen for the Home Office to share regular, basic and high-level information with the public, to help counter Disinformation.

Has the Home Office outlined any funding it will provide to the Council, and what this funding decision was based on?

We received confirmation from the Home Office on 8 April 2026 that we would be provided funding under the Funding Instruction for Local Authorities: Asylum Grant financial year 2026/2027.

However, the guidance that the HO has shared explicitly excludes large sites such as Crowborough from being eligible for this funding. WDC have sought clarification from HO officials on this and received an email on 8th April 2026 to confirm that the Crowborough site would fall within the terms of that grant system. They also confirmed that the Wethersfield site is an exception and will receive greater funding that the Crowborough site, but we have yet to receive an explanation for why that site is being treated differently.

The grant system confirms that we would receive our first tranche of funding at the end of June 2026 – over five months after the camp opening. This is a significant flaw in the operation of the grant funding system. If the Home Office is serious about the role of local authorities in helping to manage and mitigate the impacts of these large camps on the

local community, then funding should be provided up front and we should have an opportunity to be proactive in spending money on activities that will help prevent issues arising, rather than being given money after the event. Like much of this whole process, it is indicative of a mindset that local authorities are a secondary afterthought and that the Home Office are really only interested in getting sites open.

We would also comment that the handling of the financial situation has been another source of community tension, often stoked by elected representatives. It has been said that this Council has received bribes from the Home Office, that we want the camp opened for the money etc. It has been alleged that the Home Office told the MP and others several months before about the funding, so for the Home Office to only confirm funding arrangements so late in the day and to lack transparency about the basis upon which the money can be spent has once again added to local community tension.

What additional costs is the Council incurring as a result of the site, and is any funding from the Home Office sufficient to cover these?

As above, the Home Office have not provided the Council any funding to date, nor commitment (at the time of writing) to any particular amount moving forwards.

The Council is not keeping a running total of the full cost impact on our services as a result of the Home Office decision, as much of this cost is officer time, as opposed to direct expenditure.

However, it is fair to reflect that this issue has dominated the activities of the Council ever since the media briefing back in October. The level of public anger, the volume of enquiries, emails, local conversations, resident complaints, social media posts, emails to councillors etc. has been at a level never experienced before and which we were not geared up to manage.

As an example, since October the Council has so far dealt with 64 Freedom of Information requests in relation to the site, compared to 459 for all other Council services combined during the same time.

We have officers engaged in multiple meetings every week, with local agencies, the community and Home Office.

The Council is keen to do more to support the community, volunteer groups and the site users. Whilst the Council remains of the view that the site is not the right solution, given it is open, we are keen to help every part of our community deal with the impacts. This requires funding from the Home Office.

Do you have any specific concerns about the suitability of the site for use as asylum accommodation? If so, have you raised these with the Home Office or Clearsprings, and how have they responded?

Yes. The Council has from the start raised concerns about the suitability of the site for asylum accommodation, both with Home Office officials and, via the Council's leadership, direct with the Minister. In November 2025 the Council passed unanimously a motion at Full Council to oppose the site.

The concerns the Council had about the suitability of the site included:

(a) An in principle objection to the use of these sites for all the reasons set out in detail by various migrant charities that large camps of this nature are not the correct solution for anyone,
(b) the sparse and poorly equipped nature of the site and its accommodation,
(c) the lack of connectivity from the site to the local town or surrounding urban areas,
(d) the lack of information from the Home Office driving local fears about safety and security of the site and the local community; and
(e) the displacement of the local Cadets from the site and the loss of their regionally essential training facilities. The Cadets have been a long serving and important part of the town, and they were treated poorly and very much as an afterthought by the Home Office.

We also met with the Minister (albeit much later than we would have expected) to inform him directly of our concerns about the site and to invite him to a site visit with us to explore these. That offer was never taken up. We are surprised that no minister at the Home Office has taken the time to do this.

The Home Office has, for the most part, not entered into a discussion with the Council about our concerns, but has just "noted" them and made decisions which show little sign of them having been taken on board. As set out in the answers above, the Home Office simply refused to provide their assessment of the issues or impact until the site was operational.

Does the Council feel it has been sufficiently supported throughout the set-up of this site?

No. As will be clear from our answers above, the Council feels that it has been and continues to be badly let down by the Home Office and some other stakeholders.

The Council was and remains opposed to the use of the site. However, we have also had to accept that, if they follow the correct process correctly, the Home Office are empowered to make decisions about the use of the camp. Whilst we may not like it, we will still work in the interests of our community to ensure that the site has the smallest possible impact on our community and that residents of the camp are supported appropriately.

Despite regular assurances around engagement and communications, the Home Office have failed us and our communities. Had the Home Office engaged with us in an open and transparent way, then, despite our objections to the use of the site, the decision and use of this site could have been managed in a way that had much less of an impact on the local community.

The Council also considers that some other stakeholders have not helped support the Council or the community during this process.

The MP for the site has repeatedly said or implied that the site is a Wealden plan and/or that we are making decisions alongside the Home Office. As you will know, this is simply incorrect.

The local PCC, rather than seeking to calm community tensions, openly attended a protest march, making comments calling for the camp to be run in a way which would be unlawful.

Whilst we respect that others will hold different political views, as locally elected officials it is important that they help to calm community tensions and work with the Council, not seek to blame the Council at every turn.

Are you satisfied with the way in which the Home Office and Clearsprings have engaged with the local community about the site?

No. As explored above, the level of engagement with the local community has been very poor. The first meeting of local residents only took place after the site had been open for two months and only because the Council insisted and supported the Home Office to make the arrangements.

The Home Office made commitments (when attending a public meeting virtually in November) to set up forums for local residents, a wider group of Town and Parish Councillors and to undertake better engagement with all local politicians. The majority of this simply did not happen until long after the site opened and only when pushed by ourselves and other local agencies. Some of it has still not happened.

The Home Office have also been very slow to allow access for volunteer groups to the camp. From the very first conversations, the Home Office were clear about how important this was to the success of the camp – both for its residents and the impact on the wider community. It is built into their plans for the site (shared with WDC confidentially after the decision), but for the first two months of asylum seekers being on site, no such access was granted, meaning that services essential to the running of the site and managing the impact on the community were simply not provided.

Did you encounter any difficulties or challenges when the site was in use as transitional accommodation for resettled Afghans? If so, has the Home Office taken action to ensure similar challenges do not arise from using this site for asylum accommodation?

No. The site was run in a very different way by the MOD, with much more access to decision making, open discussions between the MOD and partner agencies and wide and varied volunteer support. Whilst not universal, the overwhelming local view of the MOD/Afghan family use of the site was positive. There was a higher level of integration with the community and, where minor issues arose, they were dealt with openly.

It certainly helped that the occupants of the site were families and so the fears and concerns of the local community were considerably less.

However, the Home Office refused to acknowledge this fundamental difference. They refused to engage in a conversation about how to address the concerns of the local community about the camp being occupied entirely by adult men.

The approach of the Home Office from the start has been to close down communication, to appear distrustful of the wider public sector and to withhold information and so cause community tension and reduce integration.

Wealden District Council

16 April 2026