Alex Norris MP
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House of Commons
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By email:
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26 November 2025
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Dear Minister Norris,

Thank you for meeting with us yesterday to discuss the situation regarding Crowborough Army Camp.

We relayed to you the fear and anger caused to residents and communities due to the complete absence of communications early in this process. Your recognition and apology for the way the communications had been handled was important and welcome.

As discussed, residents and statutory service providers feel that there is an ongoing vacuum in the information being provided by the Home Office about your plans. Not only does that create a space for misinformation leading to community tension, but it also makes it impossible for local statutory service providers to have any meaningful input into this process. We simply cannot assess fully the impact on our residents in the absence of the significant detail that we need. As expressed above, that absence of information is driving fear and very real concerns about safety and security. Whilst fundamentally a matter for Sussex police, it is imperative that we are all provided with the necessary information and reassurance that local people will be safe should you take a decision for the camp to go ahead.

You told us that you are still in the 'feasibility assessment' stage and that no formal decision has been made. Whilst that might technically be correct, the level of activity on site and the activity in preparing for the use of the site, such as recruiting staff, contacting local transport services etc. is adding to the level of mistrust in the process. Again, that can only be bridged by full, open and transparent communications. We appreciated your promise that your team would "get to us what you've got" in relation to all the background paperwork and assessments, even if they are still in draft format, and ask for this as soon as possible.

You also offered to share with us data from other similar camps across the UK, so that we have clear examples of the impact on local communities. We also asked you to confirm whether these sites are also accommodating as many as seven service users to a room.

During the meeting we made several points that we would like you to take into account as part of your decision-making process. Whilst we remain steadfastly of the view that this is

the wrong site to be used as a camp for asylum seekers, there are obvious things that the Home Office could do to help local residents. These include:

1. Review and reduce the number of people to be placed on site. We discussed the use of the site by Afghan refugees. That saw no more than 250 people on site and they were families. That number accords more closely with the current assessments by your team of the number of permanent residents for which the site is suitable. So, it suggests to us that a much smaller number than 540 is the maximum that should be placed on site.
2. Provide guarantees about safety and security. Residents remain fearful and need reassurance from you and Sussex Police. Having sensitive sites assessed and the Home Office funding any improvements appears vital. As does investment in local police resources to ensure adequate and visible presence in the town.
3. Cadets. The potential loss of the cadets from the site is a matter of great concern. They are a hugely important part of local life. We would impress on you that the Home Office should do all it can to enable the cadets to remain and if that requires additional investment in the site, then the Home Office should meet those costs.
4. Home Office communications. We feel there should be at least a weekly, in-person, surgery in the town to allow local people the chance to speak directly to the Home Office about any issues they have with the camp. We would also request weekly bulletin style updates direct from the Home Office to all residents of the town. We discussed the possibility of writing letters to all residents, to reach the many who are not accessing social media.
5. Formal guarantee that you will not use the site for more than 12 months. There is not trust or confidence in the statements that have been made that you will vacate the site after 12 months.

We repeat that whilst we remain firmly against the use of this site, the above list may help mitigate the significant impacts on the local community, if you decide to go ahead.

We trust the above is a fair reflection of our conversation and we look forward to meeting with you on a regular basis. To that end, we will be in touch with your office to make appointments to ensure this channel of communication can remain open.

Yours sincerely

[redacted]

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

[redacted]

Cllr Rachel Millward
Deputy Leader of the Council and Culture, Community and Communications Portfolio Holder