

WETHERSFIELD PARISH COUNCIL
REPRESENTING WETHERSFIELD, BLACKMORE END & BEAZLEY END



MINUTES of the Wethersfield Airbase Scrutiny Committee Meeting held at Wethersfield Village Hall on Monday 26 February 2024, commencing at 7:30pm.

Present: Cllr A Hull (Chairman) (Shalford PC)
Cllr R Duffin (Vice Chairman) (Finchingfield PC)
Cllr P Kennedy (Great Bardfield PC)
Cllr A French (Shalford PC)
Cllr J O'Brien (Little Bardfield PC)
Mr R Aggis
Mr J Pearce
D Roder (Clerk and RFO)

In Attendance: Members of the Public: 0

WA83//23-24 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Cllr G Southgate and Cllr B Foulkes (Sible Hedingham PC), Cllr C West (Wethersfield PC).

WA84/23-24 MEMBERS DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS

None declared.

WA85/23-24 MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 30 OCTOBER 2023.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 29 January 2024, copies of which had been previously circulated to Members, were confirmed as a true record, and signed by the Chairman. Proposer Cllr A French, Seconder Cllr R Duffin.

Cllr R Duffin entered the meeting at 7.32pm

WA86/23-24 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

None.

Cllr J O'Brien entered the meeting at 7.43pm.

WA87/23-24 CLERKS REPORT

WETHERSFIELD AIRBASE MEGA PRISONS:

The Clerk wrote the following letter plus attached the traffic analysis undertaken by Dr Richard Sidebottom to:

- 1) All WASC Parish Councils
- 2) Mark Ault and Michael Staines / BDC
- 3) The Sampfords Parish Council - clerk@thesampfords.co.uk
- 4) Stambourne PC- debbiehilliard614@gmail.com
- 5) Panfield PC - clerk@panfieldparishcouncil.uk
- 6) Councillor John Baugh (Bocking North)- cllr.jbaugh@braintree.gov.uk
- 7) Councillor Lynette Bowers Flint (Bocking Blackwater) cllr.lbowers-flint@braintree.gov.uk

In the covering email, it asked to write with their objections and concerns to
Rt Hon Alex Chalk - Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice -
alex.chalk.mp@parliament.uk

Rt Hon James Cleverley- Home Secretary - james.cleverly.mp@parliament.uk

Councillor Graham Butland- cllr.gbutland@braintree.gov.uk

Dear

On behalf of the Wethersfield Airbase Scrutiny Committee (WASC), may I draw your attention to the enclosed report which highlights the prospect of the catastrophic impact of the Ministry of Justice's (MOJ) proposed Mega-prison complex at RAF Wethersfield. The report identifies three things in particular.

1. Official forecasts of an additional 3,000 daily car journeys to the site once it is fully operational: I am sure you will agree this is staggering and quite unsustainable amount of traffic for such a remote and inaccessible location. The inadequacy of our local road infrastructure in serving the current Asylum Centre has already been highlighted on numerous occasions but the prisons take this to another extreme. The implications of such volumes in terms of pedestrian safety, road accidents, pollution and climate change are of great concern in our community and contravene numerous policy priorities at all levels.
2. Traffic timings would coincide with local travel to work peaks and school opening and closing hours: As the forecast routes pass several local primary schools and a local health centre, increased peak traffic flows could present a danger to our residents. The recent Finchingfield and Wethersfield Joint Neighbourhood Plan Survey highlighted that pedestrian safety is already a major problem in our villages. Several local sites where roads are narrow and visibility is poor could experience a staggering 3-fold increase in peak traffic. These include a blind turn at Silver Street in Wethersfield heading towards the primary school.
3. The forecast traffic routes show that a huge number of people will be affected and several local heritage assets put at risk: As the Prison Service would have to recruit from a very wide catchment area, the entire district of Braintree and beyond would be affected. Given the inaccessibility of the site, a significant portion of traffic would affect our neighbours in Great Sampford and Bocking and traverse ancient bridges at Great Bardfield and Finchingfield. These heritage assets form a key part of our villages and are already under threat from existing traffic, particularly Heavy Goods Vehicles.

The RAF Wethersfield site was selected as an airfield in WWII due its flat topography and proximity to Europe. 70 years later it is still over 9 miles from the nearest A road or train station, 23 miles from the motorway and poorly served by public transport. The closest Law courts and emergency

hospitals are 40 minutes' drive away. The 9-mile road to the nearest town has 97 bends and countless 'pinch points'. When the base was last fully active this road proved to be a hotspot for road traffic accidents. Today all roads are unaltered, traffic volumes and speeds much higher and vehicles much larger.

In view of the above, it seems totally unreasonable that the MOJ should continue to spend taxpayers' money on an unviable project that would devastate our villages. In the eyes of our community, to do otherwise appears to be completely devoid of common sense. May I urge you to make representations to put an end to these proposals and to facilitate Community-led efforts to design and implement an equitable, sustainable, and economically effective alternative use for this site.

Yours sincerely

D. Roder

Clerk and RFO.

Wethersfield Parish Council.

CC: Dr Richard Sidebottom – Technical member of WASC.

Cllr Andrew Hull – Chairman of WASC.

WETHERSFIELD ASYLUM CENTRE:

1. Home Office and Parish Council meeting – Monday 12 February 2024.

Councillors from nearby Parishes, the District and County council plus other stakeholders were invited to attend a meeting with the Home Office at the airbase.

The recently appointed Responsible Officer for the site, led the meeting along with other Home Office officials, plus representative from Clearspring Ready Homes the appointed contractor for the site.

The HO confirmed they have applied for a special development order (SDO). Technical assessments had been carried out and the SDO will be laid in Parliament for approval. The SDO is for a further 3-year permission to use the site as an Asylum Centre. An equality assessment will be published also in the next two weeks.

The HO also volunteered information about the mega prison proposal by the MOJ, stating that there are many projects and each project is mandated to continue until one of those projects is approved. They stated that the MOJ is looking for 2 sites, RAF Wethersfield was the 3rd choice and 2 other sites have since been approved, subject to an appeal timeline on one of those current approved. They stated the new prisons team are not looking at Wethersfield now and therefore highly unlikely it will go ahead at RAF Wethersfield.

The level of asylum seekers present is 550 currently. They level is also capped currently at 600 despite more beds available. The current Home Office minister is not suggesting that they push the numbers up quickly. The Responsible Officer recommended that it should not go up to 800 yet and that has been accepted and will be reviewed in the near future. The

reason being is due operational constraints they still need to be overcome to add further cohorts.

They do still intend to get up to 1700 but without being too firm about it, realistically he expects it to be towards the end of this year before that happens. The priority in the meantime is to reduce the small boats coming over and getting the Rwanda flights up and running. They were absolute they would not be increasing above 1700, also it did not expect it to continue beyond 3½ years.

Things they want in place to enable more asylum seekers are:

- Better Broadband.
- Dining facilities – at the moment it's 450 maximum.
- Menus to be increased.
- Increased security.
- Increased welfare officers.

Problems for the inmates are food, the isolated site, boredom, and lack of communication.

The Home office advised the site will be owned by the Home Office. That is the entire site, not part of it and its ownership not leased. They said the transfer is from MOD to Home Office is not finalised, they are arguing over the value. There is a problem in that the houses are not mortgageable, they are built on concrete plinths, American built. He said there is a problem with disposal because of Crichel Down rules. His expectation is that the Home Office will market it but he does not know when yet.

There was a lengthy discussion on the subject of the £3500/bed payment promised by the Home Office to the local area to alleviate problems caused by the centre. Rightly or wrongly local communities assumed that they would be the recipients of at least some of this money for local projects. Cllr Butland, Leader of Braintree District Council who has been tasked with deciding on criteria for allocating the funds made it very clear that there would be no 'largesse' to the local communities and that thoughts that this would be the case were misguided. It appears that nobody is really sure what the money is for but we understand that a certain amount has been allocated to the centre for various purposes which does seem a little surprising. We hope to have further information on this very important issue shortly.

2. The following statement was issued by WPC:

Statement by Wethersfield Parish Council on the subject of Home Office 'Compensation Payment' regarding the Asylum Centre.

When the Asylum Centre was first proposed, we were led to believe that a sum of £3500 per occupied bed space would be made available to alleviate problems caused by the asylum centre to the local area. Rightly or wrongly people assumed that this money would be made available for community projects so that some benefit would accrue from any difficulties experienced by having this large number of people planted on our doorstep.

It now transpires that this is not the case. At a meeting at the centre held last week Cllr Graham Butland, leader of Braintree District Council, made it very clear that local communities need not expect any 'largesse' from this money.

Today your chairman has discovered that a grant of £50,000 has been offered to the centre to provide educational and recreational equipment for the service users. This will come out of the fund. We do not for one moment suggest that this money is not needed or begrudge it. We do, however, feel that it should not come out of this fund but rather from Home Office funds. The centre is their project, not ours.

He was also told that £200,000 would be made available for the local community, namely Bardfield, Finchingfield, Wethersfield, Toppesfield, Shalford and surrounding areas. So, £50,000 for the 500 residents of the centre and £200,000 for the many thousands of local residents. This would seem to be meat and drink for the extreme right wing and it is possible to see their point.

In conversation with the BDC staff member responsible for dealing with this fund it transpired that our belief is mistaken. The money is not, largely, for our benefit but rather to enable the district council to carry out its responsibilities towards the occupants of the asylum centre with regard to such matters as safeguarding. In other words, it isn't really a grant at all, just the HO doing what it does best and passing the buck down the road to someone else.

We believe that the local area deserves reasonable compensation for the anxiety and distress caused by the actions of the Home Office over the last two or three years not only regarding the Centre but also the prison proposal. The HO seems to feel it is appropriate to ride roughshod over local people ignoring all reasonable rules of democracy and appropriate behaviour.

The Home Secretary, James Cleverly is YOUR MP take this opportunity to write to him and let him know our views.

james.cleverly.mp@parliament.uk

RAF WETHERSFIELD MUSEUM

The following letter was sent regarding the museum.

Dear Mr Cleverly

Wethersfield Airfield Museum

At our Parish Council meeting yesterday evening, Ross Stewart who ran the museum, made a short presentation about the current state of affairs.

He advised us that he had been most encouraged some weeks ago that you showed great interest in the project and offered support.

Since then both he and BDC have made repeated efforts to contact the Home Office to find out in what way they/you can help but, regrettably, neither BDC nor Mr Stewart have received any response.

If, as we must presume, your offer of support was serious, could you use your best efforts to persuade your Home Office officials to urgently engage with Mr Stewart and BDC, to

establish in what way you can help to preserve this important local and, indeed, national, and international historical resource.

It is a fact that there are now listed disused buildings on the site which might well be repurposed to house the museum in the most appropriate location. All that is missing is political will and a little money. As to the latter, this would seem an appropriate use for some of the fund currently being considered for distribution by BDC.

We look forward to your timely response.

WA88/23-24 SUB-COMMITTEES.

Cllr A Hull gave an update: The i newspaper journalist has been very interested and active on WASC minutes, and has picked up the FOI requests to the Accounting Officer and the MOJ and Keir Group FOI. Mr Tom Purslow has been delegated HO minister for the airbase. On the mega prisons, the Home Office has said it is highly unlikely to happen now at Wethersfield at a recent meeting between the PC's and the HO. WASC is not convinced of this, and could be a timing issue with the SDO for the HO, in order the cumulative impact of the total development of the base be avoided. Furthermore it is unclear then why a further £30M has recently been announced for new prison places. The committee agreed to write to the Mr Alex Chalk to ask for a firm answer as to what is happening on this.

WA89/23-24 JOINT NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

A meeting is scheduled this week with BDC. A further £8K grant has also been secured to complete the NP however we may still go over budget by £1-2K currently. Outline plans are due to be received shortly from our Consultant. Quotes for photographic work and housing design illustrations have been received.

WA90/23-24 FINANCE

WASC Finance			
Updated 1/2/24			
Invoices Received			
<u>Date</u>	<u>Supplier</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Amount ex VAT</u>
27/02/2022	Captial Road Safety	Traffic Monitoring	£ 600.00
10/03/2022	Sedley Place	Prison Model	£ 2,137.50
01/03/2022	CBA	Mobilisation Payments	£ 2,000.00
28/02/2022	Andrew Martin Planning	Briefing note and research	£ 1,000.00
05/05/2022	CBA	Consultancy	£ 2,800.00
15/07/2022	Spectra Studios	Prison Model	£ 1,200.00
01/08/2022	CBA	Landscape assesment	£ 3,895.00
10/11/2022	CBA	Heritage application	£ 5,000.00
15/03/2023	T ROBERTS	WASC POSTAGE COSTS	£ 141.49
20/04/2023	BURO HAPPOLD	WASC DESKTOP CONTAMINATION	£ 4,950.00
20/04/2023	BURO HAPPOLD	WASC DESIGN NOTE ON EIA SCREENING	£ 500.00
04/07/2023	TRANSPORT PLANNING CONSULTANTS LTI	TRAFFIC ASSESSMENT	£ 4,750.00
		Total	£ 28,973.99

Income Received			
Date	Payee	Description	Amount
21/02/2022	Shalford Parish Council	10% Contribution 21/22	£ 2,150.00
14/03/2022	Toppesfield Parish Council	Contribution	£ 500.00
11/04/2022	Little Bardfield Parish Council	Contribution	£ 300.00
08/04/2022	The Fields/SWAP	Grant	£ 5,000.00
05/05/2022	Great Bardfield Parish Council	Contribution	£ 1,000.00
18/05/2022	Finchingfield Parish Council	Contribution	£ 4,474.20
20/06/2022	Sible Hedingham	Contribution	£ 500.00
01/08/2022	The Fields/SWAP	Grant	£ 5,000.00
10/08/2022	Castle Hedingham	Contribution	£ 300.00
25/10/2022	Helions Bumpstead Parish Council	Contribution	£ 100.00
01/12/2022	Finchingfield Parish Council	Contribution	£ 4,748.50
17/06/2022	Shalford Parish Council	10% Contribution 22/23	£ 2,150.00
12/12/2022	Sible Hedingham Parish Council	Contribution	£ 2,375.00
24/01/2023	The Salings Parish Council	Contribution	£ 500.00
28/04/2023	The Fields/SWAP	grant	£ 3,500.00
22/05/2023	Little Bardfield Parish Council	Grant	£ 315.00
11/07/2023	Toppesfield Parish Council	Contribution	£ 500.00
06/10/2023	Shalford Parish Council	Contribution	£ 1,121.00
02/10/2023	Finchingfield Parish Council	Contribution	£ 2,000.00
24/11/2023	Gosfield Parish Council	Contribution	£ 250.00
		Total	£ 36,783.70
		Current Position	£ 7,809.71
		EARMARKED RESERVES:	
		Finchingfield Parish Council balance remaining	2000
		Shalford Parish Council balance remaining	1121
		<i>Wethersfield Parish Council contribution Clerk and Hall Hire (£6500.00)</i>	
		Spending in the pipeline resolved:	
		Water testing	1000
		Photo's	200
		BH report	5000
		Total:	6200
		Current balance	7809.71
		less spending agreed	6200
		Current actual position minus pipeline spending:	1609.71
		Plus 50% of earmarked reserves:	
		finchingfield pc	2000
		shalford pc	1121
		Current balance minus pipeline spending plus earmarked reserves	4730.71

WA99/23-24 SPECIAL DEVELOPMENT ORDER (SDO) AT RAF WETHERSFIELD.

No further update currently.

WA100/23-24 RAF WETHERSFIELD MUSEUM

Since no response still from the Government and/or Home Office, the museum will start to put the entire contents in storage now, and take a 3 month break before next steps.

WA101/23-24 ITEMS FROM COUNCILLORS TO BE ADDED TO THE NEXT AGENDA

- Traffic Assessment.

All items should be sent to the Clerk by 18 March 2024.

WA102/23-24 NEXT MEETING OF THE WETHERSFIELD AIRBASE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE:

The next meeting of Wethersfield Airbase Scrutiny Committee will be held on Monday 25 March 2024 at Wethersfield Village Hall.

The Chairman thanked everybody for attending and declared the meeting closed at 8.53pm.

Signed:
Chairman

Date:

DRAFT