

WASC July 2022 Update

On the morning of Sunday 3rd July there was an impromptu turnout of circa 70 people to form a small demonstration for Anglia TV. Alan Mckenzie, chairman of SWAP and The Fields Association, and Andrew Hull, chairman of WASC were both interviewed.

On Sunday 3rd July an Information Evening at held Wethersfield Village Hall by SWAP was very well attended by local people, including several district councillors.

By the end of the event visitors had a clear idea of the respective roles of SWAP and WASC and of the progress made by SWAP in raising the profile of the potential prison application as well as funds. Andrew Hull and John Pearce explained the origins and role of WASC with John focussing on progress with surveys and engagement of specialist consultants on traffic impact projections, heritage, landscape and ecology work. All attendees were very impressed with the professionalism of the event and particularly the investigative work being done to resist a planning application for the prisons.

Another 10,000 leaflets were printed and distributed by the Fields Association providing details of people to write to, to protest against the prison and to encourage donations.

Trees and Parks not Prisons and Roads banners have been erected on the greens in Finchingfield, Wethersfield and Shalford.

SWAP have produced an excellent 20 minute video on the potential prisons with aerial photography showing the larger area and how the prisons would look, with local people speaking and illustrating some of the reasons why the project is totally inappropriate for the area.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsbUQ3AKBHQ>

Dr Richard Sidebottom and Frank Easton have produced a comprehensively researched 40 page report on Mega Prisons and their merits or otherwise to the economy in a rural community. This references a number of reports and recommendations to government that the optimum size for prisons was 400 – 600 inmates, and that there is little benefit to the local economy. Employment is a problem in terms of both attracting and retaining staff. Highpoint and Chelmsford both already have difficult recruiting sufficient personnel. Putting a prison between, and in the staff catchment for the two would compound the problem. The report will be distributed as widely as possible to relevant prison bodies and politicians.

On July 7th the Heritage and Landscape consultant commissioned by WASC visited Wethersfield Airbase. Evidently they were more impressed than they expected to be with the value of the buildings. They will come back in a couple of weeks to confirm proposals to protect the heritage value on the airfield.

On 23rd June Andrew Hull and Roger Duffin, Chairman and Deputy Chairman respectively of WASC met up with District Councillor Tattersley to discuss the concerns of his 5 parish councils over having their views incorrectly represented in a series of emails from Cllr Tattersley stating the Parishes supported the prisons and favoured prisons over housing on the airbase. Despite having been written to twice on the matter Cllr Tattersley seemed unaware of WASCs concerns. However after lengthy discussion he confirmed that in principle he would be willing to contact the recipients of the emails to present the correct views of his 5 parishes. The meeting was followed up with an email for clarity, and having received no reply he was emailed again on 16th July this prompted a reply stating that he had done as asked but when asked for clarification, the followup email said that he had not contacted everybody but all were by now well aware of the local parishes and residents resistance to the prisons. It is not clear who if anyone, Cllr Tattersley did contact to correct the statements given last year that the local parish councils were all in favour of the megaprison.

The Government Petition is now at >10K signatures and a Government response has been received.

Government responded:

"The Government is undertaking the largest prison build programme in more than a century, one of the sites being considered is Wethersfield Air Base, a planning The proposed prisons, if built, would be the greenest prisons built so far and follow a new design that helps aid rehabilitation of offenders, helping make our communities safer. The new prisons would also create over 1,200 permanent jobs in the local area once the prisons were operational and hundreds of local jobs during construction.

The MoJ ran a pre-planning public consultation to seek feedback from the local community on these proposals in the Braintree District. The consultation ran from 27 September until 8 November with face to face consultation sessions on the 14 and 15 October. Residents were able to have their say by submitting comments online, over the phone or by post. We appreciate the feedback received and had around 1,800 responses.

The MoJ are currently deciding whether to proceed to submitting a planning application for new prisons on the Wethersfield site and taking time to consider the information received from the public consultation, stakeholder engagement and the results of ecological surveys on the site.

The MoJ are committed to adhering to the Environment Act and have followed due process by engaging ecologists to conduct relevant surveys and provide the necessary advice on mitigation action required to offset the impact of the proposed development. A Preliminary Ecological Appraisal, reptile survey, and dormouse survey were conducted in 2020. A Breeding Bird Survey (BBS), great crested newt surveys, invasive non-native species survey, and an updated Phase 1 habitat survey were conducted in 2021. A Wintering Bird Survey was conducted in winter 2021/2022. A bat Preliminary Roost Assessment (PRA) has been conducted in 2022, and the following surveys are ongoing: bat activity surveys, bat roost surveys of buildings, invertebrate surveys, and a botanical survey.

The findings of these surveys have guided, and would continue to guide, the formulation of an appropriate mitigation response to the impacts of the proposed development. An ecology chapter would form part of the Environmental Statement for the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) if a planning application is submitted.

To mitigate the ecological impact of building on this site, prison landscaping would use native planting and seed mixes as far as possible.

The loss of any trees, scrub, and buildings would be mitigated/compensated. Brown hares use the site, and appropriate mitigation/compensation would be provided. Great crested newt impacts are limited to habitats on land (no ponds would be lost), and we propose following the District Level Licensing route with Natural England, to offset any impacts.

The invertebrate surveys target a wide range of rare and notable species, including priority species. We are confident that the needs of any priority species can be accommodated within the habitat provisions envisaged.

The MOJ is committed to Environment Act and to the protection of wildlife. The MoJ currently operates a number of prisons in Sites of Special Scientific interest (SSSI's) and on sites with protected species of birds and other wildlife. Any proposals put forward for Planning Permission would have a commitment to protect the wildlife on the site and to mitigate the impact of the proposed development.

Ministry of Justice “

The four parish councils who have part of the prison within their parish boundaries are hoping to work together on a potential combined Neighbourhood plan. The details need to be put to each parish council for approval. This would involve Finchingfield, Wethersfield, Toppesfield and Sible Hedingham. This will take a lot of time and volunteer support from residents is needed, but in the longer term should help protect the airfield from inappropriate development. Any potential volunteers in the four parishes mentioned, please contact your PC Clerk, who will provide your details to the project leaders.

Alternative uses are being considered for the site working with other organisations. Discretion prevents any detail being provided for the moment, but there are serious options being explored for use that would be much more in keeping with the area. This is important because we all recognise that when the authorities recognise that a prison is totally inappropriate for this site, there will still be a requirement for it to be utilised in some way.

WASC and SWAP continue to work towards identifying alternative uses for the airfield, this will be necessary whether the prison goes ahead or not. At this stage it would be premature to say more than that but it is believed there are genuine viable alternative options. We have to get MOD, Essex CC and Braintree DC on side with these.