

WASC update 16th June 2022

Natural England have a team going on site to look at the ecology, we're just awaiting confirmation of the date.

Digital model and modelling work has been completed and tested on the southside of the base. The drone will do a full circuit this week, including the Pant Valley. Visuals should be ready in couple of weeks. Specific views from a distance at a range of vantage points all around to now be photographed. Digital image of the prison to be dropped in so that its impact on the landscape can be seen from said vantage points and from the aerial drone views.

WASC have commissioned a 'base line' study on the heritage assets within the area but to conserve funds have not taken it further yet. If there is a PP application we will need to do so at that stage. Scheduled Monument status is possible and there are a number of buildings our consultant believes should be listed. However he prefers 'conservation area' this can include listed buildings but he believes it could justifiably include the whole area. It would fall to Braintree DC to schedule it. It is believed however that Historic England and Essex Place Services are likely to be supportive of the airfield being given conservation area status and this could significantly impact on future uses for the site.

Advocating conservation area status will require an additional £4K cost to move forward. An agreement to pursue this was agreed by all WASC members.

In the '9,000 Miles of Concrete' report from Historic England, Wethersfield is listed as one of the highest rated MOD Airfields in terms of buildings and structures remaining on site.

The Landscape Character Assessment is near completion.

The Remoteness Study is complete.

Traffic levels on the roads that approach the proposed prison have been surveyed/recorded and a consultant with experience of traffic volumes and impact around prisons is engaged to analyze the stats collected so far and assess the likely impact of prison traffic during and after construction on the local road network.

The intention is to also factor in the effect of the increased traffic levels that will in any event occur naturally, as a result of housebuilding, increasing population and car ownership and the impact on local roads when there are road closures which seems to be an increasingly frequent event. This will be backed up with records of road closures in the area over the last 5 years.

Lots of information and data already identified in recent FOI's, to challenge. Consultant needed to prepare a full report; our own estimates are already done and the numbers are in line with those in the FOI's.

One problem we are likely to face is that any planning application is likely to be an outline application. If granted then the principal to build is established and then the applicant's consultants work through all the conditions applied, finding precedents as to why they should be relaxed.

We now have a huge amount of data gathered and BDC have expressed interest in seeing this. The question is how much do we dare to release knowing that BDC will inevitably share this with the MOJ?

A FOI request has provided a communication from Essex CC to the MOJ raising a number of concerns that would need to be addressed, including impact on social care needs, location of the site and access, a sustainable travel plan, traffic volume generated from out of the immediate area, architectural design sympathetic with the local landscape and existing buildings. The document goes on to say that “any application will be required to have regard to the historic airfield itself and nearby heritage assets, to conserve and enhance their setting and provide a positive to the local character”.

And also **“at present it is unlikely the scheme could be supported from a heritage perspective should it progress to an application.”**

DIO have agreed in principle to allow WASC and it’s consultants access to the airbase to complete the surveys. A follow-up email has been sent to request confirmation of dates.

10,000 signatures to the SWAP petition against the prison. Partly assisted by some coverage from Chris Packham and SWAP await a government response

Cllr Tattersley had responded to WASC’s request for the record to be corrected regarding all parishes objection and then followed this up with a suggestion to meet no more than two of WASC’s representatives. A date is set for late June.

The 2007 Reform Paper from the Prison Officer’s Association recommends against large scale prisons. The prisons proposed at Wethersfield would make it the largest prison in Europe so WASC has written to see if this is still the view of the POA.

Banners: Wethersfield PC have agreed and purchased a Banner. It will be displayed at the bus shelter next to the Village Hall in June.

Finchingfield PC have also agreed to purchase a banner. Location to be confirmed but is expected to be the high point of the green.

A report on Mega Prisons and the impact they have economically and environmentally has been drafted by a WASC statistician. This will further developed and then provided to The Howard League for Penal Reform and other influential organisations for comment.

It is known that Highpoint are having problems recruiting. There is low unemployment in the area around Wethersfield airfield and therefore staff for any prison would need to come out of the same pool as Highgate recruit from, compounding an already existing problem.

BDC’s Local Plan is still not fully adopted. Modifications have been requested by the Inspectorate, however should be in place and fully adopted in the next 2-3 weeks. Heritage: Baseline study and assets in the area completed.

It is agreed in principle that there is merit in putting together a Neighbourhood Plan to cover the area of the airfield. This would involve Toppesfield, Wethersfield, Finchingfield and Sible Hedingham Parish Councils. First step is to get at least two representatives from each of these parish councils to meet to discuss the parameters and practicalities.

On Friday 10th June a number of WASC members attended the Essex CC Levelling up launch at Sible Hedingham Village Hall.

This was chaired by Louise McKinlay, Deputy Leader of Essex CC with support from Graham Butland, County Councillor for 5 WASC parishes and leader of Braintree District Council. There was a lot of aspirational talk around the purpose of levelling up but virtually zero reference to the Levelling Up White Paper itself. It seemed to be assumed that it was accepted as a given by attendees that there is deprivation in rural north Braintree, though it's not always visible. The electric bus and mobile library were mentioned along with the launch of a digital strategy. Quite a bit of talk about loneliness and a bit about overweight people, also apparently you can be financially comfortable but still deprived. A community engagement exercise will be carried out this summer with £200,000 ringfenced to increase support.

There was also reference by Graham Butland to the unsuitability of the current bus system (large buses carrying one or two people). Digigo was mentioned, which is a dial a bus service (electric vehicle) being trialled for two years and it's hoped to roll that out over a larger area of Essex. GB also highlighted fuel poverty, vehicular for transport and heating for homes and that community-led solutions are more sustainable than those imposed. There is £1.6 million sustainable warmth funding. He believes that deprivation is hidden in rural areas and represents a challenge for communities that rallied together during Covid.

James Cleverly MP referred to beautiful parts of the district and that we must protect what we value. He also referred to the greater social cohesion in rural areas where the archetypal little old lady living on her own would soon have a neighbour checking on her if she hadn't been seen for a few days. He made the point that despite having lived in the same street in London for most of his adult life, in only 7 years in Essex he'd come to know all his neighbours. This did seem slightly at odds with the image of social deprivation that Essex CC were projecting.

Essex CC were also represented by Tom Walker, Exec Dir of Economy, Investment and Public Health plus Adrian Coggins, Head of Wellbeing, Public Health and Community Assets.

Nick Shuttleworth from the Rural Community Council of Essex, stated that levelling up is part of a national thing and it's important to create jobs in the north, Macclesfield was the example used, as this impacted on the south.

Tristan Easey of Community 360 referred to the assets including people, places, open spaces, faith communities, friends and neighbours, business events and seasonal activities and the importance of the voluntary sector.

All said transport is key to employment and health outcomes but showed a health model which indicated that it wasn't.

It was conspicuous that no-one defined the problem or referred to the White Paper.

RS (Wethersfield's statistician) questioned them on the stats behind the white paper and they acknowledged that there is a lot more info that they have and they will pull together and provide to us.

RD asked when this would be, as there is precious little in the white paper. We're told by Louise McKinlay, it will be a couple of weeks. RD pointed out that there is a degree of scepticism about the stats behind the white paper in Finchingfield and neighbouring parishes, so we were keen to see the statistics to understand the issues the levelling up white paper is dealing with and engage with Essex CC. LM also emphasised that this was just the launch and confirmed there would be engagement with the community and PCs and that it was great to see so much interest as they (Essex CC) wouldn't be able to achieve their aspirations without us. This was mentioned a couple of times.

WASC generally struggles to recognise a significant deprivation in rural north Braintree. The area may be considered 'deprived' in terms of access to services, broadband, shops and public transport, also some poor-quality housing (largely because this is defined in terms of insulation, heating type and age). Villages score well on everything else, including loneliness and health. Rural Market towns like Halstead etc have issues with income and skills (not employment) and community engagement which is made worse by people commuting out every day. These issues pale into insignificance compared to Tendring.

Those present from WASC felt it worth engaging with Essex CC and will make an initial contact before raising at our next meeting. We need their stats (and source) on the deprivation and also their definition of deprivation.