

An update from WASC.

Since our last update we are pleased to announce another Parish Council has joined WASC, Ridgewell PC has joined bringing the present number of PCs to 14.

Many months of hard work by the technical sub committee of WASC means that phase one of the work programme is almost completed. This brings us up to date and well prepared for what we feel is an inevitable planning application for 2 mega prisons by the MoJ.

The work programme has involved the following

- 1) A detailed landscape character assessment and how the prisons are likely to affect this has been finalised
- 2) A comprehensive study on how such large mega prisons in such a rural location are not in the national interest has been finalised. Produced by Dr Richard Sidebottom and Frank Easton and running to 40 pages, this is a hugely impressive and compelling study based on solid evidence and extensively researched data, the bibliography of references quoted runs to 5 pages.
- 3) A paper has also been written strongly countering the MoJ assertion that this is 'previously developed land'. The proposed prisons are to be sited on what is now existing grassland and part runway, the proposed prisons take over no footprint of any current building.
- 4) A response to the Prisons Strategy White Paper has also been sent back to the MoJ. It demonstrates quite clearly that such a large prison in such a rural location actually conflicts with the MOJs own guidelines.
- 5) We have undertaken our own traffic surveys to get baseline figures on current traffic flows around the area.
- 6) A strategic accessibility study is also nearing completion. This study will show how Wethersfield airbase is actually one of the most remote areas in relation to what Government considers a strategic road, or in other words, a road suitable to manage further development .
- 7) A heritage assessment has been finalised with key assets identified and a strategy for their protection underway
- 8) Crichel Downs - These are the rules in which the land was originally compulsory purchased, a legal assessment has been made as to how these rules currently affect the site. When land is offered from one government department to another the Government can avoid offering the land back to the previous owners to be purchased.
- 9) A review of Local and National Planning Policy has been undertaken, it is clear these prisons, in such a location, contravene a huge amount of these planning policy frameworks.
- 10) A review on the outcomes of other planning applications for mega prisons is also underway.
- 11) Transport Assessment- This is the final piece of work to be finished, A well respected traffic consultant has been appointed and is currently working hard on this. It is obvious to all that live here that the roads simply cannot take the increase in traffic these prisons

will generate. A professional and detailed assessment of the impact of these prisons on the road network is obviously the major factor in this application, WASC will endeavour to make sure this assessment is as thorough as can be.

- 12) It is planned that the four parishes with part of the airbase within their site will work together on a joint Neighbourhood Plan which will cover all of Wethersfield and Finchingfield and just the parts of Toppesfield and Sible Hedingham that include part of the airfield.

As mentioned before, we are extremely lucky to have such expertise within WASC that a lot of the above work has been done 'in house'. The work of Councilor John Pearce in particular has been instrumental in making sure we have the most professional and comprehensive work programme finished. Also, the work of Dr Richard Sldebottom and Frank Easton has also been vital in providing a very clear and detailed analysis as to why these prisons are not in the national interest, this could be an absolutely key factor.

Their comprehensive report (40 pages long) 'People, Place and Performance' subtitled 'Are rural Mega Prisons in the National Interest?' is being distributed by WASC and by SWAP to senior politicians and relevant cabinet ministers, BDC and Essex senior planning officers and councillors, as well as the prison service and police etc.

A small number of WASC technical sub committee met with planning officers at BDC in September. Whilst officers cannot comment on their likely response to a planning application till it is received, they did take an interest in the work program outlined above and we believe were impressed by the depth of the work we have done so far and we would therefore expect that this would form part of their considerations when they process the planning application from MoJ.

WASC will continue to work hard, ensuring our voice is heard, we will also, with the help of SWAP, be pushing for alternative uses for the site, things that can benefit all of us.

Work is underway on alternative uses for the site but is premature to air these till the prison issue is resolved and we know whether we are looking at the whole site or part of it.