

WASC update for Finchingfield PC 26th April 2022

The WASC Technical Committee met Thursday 21st April and the full committee met on Monday 25th April.

Various consultants are appointed to undertake work and/or advise on specific aspects of the potential prison application. Given that there is so much to do, and the short time allowed for a response should a planning application come in, it was felt necessary to make a start.

Traffic counts have taken place and it is estimated from activity at other prisons that the current 2,400 vehicles per day passing the site would increase by 3,200. This would be in addition to further organic growth from new build development taking place in all local villages. More work will be done.

All local and national planning policy is being researched as well as prison policy. Evidence is emerging that in the past the prison service have recognized that large prisons are difficult to manage and recommended best practice is for prisons to house no more than 500 residents. More research is needed.

Where possible WASC are engaging with other bodies that may do their own research that we can use and thus conserve our resources.

e.g. Natural England who will have an interest in the flora and fauna, including ancient woodlands, rare grasses, skylarks, crested newts etc.

Historic England are beginning to take an interest in the military heritage and buildings including the cold war hangers and weapon storage facilities.

A meeting took place between the Defence Infrastructure Organisation and WASC on 21st March. The DIO need to complete the sale of the airbase by 2025 but are committed to letting the MOJ prison application run its course as a first option. This would occupy circa 120 acres of the airbase and does not overlap with the existing 150 acres of buildings, still leaving 500 acres for potential future development. They are however willing to engage with WASC as representatives of the residents of the wider community and we expect to have future meetings with DIO.

Initially reluctant to allow WASC and our consultants access to the airfield they now accept that we are a statutory body and are willing to allow access, albeit it's still a bit slow.

There are now 12 PC members of WASC with Sible Hedingham being the latest to join.

WASC has written to the district councillor for 5 of the most affected parishes for clarification of why he has advised both the MOJ and BDC officers that parishes

welcome the idea of the prison. All 5 parishes have been contacted, meeting minutes and memories thoroughly checked and all confirmed that they have never expressed this view either formally or informally. The councillor in question will be written to again to give every opportunity for the record to be corrected.

Four of the WASC Technical Committee, met with the two most senior planning and economic growth officers at BDC on 25th April. An in-depth meeting took place focusing on policy. The distinction between SWAP and WASC was made clear.

BDC confirmed that they are involved in preapplication discussions with MOJ which will remain confidential. There is agreement that there is a need for a masterplan for the site, but the MOD are reluctant to develop this till the prison application is resolved. At this stage it is still not certain when PP application will come forward or if it will at all. MOJ and their consultants are working through the requirements of the scoping impact document.

BDC were very interested in the work WASC have been doing on jobs, impact on the local economy, remoteness and accessibility, traffic levels and the digital model. However anything we provide will be shared with MOJ so there is a decision to be made as to if and how much we share in advance of any application coming in.

BDC envisage an enormous amount of work arising from such a large build project and have a host of consultants lined up to assist if and when an application does come in.

A presentation on WASC was given to the BALC (Braintree Association of Local Councils) executive committee earlier in April. All parishes that are members of WASC are also members of BALC. The connection is therefore made and the two organisations expect to be mutually supportive going forwards.

A FOI request recently processed has produced a great deal more information to work through but it appears Essex CC have already expressed concerns over heritage, landscape and on travel/roads.

Fields Association petition to stop the prison development has now reached 9,000 signatures. There was a bit of a boost when Chris Packham posted on FB in opposition to the development. At 10,000 it is called in by government to look at.

Fundraising by SWAP has been going well and a number of parishes have made financial contributions. However, there will be a great deal more financial support needed as the application progresses.