



FINCHINGFIELD PARISH COUNCIL

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Development Management
Braintree District Council
Causeway House
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30th December 2021

For the attention of Neil Jones

APPLICATION NO: 21/03405/SCO & 21/02425/SCR

DESCRIPTION: Scoping Opinion (under Part 4, Section 15 of the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017 (hereafter known as the 2017 EIA

Regulations) for two prisons which will operate independently of each other once operational and each have a full suite of ancillary facilities. One prison will be a Category B and the second a Category C Prison and there will be a common access to both prisons at Wethersfield Airfield, Braintree.

Finchingfield Parish Council wishes to submit the following response to the scoping document submitted by Cushman and Wakefield on behalf of the Ministry of Justice. Finchingfield Parish Council already responded to the recent Ministry of Justice consultation setting out clear reasons for our objection based on facts and planning policy rather than a NIMBY knee jerk reaction, but there are concerns over the range of the scoping exercise proposed.

Finchingfield Parish Council is also a member of the Wethersfield Airbase Scrutiny Committee made up of 10 local parish councils that stand to be impacted by this development. WASC have made a submission on behalf of all 10 parish councils but given the strength of feeling locally regarding this development, the Parish Council wished to make a representation regarding the scoping exercise on behalf of the residents of Finchingfield Parish.

There is a great deal of local concern over the speed at which this application appears to be moving, given the dramatic impact it would have on the communities, environment and landscape of this rural area located only two miles from the centre of Finchingfield, which is widely regarded as “the prettiest village in Essex”.

Indeed, given the very restricted access by road and lack of public transport it is hard to conceive that there is a serious intention to build two such large prisons in such a totally unsuitable area. The fact that it is even being proposed however and the proposed occupation dates of 2027 and 2029, gives serious concern that it is the intention of the state to ignore the impracticalities of the location and simply to try to bulldoze this development through.

The short lead in and lack of engagement with the local communities, drawing the Scoping Opinion solely to the attention of Finchingfield Parish Council and to no other parish council, reinforces those concerns.



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The fact that a firm has purportedly been measuring the site with a view to fencing it, adds further to the concerns over due process being followed.

There is reference within the Scoping Letter (P2) to access the site via Shaw Drive. Please note that Shaw Drive is on MOD property and is an internal road rather than an access road. Access from the B1053 is via Sculpins Lane.

The Scoping Letter recognizes the rural location of the site in a predominantly agricultural landscape, and inaccessibility, stating proximity to local villages and distance from the nearest towns, train stations, airport and motorway.

P7 states that “Any cumulative effects of the proposed development within the locality will also be considered.” P8 goes on to list those topics to be included in the ES. Cumulative in this context should mean effects in addition to those already taking place in an area that has already seen profound change in the last 50 years and that will continue to see increasing growth and traffic, even without the addition of a prison. In other words the environmental impact of the growth that will already happen without a prison should be assessed so that the impacts of the prison can be added to this expanding baseline rather than to a static baseline as at 2021.

P9 States that the majority of the application site is previously development (sic) land. The topographical report referred to on the previous page cannot support that. A much smaller site, previously sold off by the MOD, was not considered by BDC planners to be brownfield even though it had been highly developed. The topographers report stated that 70% of the site had been covered with concrete, tarmac and building foundation slabs. The topographers report for this application site will show a much, much lower % of built on surface that cannot under the government’s own guidelines be considered brownfield.

The high quality land referred to here was lost when the initial compulsory purchase of this land by the government took place. The land has the potential to return to agricultural use. There are many similar airfields up and down the country where the land has returned/remained in agricultural use. The loss of agricultural land should not be scoped out of the EIA process.

Lighting is proposed to be excluded from the EIA. Given the height four storeys and scale (i.e. sq metre footprint) of the development in such a high up area, the impact of the prison lighting will be major in the area and will be visible for miles around. It is hard to believe the light pollution will not spread across neighbouring arable land and villages. It will impact on wildlife in the area and takes no account of the fact that within a stone’s throw distance, almost 300 acres of arable and woodland was purchased earlier this year specifically for the purpose of rewilding. There will be other impacts too on this noble effort to rewild if prisons were to be built on the Wethersfield Airbase.

The reasons given for lighting to be scoped out of the EIA process and only appear in the Outline Planning Application as a lighting design strategy bears no relation to the level of Environmental and Ecological problems it can cause. A ZoI (Zone of Influence) of a 100m may be the limit of



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providing useful illumination. Comparing it to the light given off by the light of the current MOD Base is not an appropriate comparison. Lighting needs to be part of the scoping process.

P12, Chapter 3 mentions alternatives. It is not clear to the layman whether this refers to alternative sites, or alternative uses for this site. Both should be fully and honestly explored and discussed. Given the inaccessible position of the airbase, it's size and geography combined with the MOD's presumed need to monetise an asset compulsorily purchased many decades ago, this is a project which the MOD should be discussing with the local communities, via the Wethersfield Airbase Scrutiny Committee. A working party formed from MOD representatives and WASC representatives could then work to ensure this site is put to best use. This is a classic case that would benefit from application of the 2011 Localism Act.

Chapter 12 Socio-Economic and Health.

Under the heading Foul Water, a statement says it is understood that the foul water system would be unable to accommodate the proposed development and that an on-site water treatment plant would form part of the new development proposals. Figures show that a person produces 150 litres of waste water a day. When both prisons are fully up and running they will be producing 600,000 litres (132,000gls) a day. The on-site plant may well be able to make it fit for discharge but where is it going to go? The current pipework around the site is unable to carry demand during heavy rainfalls. The Finchingfield Brook is part of the River Pant/River Blackwater system. This is a main river system under the Environment Agency's control for flooding. In fact they are in the process of designing and building an £18 million flood relief system in Coggeshall, a further down stream part of the Finchingfield Brook. If the plan were to use the river system from the new plant to discharge the treated water, whether scoped or not, discussion needs to take place between the EA and the MOJ. We see no indication of it from the scoping letter.

P30, Chapter 12 anticipates "that the proposed development will have a significant beneficial effect". And goes on to say "There is no defined way to determine significance of socio-economics effects. As such, professional judgement and previous experience will be used to define the significance of likely effects. With regards to employment, it is likely that effects will be positive and therefore, no mitigation will be required."

This seems like creative licence to produce "authoritative comment" based purely on supposition and heavily influenced by what the paymasters of the report would like it to say. The area in which the airbase sits has low population density, a relatively high number of retired people and very low unemployment. It is impossible that jobs created at the prison would be filled by local residents and therefore it would require staff to travel in from outside the area. Given the low population density the majority of these staff would be travelling a minimum of 10 miles and quite likely 20 or 30 miles adding considerably to traffic levels creating congestion and environmental pollution.

This applies during the build stage too. Those engaged in the construction industry have full order books, it is very difficult to engage any kind of tradesperson (electrician, plumber, bricklayer, plasterer etc) and so construction workers would also have to travel in.

Due to the appeal of our rural historic village, the local economy is reliant on tourism including day trippers, visitors to Finchingfield and other villages in the area. The widespread change in character



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of that would be caused by a prison development of this size would significantly damage that low key and light traffic, comparatively environmentally friendly, economic benefit.

As has been noted elsewhere, the roads serving the airbase are small B roads with pinch points through villages along narrow roads, made narrower by residents parked cars, bridges and twists and turns in the road. When roads are closed due to flooding or roadworks etc, it creates volumes of traffic along roads classified as “Quiet Lanes” and blockages where these lanes are insufficient to deal with the volume of the traffic or size of the vehicles that are unable to back up to pass.

Whether coming in via Bardfield, Finchingfield or Wethersfield, or from the Sible Heddingham direction there are pinch points at every approach. Already increasing traffic volumes in the area means this gets worse every year anyway. The additional traffic volumes these prisons would create would destroy the character of the area.

Chapter 13 deals with “Water Resource and Flood Risk”. The proposed development will displace a great of surface water that would otherwise naturally drain through the soil. There are several spots that already regularly flood and these would inevitably suffer with deeper floods and more frequently. This is partially recognised but seems to be discounted as not a problem as it will occur off site. Conversely, East Anglia generally is recognised as a dry area, suffering from low pressures, it does not appear sufficient thought is going to be given to where the huge additional volumes of water required during construction, but especially once active, are going to come from.

The above is mainly concerned with the direct effects of the prison and its staff only. That impact will be huge. The supporting infrastructure of suppliers and maintenance and support would impact massively on the area and over time, change it beyond all recognition. Whilst we recognise that we cannot make time stand still, the destructive impact of this development is not compatible with levelling up, localism or quality of life gains.

The need for a prison may be real, but it would be more appropriate to be located where it can be more easily accessed by staff and suppliers as well as visitors.

The desire for the MOD to make a financial return on their asset is understood. Much better for the MOD to work with the community to arrive at a use that brings financial return for the MOD but does not damage the area and ideally brings a benefit to the local communities.

Please note: as of January 5th 2021 we have a new Parish Clerk whose contact details are on the letter head. Please keep Finchingfield Parish Council up to date with any developments on this application.

Yours sincerely

Cllr Claire Collins
Chairman
Finchingfield Parish Council