

Update for Finchingfield PC Parish Assembly 12th May 2022

I think everyone will be aware of the MOD's proposal to build the largest prison in Europe on the Wethersfield Airbase. In short it's a massive build project with a planned 3,500 inmates and 1400 staff in an area totally unsuited to such a development. It would be a massive blight and would destroy the area as we know it.

Finchingfield Parish council objected to the prison back in November 2021 on the grounds of roads and transport, i.e. restricted access, ecology, history, economy and pollution.

And we responded to the BDC scoping request stating what we felt the MOJ application needed to cover in their planning application. Both these documents are on the PC Website where we will be posting regular updates.

There were many other submissions, and in March BDC produced a fairly comprehensive Scoping Opinion running to 35 pages and setting out what they believe any planning application from the MOJ should provide as supporting information in the impact assessment.

In November last year a collaboration of parish councils were formed, initially with half a dozen and now there are 12 parish councils that are members of the Wethersfield Airfield Scrutiny Committee, now known as WASC. The immediate objective is to stop the prison being built, but we have to be pragmatic and accept that something will happen on the airbase, so the longer term goal is to have some input in to a more suitable use for the airfield.

12 Parish Councils - Shalford, Wethersfield, Finchingfield, Sible Hedingham, Toppesfield, Bardfield, The Salings, Little Bardfield, Panfield, Castle Hedingham, Gosfield and Great Yeldham.

Each parish has officially discussed and voted on joining WASC and each has two representatives that sit on the WASC committee. For Finchingfield that is David Coverdale and myself.

WASC has a technical sub committee which is spearheading the opposition to the proposals. Chaired by a Wethersfield councillor with over 40 years experience as a senior planner, we have a terrific group of experts including planners, architects, solicitors and an economist who lectures at Cambridge University.

So, WASC is the Parish Council led, technical response to the proposals, responsible for responding to any application with detailed expert analysis.

SWAP is the residents led group looking to raise public awareness and raise funds to help WASC in its task of fighting these proposals.

To provide the most robust opposition to the plans a long and extensive work schedule is well underway. However there is a huge amount to do and given the short time allowed for a response should a planning application come in, it was felt necessary to make a start. Therefore WASC as well as internal work are currently engaging with expert consultants in - landscape, heritage, ecology, transport/highways etc.

For example, traffic counts have already 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.

This is where the fundraising from SWAP and the financial contribution from some of the parish councils is so essential. If a full application for planning permission comes in these costs will escalate.

Where possible WASC are also 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 presentation on WASC was given to the BALC executive committee earlier in April. Almost 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.

We had a meeting with the Defence Infrastructure Organisation 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.

The DIO confirmed at our meeting that large-scale housing is simply not possible as it will fail to meet local and national planning policy.

This stops dead, any misconception that the prisons are 'better than houses'.

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.

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 and would copies of and be kept up to date with our work. 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.

In summary WASC is led by parishes whose future generations will be affected by decisions made now. We intend to scrutinise any proposals but also aim to directly influence future plans for the base, in its entirety, making sure any plans put forward fall within local and national planning policy and are sympathetic and beneficial to the area.

Fields Association petition to stop the prison development has now reached 10,000 signatures. Congratulations to the organisers who are doing superb work. At 10,000 it is called in by government to look at.