

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 analyse 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 followup 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.