**WASC update January/February 2023**

* A small number of WASC representatives met with our MP, James Cleverly, before Christmas to update him on our work with the hope he will pass our concerns and findings on to relevant Government departments. It was reassuring to find he has a solid understanding, not only of the inadequate road network but also how the job market in the Braintree District is not in need of such a prison, it has some of the highest employment rates in the country. He was very interested in learning more about some of the possible alternative uses we have been investigating, from a community owned solar farm to a mixture of community owned housing and work spaces. Mr Cleverly could understand that some of the uses we are investigating could be used as a showcase or template that could be replicated through other parts of the country. Disappointingly his constant approach to planning applications is not to get involved and his role as Foreign Secretary makes it unlikely we will ever hear any public disapproval for the plans from our MP.
* SWAP have done an excellent job in testing the immediate water courses for PFAS chemicals or 'forever chemicals', their findings of extremely high levels of these toxic chemicals, 70 times higher than should be found, into our water courses is truly worrying. WASC have spoken to several experts on contaminated land and it is clear there could be serious issues at Wethersfield from jet fuel, lubricants, PFAS chemicals to issues regarding the storage of nuclear weapons, plus of course anything else that could be buried up there. It seems inevitable WASC will have to engage a consultant on the matter. Having expert opinion will not only inform us of the possible threats our parishes may face but will also ensure we are able to hold the MOJ. Braintree District Council etc to account at every step of the way. WASC are currently clarifying the costings and scope of work with such experts now.
* Following preparation of a heritage report by consultants acting for WASC, an application has been submitted to Historic England (HE) seeking protection of some buildings/areas on the base through listing as buildings of special historic interest or scheduled monuments. This current application relates to the eight early Cold War Victor Alert hangars and associated weapons storage area (including several igloo structures used to store nuclear weapons) together with the American chapel. The application is currently under consideration by HE and does not preclude further measures at a later date seeking heritage protection on the base.
* The Technical Committee has been monitoring planning appeals involving mega prisons at other sites across the country. These have implications for Wethersfield both in terms of alleged need and the decision-making process. The Inspector for HMP Garth (Chorley) has issued his decision letter which recommends the Secretary of State to dismiss the appeal and refuse permission. The Secretary of State has decided to invite the MoJ to submit further proposals relating to highway safety on the basis that he is minded to grant permission, notwithstanding the Inspector's recommendations. This decision emphasises that a decision will be based on a balance of competing harms/benefits (which itself is highly subjective and in the hands of the decision-maker)  and illustrates the need for us to continue focusing on the work done on national interest (need) and  socio-economic local interest as well as highway safety, ecology, heritage, landscape impact, countryside character,  scale/design, alternative sites, contamination etc. The decision does at least demonstrate we're progressing on the right lines.
* Meetings have been held with BDC to progress the Joint Finchingfield and Wethersfield Neighbourhood Plan(NP). As this would involve establishing planning policy for both parishes to include the base, Sible Hedingham and Toppesfield PCs were invited to become party to the NP to include the small elements of the base within those parishes. Whilst both had agreed this in principle Toppesfield have been advised to consider any resource/timing implications for their own NP which is currently well advanced. A meeting is to be arranged between PCs and BDC to discuss this issue and this has resulted in a delay in submitting the joint NP area application to BDC for approval until the precise NP boundary is settled.
* Braintree District Council issued a press release in early January stating that Cllr Graham Butland, Leader of BDC will be writing to the Secretary of State for Justice to say that BDC shares residents frustration that the announcement of the intention to build two prisons on the airbase was made well over a year ago, he will ask for an update and “impress on the SoS the need to share those plans with the local community at the earliest opportunity.”