

Caught between the Devil and the Deep Blue sea

Asylum, Imprisonment, or both in rural Essex?

Richard Sidebottom

on behalf of the Wethersfield Airbase Scrutiny Committee,
(WASC) Technical Sub-committee

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*“What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun.”¹*

This paper was written by Richard Sidebottomⁱ on behalf of the Wethersfield Airbase Scrutiny Committee (WASC) Technical Sub-committee². It uses findings from previous work on the National³ and Local interest⁴ regarding the prison proposals to put the prospect of an asylum centre in comparative context.

As the asylum centre is currently subject to ongoing legal proceedings, this is a 'working document' that will be updated in accordance with new developments and feedback from those who read it.

The author gratefully acknowledges comments from a range of reviewers and members of the WASC Technical Sub-committee. All errors and omissions remain the author's own.

ⁱ The author is an independent economic consultant with 35 years' experience in the private sector and academia. He has conducted research for public and private institutions on sustainable rural development, employment, skills training, entrepreneurship, malnutrition and affordable housing. He has a PhD from the University of Cambridge; and Masters qualifications in Development, Finance and Economics from the University of Cambridge, London Business School and the University of Oxford.

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Executive summary

It is time for some common sense to prevail:

In a remote rural community that has been on tenterhooks for 21 months awaiting confirmation of the Ministry of Justice's (MOJ) ill-conceived Mega prisons plan first mooted in September, 2021, the added mental stress of a pending asylum centre is pushing residents to breaking point.

Even in isolation, each over-sized proposal is neither equitable nor effective and promises a range of severe negative consequences in terms of each of the social, economic, and environmental pillars of sustainable development (Table 1). Together they represent a "colossal failure of common sense"⁵. Neither proposal can be defined as a short-term unavoidable localised emergency and neither are in the national or local interest.

It is clear that the MOJ and Home Office are each engaged in an attempted ex-post justification of decisions made purely in the interests of political expediency. The nature of the government's approach and the litany of errors and inconsistencies in its (very limited) submissions of 'evidence', suggest the need for detailed local (and national) scrutiny of each proposal is more apparent than ever.

Each proposal imposes an unfair burden:

1,700 asylum seekers equates to an 11-fold increase in the young male population in Finchingfield and over 12-fold in Wethersfield, thereby dramatically distorting the ratio of males to females. If the rumour of 2,000 asylum seekers is true, this would mean that this remote rural area would be home to more asylum seekers than several major cities including Leeds, Manchester, Sheffield, Newcastle and Cardiff.

If the Wethersfield prisons were built, the region would have nearly 3 prison places per prisoner from the East of England, compared to just 1 in Wales, the South West, or the Midlands.

These unfair burdens also directly detract from the government's declared objective of smooth integration of released prisoners and successful asylum applicants into wider society.

Each proposal is affected by the same logistical bottlenecks:

In addition to inadequate existing onsite infrastructure, the site suffers from poor road access and is located at a significant distance from business and population hubs required to support it in terms of supplies, workforce and other support services.

Each proposal may have significant negative impacts on the area:

Each proposal will have significant negative social and environmental impacts (Table 1). Given regional demographics and the need for higher paid skills jobs, purported economic benefits are likely to be illusory and may be offset by a decline in property values. Fear of crime, traffic pollution and accidents and restriction of access to outdoor activities may compound the strain on rural health services and negatively impact residents' health at local and district levels. Deprivation data for 100 areas in England and Wales that have a prison shows little evidence of economic benefits but a significant increase in the likelihood of being in the worst 20 percent in the country in terms of crime, health, and housing.

These negative effects may permeate across the entire district of Braintree.

Sustainable pillar	Specific impact	Asylum centre	Prisons	Features / bottlenecks
Social:	Crime	No systematic evidence that asylum seekers cause higher crime but maybe likely victims of crime. However, Home Secretary has commented otherwise.	MOJ claims no effects but it has conducted no studies. Anecdotal and sytematic evidence that English prison neighbourhoods experience higher crime rates	Emergency services situated several miles away
	Health	No studies available of local impacts. Some provision onsite for basic needs.	Prison inspectors' reports suggest increasing problems with ageing prison populations. Frequent demand on ambulances at existing rural prisons.	Rural health services already stretched
	Housing	No studies available	MOJ claim no effect but they have done no systematic studies. Government house price statistics show a significant and lasting effect	Cited as an area deprived in terms of Decent Homes
Economic:	Jobs	DHLUC claims only 120 jobs, so limited local economic benefits	No rural economic prison impact model exists.	Wide catchment area of 5,000 sq miles
			Low skilled jobs do not address either local or regional deprivation issues.	Pre-existing prison recruitment and retention problems especially in rural areas
Environment:	Traffic	As staff and visitor numbers will be smaller, there may be a 20% increase in traffic volumes	Devastating doubling of local traffic volumes, especially during peak periods. Consequent increase in pollution, accidents and GHG emissions.	Local road and public transport inadequate
	Contamination	Use of 'temporary' modular buildings should reduce ground disturbance but care may be needed to restrict access to all points on the site	Substantial risk that toxic chemicals released into atmosphere or local water courses	Risk assessment required for both, especially in the case of the prisons
	Natural habitat & heritage buildings	Potential problem due to ineffective sewerage system. No public access to heritage sites.	Substantial irreparable damage to natural habitat. No public access to heritage sites.	One of most remote areas in UK & one of highest concentrations of listed buildings

Table 1: Summary of comparative impacts

Introduction

Widespread alarm at the potential impact of a Mega sized Asylum Reception Centre (ARC) on a scale that would dwarf the local population⁶ has compounded months of community anxiety regarding the continuing prospect of two Mega prisons on the same site (at the same time!). The purpose of this paper is to tie these proposals together. It argues that Asylum or Imprisonment in rural Essex are both unacceptable and unpalatable choices. Each of these ill-thought proposals rely on inconsistent logic, weak evidence and ignore the untold consequences for all concerned.

As the district council elections approached in May, 2023, some politicians suddenly woke up to the impracticality of siting a 1,700 strong asylum centre in a remote site but remained curiously blind to the even greater logistical problems with a Mega prison complex housing twice that number. Planning law is cited as the reason why they must object to one but cannot object to the other! This inconsistent political double speak has left voters increasingly frustrated.

Throughout the prison and asylum proposal debacles, local residents have also been truly shocked by the UK government's evident ineptitude, lack of basic knowledge about local socio-economic geography and complete disregard for equitable consultation. Each proposal has been imposed through an arbitrary undemocratic process which is deaf to objective evidence and local voices. In the short-sighted pursuit of quick political fixes, the government continues to repeat mistakes of the past, railroad through ill-thought out schemes and by-pass all previously accepted modes of accountability.

This comes at a time of deep concern regarding the centralisation of control by Westminster. As Braintree District Council (BDC) exercised its legal challenge to the Home Office's (HO) Mega ARC in Wethersfield, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC) quietly slipped further powers to subvert local democracy into the Levelling-Up and Regeneration Bill (LURB). Inclusion of the aptly numbered Section 101 adds to existing Government powers to ignore the concerns of the local planning authority, parish councils or local communities. Levelling Up was portrayed as a means to improve community engagement and well-being. However, Section 101 seems to unmask post-Brexit promises of 'taking back control' as a means to consolidate power, not devolve it.

By preventing the local communities in North Essex from exercising their own collective choices, central government is placing them between the Devil (the asylum centre) and the Deep Blue Sea (the prisons) or possibly imposing both. As it stands, Government 'Double Speak' looks set to place Finchingfield and Wethersfield on a path to 'Levelling-down', not 'Levelling-up'.

This further example of the 'hollowing out' of local autonomy⁷ continues the seemingly inexorable slide towards Lord Hailsham's 'elective dictatorship'⁸ in which we may finally have to believe that two plus two may indeed equal five after all⁹.

To illustrate this duplicity and to dispel some misconceptions regarding the relative 'attractiveness' of the Devil or the Deep Blue Sea, this paper addresses questions common to both. These include how we might need to understand the national problem each is trying to resolve; how the government has failed to appreciate the importance of appropriate scale and location; failed to disclose possible impacts on crime, traffic, and housing; and failed to consider community-led alternative uses.

1. What is the problem Mega ARCs and Mega prisons are trying to solve?

The government's case for the ARC and the prisons is founded on a narrative of a 'national emergency' beyond their control¹⁰. In reality, they continue a reactive approach by resorting to old wine in new bottles. As the current government repeats the failure of its predecessors to strategically plan for the inevitability of intermittent flows of asylum seekers¹¹ or address the root causes of criminal reoffending, in the corridors of Whitehall it seems there is indeed '*nothing new under the sun*'¹².

Neither issue can be resolved simply by parking people *en masse* in inaccessible sites and hoping the problem disappears with no adverse medium-term impacts. The government's rationale is based purely on short-term political and economic costs they can measure but not those they cannot¹³.

Mega ARC: Several institutions, including the Migration Observatory at Oxford University, attribute the asylum accommodation issue to bureaucratic incompetence, not volumes¹⁴. They highlight that nearly half the backlog built up before July, 2021 prior to the acceleration in applications, reflecting a rapid decline in productivity since 2016 (Figure 1).

France, Germany and Spain receive far more applications than the UK compared to their population, yet their backlogs are much smaller. In a recent paper the Institute for Government (IFG) highlighted that in 2021 the UK had a larger backlog of cases per 10,000 population (14.9) than Germany (13.0) and France (7.3) despite the fact that UK applications (8.4 / 10,000 people) were much lower than in France (17.9) and Germany (23). The IFG's verdict that the UK backlog can largely be attributed to falling case worker productivity is endorsed by the House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee (HASC)¹⁵.

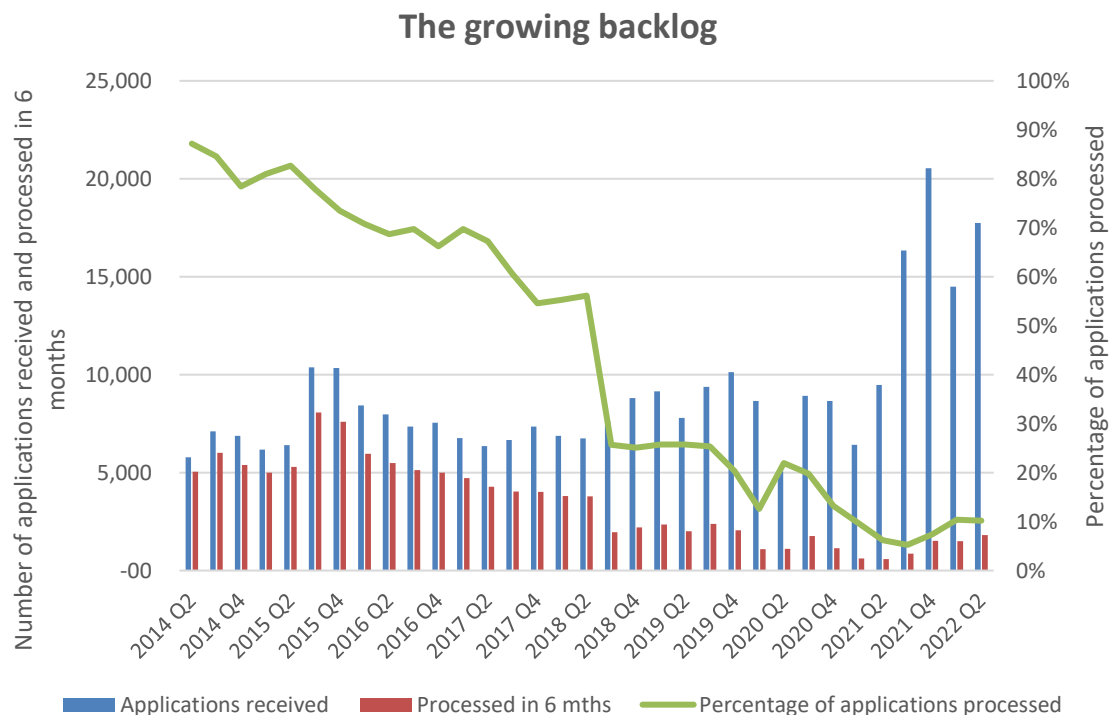


Figure 1: UK Asylum application backlog: applications and those processed in 6 months¹⁶

The HO has promised to double staff to 2,500 or so by August 2023 to 'eliminate the backlog by year end'. This seems to be a rather ambitious target. According to HO data released in May, 2023¹⁷, staff numbers have already increased since Q1 2022 by 80% but the number of cases awaiting initial decision has increased 52% and the overall 'backlog' (including appeals and those subject to deportation) has increased 4% to 172,758.

As of Q1 2023, 48% of applications were still taking over 12 months to process, despite the large increase in staff that began in Q1 2022. In fact, the time delay has got worse, not better. With a current monthly processing average of 3 decisions per staff member, a staff of 2,500 would still take over 1.5 years to deal with over 138,000 existing applications, even if there were no new ones. As this also takes no account of refused applicants making an appeal or not being deported, the purported 'emergency' cannot possibly last only 12 months unless other radical policy measures are enacted.

Whilst the government advocates Mega ARCs as a cost saving emergency measure, it fails to alert voters to severe consequences and likely ineffectiveness. Pressure on the UK's social infrastructure is largely driven by other forms of migration. Government figures show **that asylum seekers accounted for only 7% of immigrants** in the years ending June, 2022¹⁸ and March, 2023¹⁹. The Refugee Council notes that even including other forms of refugee resettlement, the UK ranks 19th amongst EU countries when adjusted for population size²⁰. Unlike Canada, Germany, or the USA, the does not allow asylum seekers to work to pay for their upkeep^{21 22}. The UK predicament is as much due to policy choice, as to external events. **It is unreasonable to interpret the current malaise as *force majeure* or a short-term emergency.**

Mega Prison: The official rationale for new Mega prisons - each with 1,715 inmates - is to modernise the country's prison estate to reduce costs and reoffending. The government's case is based on short-term horizons, assertion, anecdotes, and hopeful promises that rely on the potency of physical and technological infrastructure but ignore people and place. The recent Mega prison flagship, HMP Berwyn, has not achieved the savings or performance targets used to justify its construction. Moreover, prison construction and operating costs in general have increased significantly since its completion²³.

Government strategy has been widely criticised in terms of scale and rural location, including proponents of Mega prisons. Critics include a range of academics, the Howard League for Penal Reform, the Chief Inspector of Prisons, the Prison Governors' Association, the Policy Exchange, Government Committees and Inquiries, the Prison Officers' Association, and the Prison Reform Trust (PRT)²⁴. This critique centres on the failure to address the MOJ's own evidence that around 80% of convictions are of previous offenders²⁵.

In a response to a Parliamentary question in March, 2002, the Secretary of State for Justice revealed that, **"the economic and social cost of reoffending in England and Wales is approximately £18 billion per year"**²⁶. To address this staggering burden of reoffending requires appreciation of the importance of people and place. Research from a range of sources (including the UK Government) suggests that a prison's performance is a function of multiple factors including site location, the nature of the prison population and staff recruitment and retention. Reoffending rates are dramatically lower for those who received family visits, have a job and a home. In 2021, only 8% were employed 6 weeks after release and 12% were sleeping rough²⁷.

A deeply frustrating aspect of this debate is that much of this evidence already exists but lessons are not being heeded. **His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) reports are replete with examples of how addressing each of these underlying issues is significantly more difficult in large remote rural prisons.**²⁸

The fact that *"what has been done will be done again"*²⁹ at Wethersfield is incredulous to most rational observers. Bureaucratic deafness in Whitehall is indeed profound. Is it any wonder that politicians seek to pass legislation that would further undermine outside scrutiny?

2. Shouldn't everywhere do its fair share?

The notion of an equitable solution for the 'national problem' has to include consideration of how the burden is geographically distributed. Deciding on 'fair share' must allow for the capacity of local communities to bear the burden in terms of population and its social and physical infrastructure.

Mega ARC: It may surprise many that the government only records the location of those 110,171 asylum seekers who receive some kind of local authority benefit but does not track the location of the remaining 50,000 or so^{30,31}. The 110,171 figure equates to only 0.16 per 1,000 UK residents but the impact is uneven. It is highest in absolute terms in high population regions, such as London^b (25,863) and the North West (18,045), and in relative terms in the less populated North East (24 per 1,000). Although imperfect, this policy of dispersal throughout the country reflects successive government efforts to alleviate pressure on particular local authorities and facilitate community integration.

Location	Region	Population	Per 1,000 residents	Asylum seekers
Wethersfield	East of England	1,269	1,576	2,000
Hillingdon	London Outer	305,900	9.6	2,930
Hounslow	London Outer	288,200	8.0	2,310
Glasgow City	Scotland	635,130	7.4	4,698
Belfast	N Ireland	345,418	7.4	2,550
Southwark	London Inner	307,700	7.2	2,219
Halton	North West	128,200	6.8	868
Newcastle upon Tyne	North East	300,200	6.0	1,810
Liverpool	Merseyside	486,100	5.7	2,775
Coventry	West Midlands	345,300	5.5	1,899
Luton	East of England	225,300	5.4	1,217
Cardiff	Wales	362,400	4.9	1,777
Kensington and Chelsea	London Inner	143,400	4.9	699
Crawley	South East	118,500	4.8	572
Derby	East Midlands	261,400	4.7	1,236
Westminster	London Inner	204,300	4.7	961
Blackpool	North West	141,100	4.6	656
Stoke-on-Trent	West Midlands	258,400	4.6	1,189
Wolverhampton	West Midlands	263,700	4.6	1,208
Newham	London Inner	351,100	4.5	1,589

Table 2: Asylum seekers per 1000 local residents^c

As Table 2 shows, the proposal to house so many asylum seekers in rural Northern Essex completely abandons these principles. Whilst it may be equitable for the East of England region to house sufficient numbers to reflect its share of the country's population, it is entirely inappropriate to place nearly 2% of the country's asylum seekers in a remote village which accounts for only 0.0019% of the UK population. Even if you (incorrectly) combine Finchingfield and Wethersfield populations, or use a lower asylum seeker estimate, the magnitude of this distortion is still valid. 1,700 asylum seekers equates to an **11-fold increase in the young male population in Finchingfield and over 12-fold in Wethersfield, thereby dramatically distorting the ratio of males to females**. If the rumour of 2,000 asylum seekers is true, this would mean that **this remote rural area would be home to more asylum seekers than several major cities including Leeds, Manchester, Sheffield, Newcastle and Cardiff**³².

^b This higher number is because asylum seekers are first housed in cities like London before being dispersed

^c The figure of 2,000 is used for Wethersfield. The HO has confirmed 1,700 is only an initial target. There has been media speculation of much higher numbers.

Mega Prisons:

There does not appear to be a current shortage of prison places in Essex or the East of England but there is a large deficit in London. According to MOJ's figures in October 2021, approximately 4,500 prisoners came from the East of England, of which less than 1,500 were from Essex. If the Wethersfield prisons were built, the region would have nearly 3 prison places per prisoner from the East of England, compared to just 1 in Wales, the South West, or the Midlands (Figure 2)³³.



Figure 2: Prison places per prisoner from each region³⁴

Increasing capacity in this region through the expansion at nearby HMP Highpoint and at Wethersfield would further concentrate prisons in areas located far from prisoners' homes.

A Category B prison at Wethersfield would mean a fifth of officially designated prison B places in England and Wales would be in a site well beyond the MOJ's target distance from Birmingham.

With its poor communication links and the MOJ's stated objectives of regional co-ordination and prisoner rehabilitation³⁵, Wethersfield is simply not fit for purpose.

The Wethersfield prisons proposal is completely at odds with the MOJ's purported rehabilitation ethos outlined in the UK Government's recent White Paper and risks exacerbating problems with rehabilitation in the same way as the Carter review rebuked the MOJ 16 years ago³⁶. Despite a slew of evidence to the contrary, sadly it seems - "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun."³⁷

3. Why is a remote location such a problem for both?

This evidence confirms the importance of place not just in terms of equity but also in terms of how effective a particular location can be as a solution to the national problem (howsoever defined).

Whilst the obvious limitations of a remote site are noted in local and national politicians' objections to the Mega ARC, it seems to have escaped their notice that exactly the same applies to the Mega prisons. This inconsistency has become untenable, even in their respective political bubbles.

Mega ARC: Housing such a large number of people in a rural site is unprecedented in modern times³⁸. It is well beyond the capacity of small villages like Finchingfield and Wethersfield and will completely overwhelm the local population and resources. Wethersfield has only a part time General store and Post Office and neither village has a chemist, bank or supermarket. The camp at Napier housed only 328 asylum seekers, is adjacent to Folkestone and is therefore not a suitable comparison. The HO has no experience running a massive site of 1,700-2,000. As part of its risible 'mitigation' measures, it has suggested a shuttle service to Braintree – potentially requiring dozens of coaches or minibuses^d. In addition to staff commuting and deliveries, this implies a significant increase in traffic along B-roads.

The HO has also given few details on staffing the ARC other than to indicate it will be managed by a low cost private firm. Clearsprings, for example, who manage the heavily criticised Napier barracks in Kent are set to earn £ 1 billion from HO contracts by 2030^{39 40}. In its submission to BDC, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) stated that between 70 and 150 staff would be required at the ARC⁴¹. As this would need to supervise up to 2,000 young males, cook over 5,000 meals a day AND process their applications (which is after all presumably the point of the exercise), this would seem to be on the low side. Even if we use a staff number of 250, that equates to a staff: asylum seeker ratio of less than 0.15 (compared with 0.37 for a Category C prison, for example). Adding this more realistic staff number to resident transfers, visitors, buses and deliveries, there could be an extra **500-600** daily vehicle journeys – a 20 percent increase. However, given recent information from the Government on prospective HGV traffic, this number could be an underestimate.

Mega Prisons: The prospect of two prisons could result in a **doubling** of traffic volumes to **6,000 vehicles per day**⁴² - well beyond the capacity of the local road network. This matters in terms of logistics, the natural environment, carbon emissions, community health and the effectiveness of the prison itself.

The Government's own research (including the 2017 Farmer report) has found that inaccessibility is of paramount importance. Good relations with staff and family can have a significant effect in reducing prisoner reoffending rates which is after all one of the purposes of the prison system! If Wethersfield is simply a spill-over from London prisons, its remoteness is a significant barrier to continued family relationships. As of May, 2022, return journeys by public transport from South-West, West and South London cost up to £54.70, took up to 5 hours and involved multiple changes of transport mode.

There are also inevitable issues with staff recruitment and retention. How the HO and MOJ hope to staff either facility in a low unemployment area with a median age is 51 is an open question as several rural prison sites (including Highpoint) already face major recruitment and retention problems. In its planning applications for other prison sites, the MOJ has used a recruitment catchment area of up to 40 miles away (5,000 square miles). In Wethersfield's case, this suggests employees would drive from Ipswich, Norfolk, Kent, Cambridge and London and prefer these jobs to those available in other regional prisons or more attractive jobs in this vast area⁴³. This does not seem to be a realistic prospect.

^d A Home Office spokesman suggested this bus could take asylum seekers to local cities thereby demonstrating a complete lack of local knowledge, Notes from Public Meeting, Wethersfield Village Hall, Chaired by RH James Cleverly MP, April 28th, 2023 available on Three Fields Association website <https://www.thefieldsassociation.org/research-papers>

The HO and the MOJ are blind to the obvious limits of the local road network. Every route to the airbase has permanent pinch points, ancient houses, and walls immediately adjacent to the road, a number of schools and old single lane bridges. An ARC and a prison would also impact roads, towns, and villages further afield, including the A120, Halstead, Braintree, Dunmow and Hedingham, where district and regional governments are already aware of significant existing congestion AND safety issues⁴⁴.

No credible mitigation proposals in terms of road widening or public transport can address this. At the recent public meeting⁴⁵, it was clear that the HO had not even tried. They appeared to have conducted no research into logistical issues whatsoever and are simply trying to by-pass scrutiny to expose this obvious fact. ECC has highlighted inaccessibility in this remote area as part of its Levelling up strategy⁴⁶ and notes in its response to the prison proposal that the provision of 1,000 car parking spaces is tacit admission of a limited role for sustainable public transport. ECC has also voiced concerns about the tripling of peak flows during school opening and closing times⁴⁷.

According to Department of Transport data, Essex already accounts for nearly one quarter of accidents in the Eastern region and concerns about roads already feature prominently in resident surveys⁴⁸. **Nearly two-thirds of county accidents are on minor rural roads and tend to be more serious than on urban roads.** Rural traffic is already a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions. Braintree district's accident rates are higher than Uttlesford, Harlow, Maldon, and Rochford⁴⁹. **Accident rates in parishes close to the prison site are already higher than the district average**⁵⁰. The main access road (B1053) to the prison site is cited in the Essex Police's response to the MOJ's consultation as one that *already* features a high level of road traffic injuries⁵¹. They also forecast that prison traffic would inevitably lead to more accidents on a road network that is unsuitable for such traffic volumes, especially HGVs⁵².

The cumulative impact on the community is vividly illustrated in Figure 3^e and 1 or 2 prisons. Although planning applications (or Secretary of State 'reviews') bizarrely do not look beyond the *immediate* planning application in front of them, it is imperative in this case that decision makers join the dots, use some long-term foresight and look at the cumulative impact over time.

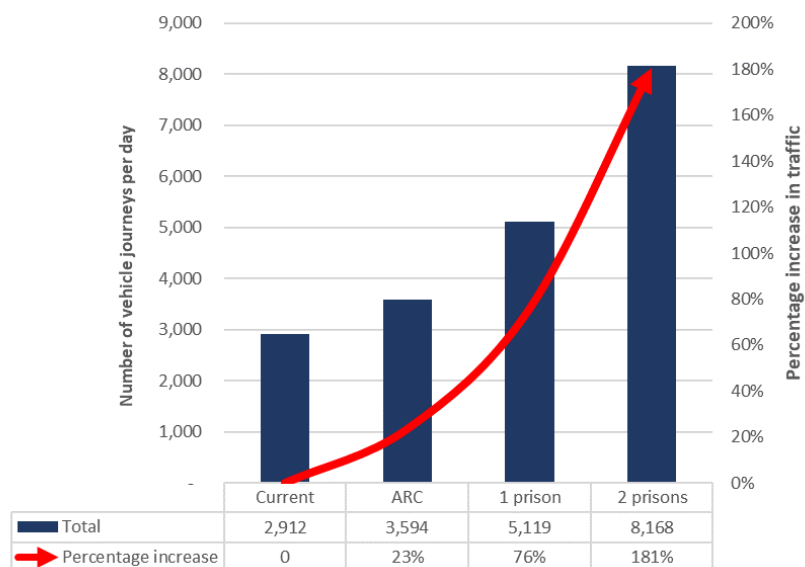


Figure 3: Traffic estimates⁵³

^e As the construction plans for the asylum centre are still subject to investigation and possible legal review, figures for HGVs are not included in these estimates.

This is not manageable, this cannot be ‘mitigated’, this is catastrophic. It poses unacceptable direct and indirect risks to the health and safety of the local population and significantly adds to the district’s carbon footprint.

The fact that a number of planning appeals for other UK prison construction proposals are ongoing can partly be attributed to the failure of the MOJ to recognise similar traffic issues at these sites. As the isolation and inaccessibility of Wethersfield is even more stark, transport is a significant impediment to the effective operation of any mass development of any kind on this site.

Perhaps the most damning indictment of the prison proposal is that Wethersfield fails to match any other aspects of the MOJ’s own site selection criteria. These include:

- i) no clear impediments to achieving planning permission
- ii) ground conditions with no abnormal costs to redevelop;
- iii) easy access to utilities and transport;
- iv) no ecological or historic designations on site;
- v) manageable contamination;
- vi) previously developed Brownfield status.

Moreover, MOJ documents suggest that a Category B site should be within a reasonable commuting distance to Birmingham and any prison should facilitate access by prisoners’ families (which in Wethersfield’s case would most likely be from London).

All of these facts are well known and apply equally to the prison and the asylum centre. It is clear that the MOJ and HO are each engaged in an attempted ex-post justification of decisions made purely in the interests of political expediency. As part of due process, key questions in terms of effectiveness, value for money for all taxpayers and dire local consequences need to be addressed, not simply ignored or by-passed.

4. What about crime and housing?

Foremost in the local community's questions regarding an asylum centre are concerns over personal safety⁵⁴. Whether justified or not, community fears have been heightened by recent statements from the Home Secretary⁵⁵ and the Immigration Minister⁵⁶. What is less apparent is residents' awareness of the source of such crimes or that higher crime may also arise due to the siting of a prison.

The key point, in each case, is that higher crime may be driven by those coming into the area, rather than those already in it. Whilst an asylum centre or a prison may attract the attention of people who see its occupants as a focus of profit (for example, through the black or drug economies), an asylum centre may also attract those who see its occupants as a focus of opposition or hate.

Despite these rather obvious facts, when choosing a location for an ARC or prison, both the Home Office (HO) and the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) are rather dismissive of any evidence of negative social impacts for local communities and very confident of their token 'mitigation' efforts.

Mega ARC: Whilst their bosses spin an inflammatory negative narrative, HO officials continue the exercise in Double Speak by denying any link between asylum seekers and crime rates. But the HO has previously admitted it has no idea one way or the other, either in dispersed accommodation or hotels⁵⁷ and certainly not at a Mega ARC in a rural location. In its response to residents' concerns at the (now aborted) ARC at Linton-on-Ouse⁵⁸, the HO simply stated that community relationships with asylum seekers were 'by and large' cordial and that all asylum seekers at remote sites would be 'screened for suitability'. The fact that there is no evidence simply means the HO has not collected any data, not that no link exists. This is not to suggest anything about asylum seekers at all. It is simply axiomatic that in any gathering of 1,700 bored unoccupied young males, there is inevitably the potential for problems, irrespective of country of origin.

In his letter to BDC in March, 2023, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (SSLUHC)⁵⁹ used this 'absence of evidence' as partial justification to bypass local planning protocols. *'The Home Office (the department responsible for crime statistics) has said that there is currently no evidence that the proposal will give rise to problems in respect of crime, anti-social behaviour and public safety. Moreover, the Home Office will have considered whether an individual raises public protection concerns prior to their arrival on site. As the site will be self-contained there will be little need for asylum seekers to leave the site. Moreover, any criminal activity will be managed by the police'*.

DLUHC's comment on the self-contained nature of the site is risible and its derisory dismissal of local concerns completely unacceptable. It symbolises the tendency of government departments to rush through quick solutions and try to avoid scrutiny by circumventing the planning process. The fact that DLUHC and HO submissions have been so limited and inaccurate is all the more reason why any such developments should be subject to effective scrutiny beyond the bubble of Whitehall.

DLUHC's assertions were heavily criticised in the recent public meeting at Wethersfield. During the meeting the HO once again tried to ignore the Home Secretary's comments but succeeding only in demonstrating their lack of preparation. The HO claimed that those coming to Wethersfield would go through a 'rigorous' check but failed to give any details or answer how this would be possible if travel documents had been lost. This is particularly true if Wethersfield asylum residents came directly from Manston (which houses immediate arrivals for just a couple of days), rather than those who had been in the UK for some time⁶⁰.

Although HO procedures also try to encourage asylum residents to be ‘good neighbours’, their representative repeatedly failed to comprehend how a community the size of Wethersfield can possibly cope with so many new neighbours, however good their intentions⁶¹. **The government appears to have little idea what will happen when 1,700 young men are concentrated in one tiny site or when they spend time in nearby market towns. There is simply no precedent.**

Using data from 2009, Bell et al⁶² did find a weak association between asylum seeker populations and property (not violent) crime but it is problematic to extrapolate this across time and nationalities. Interestingly, Bell et al also corroborate a number of international studies which show that this relationship may be related to the lack of work opportunities for asylum seekers⁶³. An obvious remedy for this (and national budget concerns) would be to allow them to work but the optics of this do not seem to appeal to the current government irrespective of international precedents^{64 65}.

Some recent media reports seem to support HO’s claims that asylum seekers are not *perpetrators* of crime^{66, 67} but in the absence of systematic evidence, negative stereotypes have become salient. The concentration of so many young men on one site (from any background) generates fear and attracts outsiders eager to exploit it. Local residents may be subject to loud (and sometimes violent) protests fuelled by “rumours and misinformation” and exacerbated by the alleged presence of Far Right groups, as occurred at Knowsley on Merseyside in February, 2023^{68,69}. This may well mean that asylum seekers are more likely to be **victims**⁷⁰, than **perpetrators** of crime⁷¹ (for example, abuse as casual or sex workers) but the detrimental impact on local residents’ well-being is the same. The fact is the crime still occurs in their neighbourhood irrespective of who is responsible.

Mega Prisons: The government is equally remiss regarding localised crime at prison sites and equally confident in its ability to address any issues. In its Planning documentation for new prisons, the MOJ barely mentions crime and seems quite content not to make local residents more aware of the potential impacts on their communities. However, evidence collated by WASC (and already circulated to our MP and local representatives) suggests a number of issues at other prison sites⁷².

- 1. County lines and organised crime:** In their response to the MOJ’s consultation, Essex Police noted that a prison may attract **Organised Crime Groups** and lead to proliferation of drug-related violent crime⁷³. This may exacerbate the spread of drug trafficking through **‘County lines’** in Essex’s coastal and rural towns and villages⁷⁴. The potentially devastating effects this can have upon our communities have been highlighted by Roger Hirst (Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Essex) and Councillor Louise McKinlay^f and would put additional strains on already stretched resources⁷⁵.
- 2. Rural prison neighbourhood crime data:** Evidence from Crimerate, a data analysis company,⁷⁶ suggests that Essex Police’s fears are well founded. Figure 4 shows that crime rates in the neighbourhoods of a number of comparable existing rural prisons are much higher than any parish adjacent to the Wethersfield airbase.

The crime rate per 1,000 residents in the area immediately adjacent to (but outside) HMP Highpoint is four times that of Finchingfield. Highpoint has also seen a number of instances of drugs being thrown into the prison and at HMP Wayland in Norfolk there was a case of gangland intimidation of prison guards .

^f Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Community, Equality, Partnerships and Performance, ECC

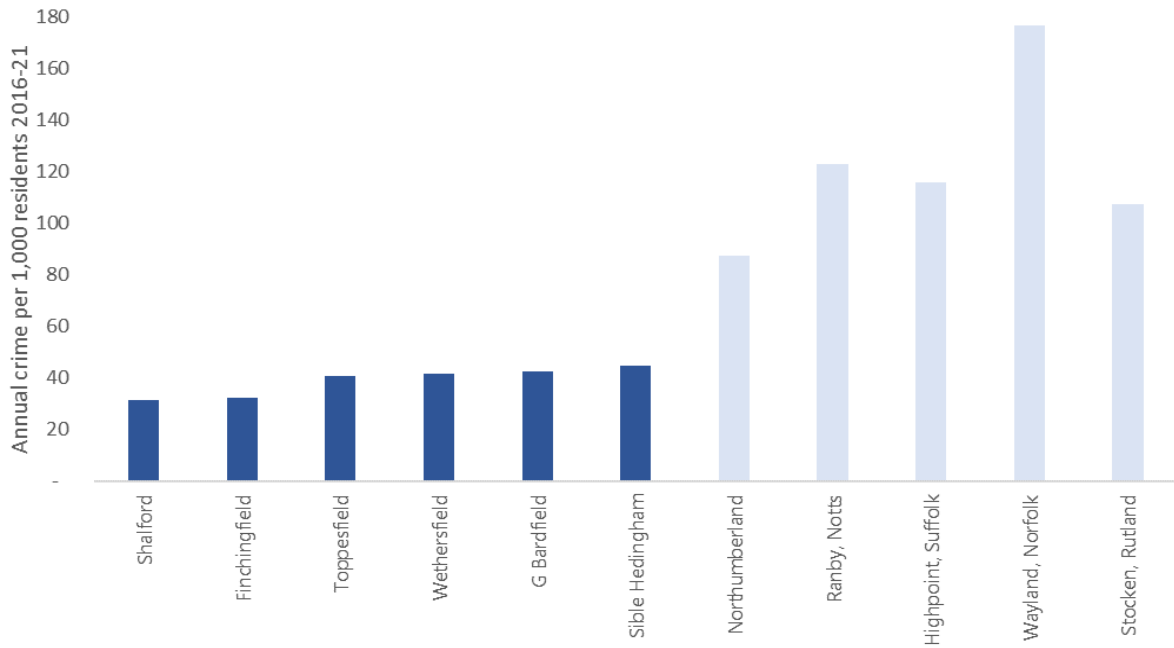


Figure 4: Crime rates per 1,000 residents near proposed Wethersfield prison and 5 existing rural prisons.⁷⁷

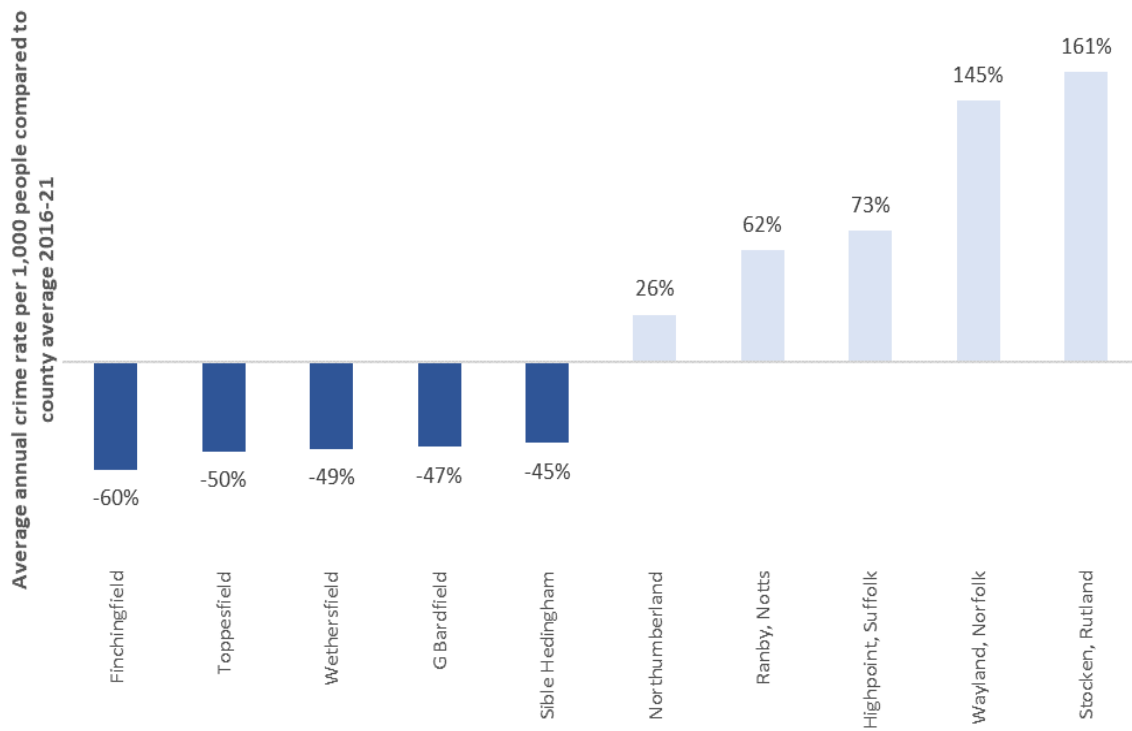


Figure 5: Crime rates versus county average near proposed Wethersfield prison and 5 existing rural prisons.⁷⁸

All neighbourhoods adjacent to the Wethersfield site currently enjoy crime rates far below the Essex average. By contrast, each of the 5 rural prison neighbourhoods in Figure 5 have crime rates far in excess of their respective county averages. This cannot be explained away by looking at economics or location. These 5 areas cover a range of economic backgrounds, so we cannot presume higher crime rates are due to deprivation.

- 3. National prison neighbourhood crime data:** This pattern is also seen nationally. UK Government deprivation data⁷⁹ for 100 prisons shows that a prison neighbourhood **is nearly twice as likely to be in the worst 10 percent of areas in terms of crime than an area without a prison.**

This does not mean we can definitely say that a prison causes any differences from expected values but the strength of these associations suggests a link.

- 4. Evidence of effects on prison neighbourhoods from the USA:** These findings are also consistent with robust systematic evidence from the USA which suggests that prisons causes significant social problems, especially in rural areas⁸⁰.

These concerns are reinforced by evidence that staff recruitment difficulties have led to increased crime *inside* prisons as well. As the Prison Reform Trust has noted, “*We know what happens when there are too many prisoners and too few prison staff — more violence, self-harm and suicide, and less rehabilitation*”⁸¹. Data obtained through a Freedom of Information request reveals that Essex police were called to HMP Chelmsford 912 times from 2019 to 2021 (virtually every day)⁸² to deal with “serious assaults, intimidation, internal corruption and drug supply.”

This is in addition to the likelihood of increased crime in settlements near the prisons, including drugs and property offences. The prison complex at Wethersfield would therefore create additional burdens on already stretched resources in terms of site risk management, forensic investigation, and emergency response, especially as the site is so remote and the road network so poor⁸³.

In summary, **local communities and councils should be very concerned that the potential siting of an enormous prison complex can have on local crime rates.** This potential arises less than the chance of prisoners escaping but more from wider secondary effects on crime rates and local resources. However, there is less evidence this is true of an asylum centre.

There is therefore an apparent mismatch between perceived and actual crime data when comparing asylum centres and prisons. Local residents are currently unaware of the risks of living near a prison. The question arises why our political representatives and the MOJ are not keeping us informed.

This is yet another reason why such developments cannot be allowed to by-pass appropriate scrutiny and simply be subject to a rubber stamp at Westminster.

5. What about housing and health?

Housing: In addition to property crime, residents are also concerned about property values. Given the potential for detrimental effects on local crime rates, natural environment, and traffic volumes, it is not difficult to imagine the impact on local house prices. However, strangely enough the effect of a major development upon houses prices is not allowed for in a planning decision. In any case, neither the HO or the MOJ claim to be aware of any evidence that an asylum centre or two Mega prisons would affect house prices in any way! The MOJ's dismissal of local concerns is based on a tiny study of just 4 prisons conducted nearly 20 years ago and the HO has not conducted any research at all.

Neither stand up to scrutiny. Analysis of official house price data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), reveals that neighbourhoods with a prison had lower house price increases on 62 percent of occasions and were 3.5 times more likely to be in the worst performing 20 percent in their region than the best performing 20 percent. Whilst critics will claim that no statistically significant causal link can be made using this data, anecdotal evidence is everywhere. There are a number of local residents in Finchingfield and Wethersfield currently struggling to sell their houses due to deteriorating perception of the neighbourhood. Prospective buyers have no desire to move in next to the Devil or the Deep Blue Sea. Some may welcome this but others may simply see it as part of 'Levelling down', not 'Levelling up'. These concerns about house prices apply to both an ARC and a prison. They were raised by local residents at the recent public meeting but the HO had no response.

The issue of housing is also important in terms of how refugees are supported. It is also unclear how the HO will induce successful applicants to 'disperse' away from the Braintree district if they are granted refugee status. If each asylum seeker stays for 6 months, this suggests 3,400 applications at Wethersfield per year. Depending on application success rates (currently averaging 74%), hundreds of refugees may need a local home. The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (SSLUHC) response to the BDC injunction conceded that 'successful asylum seekers may choose to settle in the area'⁸⁴ but offered no information on how a rural community was expected to house so many of them. Like most aspects of its proposal, the HO does not appear to have any plan at all.

Health: As well as a detrimental effect on community wealth, each of these unpalatable proposals will impact community health and cohesion. Some of these, such as the strain on local service resources and budgets are more visible than others. As they are easily measurable, *direct* factors (such as distance to a hospital) are included in Levelling up calculations but *indirect* ones (such as the mental stress caused by fear of crime) are not.

One of the key concerns regarding these *direct* effects raised in ECC's response to the MOJ's prison consultation paper⁸⁵ is the potential burden on less accessible specialist **healthcare** services, particularly in view of ageing populations (inside and outside prisons) and the high prevalence of prison drug use. HMIP reports and FOI evidence demonstrate that prisons create a significant burden on local services⁸⁶. An ambulance was called to HMP Chelmsford 170 times a year on average during the period 2019-2021 and 136 times to HMP Highpoint⁸⁷. ECC has also expressed concern regarding its obligation to provide social support for any minors amongst asylum seekers possibly up to the age of 25 and questioned the prioritisation of dentistry services on asylum centres, at the potential expense of local residents⁸⁸. Whilst the HO has tried to address local concerns regarding healthcare by suggesting that asylum seekers will receive basic onsite medical care, there has been no mention of facilities for staff and their families, what happens if onsite facilities prove inadequate or if asylum applications are granted.

A focus on direct effects leads to the dangerous conclusion that health impacts can be mitigated simply by increasing budgets. However, many *indirect* effects are less visible but arguably more insidious. These include the medium-term effects on physical health through the restriction of access to safe open spaces and increased traffic volumes and accidents; the negative effects on mental health due to individual fears regarding safety, livelihoods, and environment; and the wider impacts on community cohesion. The mental stress in evidence at the recent asylum centre public meeting was obvious to all and has been gradually building over 21 months of waiting for the MOJ to make up its mind.

To try to understand health outcomes, researchers and health providers, use a “Wider determinants of Health model” which looks at *direct factors* (such as how far we live from a hospital) and *indirect factors* (such as individual dietary and exercise behaviour, education, employment, and highlights the importance of social and community support networks)^{89, 90}. International academic research shows that our health is influenced by our built, natural, and social environments^{91,92}. In its assessment of the country’s health profile in 2018, Public Health England (PHE)^g noted, “There is evidence to suggest that access to green spaces has a beneficial effect on physical and mental wellbeing through both physical access and use”.⁹³ Research by the Local Government Association (LGA)^h and PHE suggests that access to open spaces helps in addressing obesity, a key problem in the Braintree district⁹⁴. Several studies also show that loneliness, and physical and mental health outcomes are currently worse in Braintree’s towns than in its villages^{95, 96, 97}. In some cases this may be attributed to lower incomes but may also be due to sedentary lifestyles or weaker social and communal networks.

The parishes of Wethersfield and Finchingfield currently enjoy relatively good health outcomes and the proximity of a highly rated medical centre. However, the direct and indirect factors behind these outcomes are in jeopardy due to the prospect of the ARC, Mega prisons or both.

One of example of how this may happen is through the fear of crime which can have “negative consequences for health and wellbeing”⁹⁸. Fear of crime does not necessarily relate to actual experience or crime statistics⁹⁹ which (according to the Office for National Statistics) tend to under represent true levels of crime (especially low level)¹⁰⁰. These fears can be particularly acute amongst older population groups (precisely the Finchingfield/Wethersfield demographic) and women¹⁰¹.

Over recent months, numerous local residents have been expressing their deep seated fears privately to local community and charity groups. This was also highlighted at the ARC Wethersfield public meeting which demonstrated that perceptions of the risk of crime already affect how people behave. Again and again audience members tried to get the (all male) panel to understand how the presence of any group of males increases anxiety and encourages preventative action to reduce risk. Several audience members (especially female) said they would now have to restrict their lives further. They would no longer walk their dogs alone in the fields and those living alone (male and female) revealed high levels of mental stress. Essex Police’s proposal to station one solitary officer with a stand-by back up force ready to drive to such an isolated area was condemned as wholly inadequate. It was not that local people want dozens of police in their village (as this may exacerbate, rather than allay anxiety), they just do not want the potential source of the problem to be situated there in the first place¹⁰².

^g Before its replacement by the UK Health Security Agency and Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, PHE was an executive agency of the Department of Health and Social Care, established on 1 April 2013. <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/public-health-england>

^h According to its website the LGA is “the national voice of local government, working with councils to support, promote and improve local government” <https://www.local.gov.uk/about>

These sentiments echo the conclusions of numerous academic studies which have found links between people's physical activity, mental well-being and fear of crime¹⁰³. One study found "the fear of crime is associated with sedentary behaviour, including reduced outdoor activities"¹⁰⁴. This can have mental, as well as physical effects. Once local residents become aware of the potential increase in crime from the prisons, as well as an ARC, this could "limit people's activities, including social and cultural activities, sometimes leading to social isolation"¹⁰⁵. Fear of crime can also undermine the social networks which help mitigate residents' concerns and upon which they rely for every day support, especially the elderly in remote rural areas. The combined effect on social habits and physical and mental health mean there is a danger that people literally become "scared sick" either directly (through higher blood pressure) or indirectly (through less exercise or lower levels of communal trust)¹⁰⁶.

What this demonstrates is that each of the effects of the Mega ARC or prisons on our community's sustainable development is inter-related. The claim that some may be individually mitigated or offset is simply not credible and belies a total misunderstanding of how social, economic and health outcomes are realised. Either proposal will therefore inevitably lead to a 'levelling down', not 'levelling up'.

In fact we can already see this vision of the future by looking at deprivation data for 100 local areas in England and Wales that already have a prison¹⁰⁷. This shows that there is little evidence of a link between a prison and local employment, income or skills. However, there **is a significant increase in the likelihood of being in the worst 20 percent in the country in terms of crime, health and housing**.

This is corroborated by evidence from the USA which shows that mass incarceration of any kind exacerbates existing rural problems and creates new ones.¹⁰⁸

The evidence is there. The risks are significant. The question is whether or not they are examined in accordance with due process.

6. What is the alternative use of the site?

A criticism often levied at communities who oppose inappropriate developments such as a Mega ARC or Mega Prison, is that they just want nothing to happen and to keep things the way they are. This simplistic Not In My Backyard ('NIMBY') critique is not valid in this instance.

A number of community groups (including the Three Fields Association and Finchingfield and Wethersfield Parish councils as part of a Joint Neighbourhood plan) are trying to put forward alternative proposals for the Airbase but are currently being thwarted by local, regional and national government regulations, silence and indifference. In contrast to proposals by the HO and MOJ, these community proposals would be founded on robust evidence of need and be subject to the full scrutiny of local residents through surveys, focus groups, village meetings and a referendum.

Current potential ideas include a small number of community owned eco-affordable housing for rent to local residents and / or veterans; a community solar energy grid; a youth centre; an OAP centre; restoration of the Museum; small scale light industry and training centre; a cycle track; a nature reserve (in honour of the RAF and USAF); and a country park. Table 3 summaries how these sustainable alternatives may offer a far more equitable inclusive community-led solution than either the Devil or the Deep Blue Sea.

It is most important to understand that nothing is finalised as the formal Neighbourhood Plan process is just beginning. This will be an inclusive process in which residents will define the problem as they see it, not just be expected to pick between bog standard pre-packed solutions. There are policy protocols and precedents to follow but these have to be adapted to local priorities, circumstances, and location.

The NP is mentioned here only to highlight that there **IS** an alternative which does make common sense.

		Wrong Plan; wrong place		Right plan; right place
The problem		Prison High rates of reoffending lead to excess demand on prison capacity	Asylum Centre Large backlog of asylum applications due to insufficient processing resources. Other countries have coped with similar increases in volumes.	Sustainable alternative National need to improve energy security; provide skilled jobs; mitigate climate change; improve mental & physical health
			Need to integrate successful applicants into society	Enhance community capacity and empowerment Preservation of (and public access to) our Historical Military heritage
Proposed solution		1 or 2 Mega prisons 1,735 each	1,700 capacity Asylum centre	Mixed sustainable use site including community energy; small scale housing and industrial units; country park
Effectiveness		Rural sites have insufficient resources to support such high volumes of inmates, asylum seekers and staff		Climate change, Community Physical and mental health and empowerment, skilled jobs on a sustainable scale
		Rural sites suffer from severe recruitment issues		
	Crime	Relations with staff and family are key to reoffending rates but rural sites inhibit access for families and deter retention of experienced staff.	Processing delays and isolation hamper integration of successful refugees	No impact
		Neighbourhoods at many rural prisons see higher crime rates than county averages and far higher than Finchingfield	Several cases of anti-Asylum groups engaged in violent protests near Asylum seekers' accommodation	
	Health	Essex police warn of extension of county lines drugs gangs if a prison is constructed	Residents fear that potential for crime high with 1,700 unoccupied males on an open site and where no police are normally situated	Access to open spaces and exercise circuit will enhance mental and physical health and thereby reduce pressure on NHS
		The long drawn out 'pre-planning' saga has caused severe strain on residents' mental health	A significant number of residents have expressed their anxiety and suggested a high degree of stress	
	Economic	Emergency services have expressed reservations about their capacity to meet prison demands	Vague promises of onsite health provision but no discussion of when asylum status is given	Training and highly skilled green jobs (eg Green energy solutions) in accordance with local priorities and infrastructure capacity Positive impact on equestrian and tourism, as well as other green skill sectors
		Full employment; older population; recruitment issues; no local economic ecosystem or transport infrastructure to support prison	Full employment; older population; recruitment issues; no local economic ecosystem or transport infrastructure to support asylum centre	
	Traffic	Extremely negative impact on existing sectors such as tourism and equestrian		Limited impact on local traffic
		50% increase in traffic per prison as staff will have to be recruited from a wide area	50% increase in traffic as staff will have to be recruited from a wide area	
Environment		Ground contamination risk exacerbated	Ground contamination risk ignored	Preservation of land in tact
		Destruction of natural habitat	Current sewerage leakage already apparent onsite	Enhancement of local habitat
		Increased river pollution		Reduced river pollution
		Increased pressure on water resources in an area forecast to deficient in 5 years' time. Additional stress on water system that has undergone 6 repairs on B1053 alone in last 12 months		Improved runoff and water absorption in catchment area. Limited additional demand.
Heritage		Increased CO2 emissions		Carbon capture through habitat enhancement
		Museum closed and no public access to (or protection of) designated Historical Cold War monuments		Restoration of Museum and provision for protection of (and public access to) designated Cold War monuments onsite
Energy security		Additional drain on local resources		Community solar grid on runway owned by a Community Trust
Affordable sustainable housing		Greater pressure on housing resources		200 homes for veterans and local residents owned under a Community Trust
Community empowerment		Local people's interest completely ignored		Local empowerment in terms of problem diagnosis, solution design and project implementation immeasurable
		Accepted Planning protocols ignored and Local Community groups and Parish and District councils entirely by-passed. This is completely contrary to the spirit of the Localism Act 2011 and the Levelling Up and post-Brexit 'Take back control' promises		Devised in accordance with Neighbourhood Plan protocols with local Community groups and Parish and District councils

Table 3: The Devil, The Deep Blue Sea, and the sustainable alternatives

Conclusion

This paper has outlined why there are few reasons to suggest that a Mega ARC or Mega prison are radically different in terms of their detrimental effect on our community. Each will impact our lives, countryside, roads, houses, schooling, healthcare and crime rates. Although the scale may be slightly different between an asylum centre and 1 or 2 prisons, it seems the devil may indeed see the deep blue sea in the mirror. The impracticability of staffing and connecting a Mega ARC, Mega prisons (or both) in such a remote area is rather obvious to anyone who lives here or anyone who has read the abundant written evidence.

Whilst some may perceive each development as an alternative, the somewhat **ridiculous prospect of both should not be discounted**. The HO has secured a one year renewable lease of the Wethersfield Airbase and a lease until 2025 at the much smaller facility at Napier. Given the rate at which the asylum application backlog is growing and the likely failure of deterrent measures, **the idea that the ARC at Wethersfield is 'temporary' is simply not credible**. Although the MOJ may (finally) present plans for only one prison, this has no credibility either. Time and again, we can see at other sites that **once the MOJ builds one prison, it subsequently applies to extend it or build another**. These concerns provide yet more justification for such proposals to be evaluated in accordance with due process.

Whilst the local community it is currently marooned between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea, it is important to know what each of them looks like and to realise that this is a path by which we can steer ourselves to more inclusive palatable alternatives. Unlike the ARC or Mega prison proposals, these alternatives will subject to an inclusive community-led process of design and management and to local district council scrutiny.

The experience of our local villages over the last 20 months, the disgraceful trampling of our community rights by central government and the body of work we have done, have fostered a capacity and willingness to take back control. The display of unity evident at the recent public meeting is testament to a community ready to stand up for itself. We do not have to accept that "what has been done will be done again"¹⁰⁹ and allow the government to steam roller over our aspirations or force us to choose between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea. We just need to paddle (very) hard.

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