



SWAP FOR REWILDING



STOP WETHERSFIELD AIRFIELD PRISONS

Registered address: Littleridge, Wethersfield Road, Finchingfield, Essex. CM7 4NS

30 December 2021

Braintree District Council
Development Services
Causeway House
Braintree
Essex CM7 9HB

Dear Sirs

RE: LAND AT WETHERSFIELD AIRFIELD, TOPPESFIELD ROAD, WETHERSFIELD, ESSEX.

By way of introduction, we wish to commence our letter with the following paragraph from the Ministry of Justices' (MoJ) agent Cushman & Wakefield's (C&W) own Scoping Opinion letter:

*"The policies map shows that the application site is not allocated for development and is located in a 'countryside area'. There are three Protected Wildlife Sites identified at the site within the Development Plan. The site is not allocated for development in the emerging Draft Proposals Map. The site was not considered as a development site in the emerging Local Plan. **The proposed development is contrary to the Development Plan and the policies in the emerging Local Plan.**"*

We also wish to point out that the proposals go against National Planning Policies and the MoJ's own policies on the siting of new prisons (see Appendix A).

We make the following comments and representations concerning the MoJ's Scoping Opinion letter:

We are concerned and believe that the process relating to the proposals to build two new prisons at the Wethersfield airfield site by the MoJ has been seriously flawed.

Firstly, we note the original response by Braintree District Council (BDC) to the MoJ's letter to Councillor Graham Butland. The MoJ's letter requested information in relation to identifying suitable sites for new prisons. That the letter was written to Councillor Butland and not to BDC as a body is of concern. We note that in the Dunmow Broadcast newspaper: Published: 8:38 AM March 31, 2016 Updated: 8:21 AM November 1, 2020, Councillor Butland told the Broadcast:

*"I had a letter from the Ministry of Justice about two months ago, asking council leaders for sites suitable for prisons. **I wrote back** and said the MOD had empty land that could well be suitable. **This was just my idea, it has not been put to the council.** It's a fairly isolated site, there is no significant housing there and it is close to Stansted Airport. It's not a greenfield site, it's a brownfield site because it has a ruddy great runway on it. RAF Wethersfield is an eyesore and something needs to be done."*

Obviously, if Councillor Butland has acted solely at his own behest and not with the support of, nor any consultation with, BDC at the time then proper process in relation to a project of this size has not been followed. The reply to the MoJ letter, which has been published online by BDC, lacks depth, indeed one is surprised at such perfunctory comments coming from a corporate director in BDC's

Corporate Management team. The reply, by many, may be considered careless in its detail and indeed misleading in its answers to the MoJ's questions, thereby encouraging the MoJ to pursue the site without providing it fundamentally relevant information.

Secondly, in relation to the MoJ's pre-consultation process, we note that less than 2,000 letters were sent to homes around the site's location, that is less than the number of households in Three Fields ward, therefore many residents of parish councils which will be directly affected by this huge proposal were evidently not contacted. Already, some 10 parishes have combined together under legislation to form the Wethersfield Airbase Scrutiny Committee (WASC) demonstrating the considerable concern of the councils and their residents about the proposals. Not only were the residents of most of those parish councils not contacted about the pre-consultation process, but neither were the parish councils themselves!

Thirdly, the MoJ's agent C&W provided a Screening letter dated 17th September 2021, which did not appear on the Braintree Planning Portal until 19th October 2021, during which time we assume further contact between the MoJ and/or its advisers were held.

In this letter we note that C&W state "The proposed prison is in the north west corner of the airfield and would ensure that the remaining land could come forward for development at a later date." Such a comment "ensures" that an Environmental Statement must include full consideration of the consequential impact on the development of the site as a whole and not just the area of the proposed prisons themselves.

The letter states that there are "long views across the countryside", although saying that the surrounding area is "largely at the same level" is incorrect as the airfield stands on a 300+ foot plateau. It is however correct, though a mighty understatement, that they say "the visual impact of the prison is likely to be significant". As such it is impossible to conclude that the impact of floodlighting is not going to be substantial and lighting should therefore not be excluded from the EIA.

The letter goes on to state that "the site is a previously developed site in the open countryside" - the area earmarked for development is evidently not "previously developed" being predominantly grassland whilst runways in themselves are not considered evidence of development and the site is not in BDC's Brownfield Land Registry.

In relation to the Scoping Opinion letter itself, dated 12th November 2021, uploaded onto the planning portal on the 17th November 2021, we note that wide consultation with the communities affected by these mega prisons, as is generally recognised as best practice and as recommended in Place Services letter concerning "Historic Buildings and Conservation Area Advice" has not been conducted. Place Services' letter says:

"If not already undertaken, early-stage consultation prior to the EIA, with local communities, local heritage groups, historical societies, parish councils and other stakeholders would be appropriate, including the Airfields of Britain Conservation Trust, the Wethersfield Airfield Museum and the Wethersfield Local History Group, along with Historic England."

Only Finchingfield parish council was provided with a written letter informing them about the Scoping Opinion letter and the requirement for a response, none of the other councils in Three Fields let alone further afield, were consulted and nor were any community groups – an obvious lack of transparency. That the Scoping Opinion letter was issued just prior to the Christmas period is further evidence of abuse of process, reducing the amount of time affected parties can respond

properly and fully to the letter, deflected as they would be by the holiday period – this lack of time for proper response has been expressed by WASC and SWAP as well as others.

Our further concerns relate to:

The multitude of policies from the Local Plan Review which have purposefully been ignored by C&W – we note RLPs: 50 Cycleways, 63 Air Quality, 64 Contaminated Land, 71 Water Supply, Sewerage and Land Drainage, 72 which is referred to as Waste Quality should be Water Quality, 73 Waste Minimisation, 74 Provision of Space for Recycling, 76 Renewable Energy, 77 Energy Efficiency, 83 Local Nature Reserves, Wildlife Sites and Regionally Important Geological/Geomorphological Sites, 84 Protected Species, 86 River Corridors, 95 Preservation and Enhancement of Conservation Areas, 104 Ancient Monuments and Sites of Archaeological Importance, 105 Archaeological Evaluation, 106 Archaeological Excavation and Monitoring.

The impact around a wide area of the site needs to be scoped in because of the sheer size and scale of the development and its unavoidable adverse domino effect impact on villages, roads, schools, listed buildings and the environment generally in a much broader context rather than the very restricted area C&W would naturally prefer.

As the Screening letter states that the prisons development would “ensure” that the rest of the site would be developed, what are the consequential impacts of the rest of the site being developed? That has substantial implications for the future.

In respect of the junctions and other sites proposed for the traffic assessment - from what we understand these to be, we believe these are totally inadequate for a development of this size and do not take into account a far wider area of concern, not just for BDC but also Uttlesford DC. We propose to make suggestions as to where these may be in addition to those Essex Highways seems to have indicated to the MoJ and to that end request that a list of those junctions and sites where assessments have already been undertaken and are proposed to be undertaken is sent to us for community feedback.

Water and sewage cannot be scoped out of the EIA. The MoJ has been remiss, to say the least, in not noting that the area of the proposed site falls within the Pant River catchment area. Given the importance of the River Pant in transporting water from the Ely Ouse water transfer scheme to the Abberton and Hannigfield reservoirs serving over 1 million Essex residents the potential of pollution from construction and the leeching of any poisons left in the ground from the operational days of the airfield cannot be ignored.

Lighting is a huge issue for the environment. The water tower on the airfield can literally be seen from miles around. Floodlighting, no matter what mitigation is put in place reflects light significantly. The prisons will be a belisha beacon sitting on top of a 300+ foot high plateau commanding wide views of the Essex countryside. It will be impossible not to have an appallingly detrimental effect on a very wide area. As the Screening letter says above, “the visual impact of the prison is likely to be significant”. As far as the comment about no light sensitive designations that would be directly impacted – what about the impact upon conservation areas surrounding the proposed development? As previously mentioned, lighting must therefore be scoped into the EIA

In the reply to the MoJ’s letter to Cllr Butland it says that there are no known ecological or historic designations on the site – the records with BDC show 74 bird species; 271 plant species; 401 invertebrate species. Many of these are rare (on Red or Amber lists in the case of birds) or protected. Cushman & Wakefield’s own letter (quote below) states “There are three Protected

Wildlife Sites identified at the site”, although their Screening letter points to 4 Local Wildlife Sites in the vicinity; Ostend Wood, Outfield Wood/Boyton Grove, Park Wood and Poor Park, which should be considered for impact upon them. Historic England will no doubt also be looking at the base as an important historical artefact from WWII and the Cold War with several hangers now amongst the only ones left from that time, the only intact Victor Alert station in Europe and known ancient buildings having been on site.

These are only some of the areas of major concern in regards to the Scoping Opinion letter, others include contamination (obviously given the River Pant situation) and the enormous conflict with BDC Planning Policies (quote from Cushman & Wakefield’s letter, as mentioned above, *“The policies map shows that the application site is not allocated for development and is located in a ‘countryside area’.* *There are three Protected Wildlife Sites identified at the site within the Development Plan. The site is not allocated for development in the emerging Draft Proposals Map. The site was not considered as a development site in the emerging Local Plan. The proposed development is contrary to the Development Plan and the policies in the emerging Local Plan.”*). Architectural aspects also need to be properly scoped in due to the completely alien character of a monstrosity being placed in a beautiful countryside setting atop a 300+ foot dominant plateau.

We have stated in a separate email that we believe BDC has itself lacked proper diligence in dissemination of the Scoping Opinion letter to the widest community possible particularly given the enormity of the development. Gunning Principle no 2, requires sufficient information to be provided for consultees to give an intelligent consideration and to provide an informed response. This is so evidently not the case here – a longer timescale, proper public engagement (the MoJ sent out less than 2,000 letters locally), we have no information on traffic, environmental considerations, comparable data, protection from pollution to drinking water supplies, nor access to the various studies which are stated to have already been carried out etc etc.

It has been impossible for the immediate community to be informed let alone the wider community which inevitably will be affected.

We recommend that the process is halted and re-evaluated. If the MoJ insists on returning then it should do so in a manner which befits such a large development with its consequent substantial environmental impact.

Quite frankly, it is condemning of government that this proposal has got this far given the coaches and horses which are trying to be driven through National Planning Policies, Local Planning Policies and the MoJ’s own policies. That government could so wantonly disregard its own policies is astonishing, although people seem to be becoming accustomed to it!

Yours faithfully,

Alan MacKenzie
SWAP Chair, for and on behalf of

SWAP FOR REWILDING
Stop Wethersfield Airfield Prisons

APPENDIX A

To Victoria Atkins QC MP
Minister of State for Prisons and Probation
Victoria@victoriaatkins.org.uk

7 December 2021

To the Right Honourable Victoria Atkins, MP,

Prison proposals at Wethersfield Airfield: conflict with Ministry of Justice (MoJ) strategy

Wethersfield Airfield has been proposed for two new prisons¹. The prisons would be a category B training prison for adult male prisoners, and a category C resettlement prison for adult male prisoners.

Wethersfield Airfield is not a suitable location. Wethersfield Airfield is not a suitable location for the prisons for many reasons. One of these (and the focus of this letter) is that they are incompatible with the MOJ's own strategy and aims. It would appear that the decision to propose two prisons on the airfield is entirely opportunistic, irrational and unjustified, based solely on the availability of land and failing to take account of the MoJ's own requirements and processes.

We set out reasons why, below, with focus on:

- **MoJ strategy to reduce re-offending**
- **Resettlement prisons: community ties, community services**
- **MoJ research: contact with family & society**

1. Strategy to reduce re-offending

The strategy to reduce reoffending² is central to the government's commitment to cut crime to reduce reoffending. We do not believe that the siting of two prisons at Wethersfield Airfield will achieve this.

The 'Reducing Reoffending Delivery Programme' will deliver a Community Accommodation Service and aims to improve the approach to securing employment for prisoners. MoJ focus on interventions to tackle reoffending: a home, a job and access to treatment for substance misuse, including transitional accommodation to support those leaving prison at risk of homelessness.

¹ *The MoJ Outcome Delivery Plan 2021-2022 (July 2021)* ¹ sets out a need for prison places. 10,000 of those are to be provided by 4 new-build prisons (2026), and expansion of existing adult male and female estate. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ministry-of-justice-outcome-delivery-plan/ministry-of-justice-outcome-delivery-plan>

² Around 80% of convictions and cautions come from those who have previously offended (MoJ, 2020).

The goal to reduce re-offending is to be commended. However, the interventions set out are not deliverable in the Wethersfield Airfield area.

- The airfield is at a distance from any significant settlement³. Public transport services are infrequent. This, plus the distances involved, will make it difficult and impractical to provide shuttle bases to/from a wide area. The two nearest towns are Braintree & Haverhill:

Town	Distance	Time by public transport
Braintree	9 miles	1 hour 10 minutes
Haverhill	11 miles	4 hours

- Accommodation in the local area is comparatively expensive (average house price in Wethersfield £449k; Finchingfield £550k vs Essex average £395k, according to Zoopla December 2021). Rental properties are in short supply (9 within a three-mile radius of Wethersfield). The location makes it exceptionally difficult to achieve the objective of offering a local home, particularly given the very poor local public transport.
- The area is rural. The opportunities (given the nature of the locality and scarcity of local businesses) to offer rehabilitation and work training are virtually non-existent.



³ c11 miles from Haverhill and c8 miles from Braintree, with no buses directly to the airfield.

2. Resettlement prisons: community ties, community services⁴

Resettlement prisons of the type proposed prepare an individual for release and resettlement into the community. This is done through building, maintaining or improving family and community ties and providing access to local community services.

As set out above, the location will not enable the maintenance of family or community ties nor the provision of access to local community services.

It is at a great distance from where the highest numbers of offences in Essex are committed, set out below in descending order of number of offences committed:

Town	Miles	Time by public transport
Southend-on-Sea	40	3 hours
Basildon	38	2 hours 37 minutes
Colchester	25	2 hours 13 minutes
Harlow	33	3 hours
Chelmsford	21	1 hour 36 minutes
Grays	47	3 hours
Clacton-on-Sea	42	3 hours
Brentwood	36	1 hour 48 minutes

Prisons should be located near offenders and/or near a court. There is only one court in Essex, at Chelmsford, 26km away as the crow flies. Instead, given the very poor public transport links

⁴ HM Prison and Probation Service Model for Operational Delivery: New Resettlement Prisons - Supporting effective delivery in the adult male prison estate Version 1.8, April 2019

in north-west Essex, a new prison in the Wethersfield area will not facilitate the resettlement strategy. A prison nearer to the urban areas where offences are highest would do this far more successfully.

3. MoJ research: contact with family & society

In addition, research for the MoJ about the development of new prisons found that:

- Contact with family and society outside to support rehabilitation and re-integration into the community was of the utmost importance.
- Good transport links and a location not far removed from the background areas from which the offenders are drawn are essential.
- Offenders approaching resettlement will need GP appointments, registration in the community, Hospital appointments and Dental appointments, and engagement with addiction related support. These are all extremely limited in the Wethersfield area.

Two further quotes from this Report suggest that the MoJ should focus on locations closer to the areas where offenders and their families live:

'Family contact and visits. Social visits are one of the main protective factors for people held in custody. Evidence suggests that a lack of familial contact can lead to violent or self-harming behaviours, which will have a detrimental impact on prisons and prisoners. The statutory entitlement to social visits for convicted prisoners is two visits in every four-week period. In addition, policy allows for a visit on reception.'

It is integral to the prisoner's right to family life, as well as their rehabilitation, that they can have social visits; these are crucial to sustaining relationships with close relatives, partners and friends.

... family relationships ... are particularly important in Resettlement Prisons where the onus is on preparing for release and re-integration into the community. Operators can also allow additional time with family members who travel long distances at their discretion. Enabling longer sessions can have a positive effect on these relationships, even if the visits are less frequent. As there will be fewer Resettlement Prisons, and the local estate is being reconfigured into the Reception and Training estate, maintaining closeness to home for most people in custody will more be difficult. Prisoners located at a distance from their family and significant others is likely to cause disruption to their regular visits and prevent them from forging strong links in the community. It is extremely important that, where possible, prisons mitigate this risk.

... helping prisoners find employment (and encouraging employers to take them on) should be a key aspiration of the new Resettlement Prisons."

Conclusion

We note that government has announced today in its white paper⁵ on Prison Safety and Reform, its intention to legislate to introduce a clear statutory purpose for the prison

system. The white paper notes that this purpose will be based on *“the basics of what government expects prisons to deliver: public protection, safety and order, reform, and **preparing prisoners for release.**”*

Wethersfield Airfield will not enable the achievement of the fourth objective. Wethersfield and the surrounding areas have limited accommodation available for visitors to stay overnight. Property is expensive, public transport is very poor, and there are few employment opportunities locally. Therefore, Wethersfield Airfield does not meet the MoJ criteria in published strategy and planning documents as set out above.

At this juncture, we wish to make you aware that there are, in addition, many planning reasons why the proposals do not accord with the National Planning Policy Framework. We would be delighted to set these out for you on request.

We are seeking an immediate review of the proposal to locate two prisons on Wethersfield Airfield.

Yours



Alan MacKenzie, Chairman, SWAP
Sarah Seacombe, SWAP, member

cc

James Cleverly, MP

Dominic Raab QC MP Secretary of State Lord Chancellor

Kit Malthouse MP Minister of State for Crime and Policing (jointly with Home Office)

James Cartlidge MP Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice

Graham Butland Leader, Braintree District Council

⁵ [Prison Safety and Reform \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk)