

## WETHERSFIELD AIRFIELD - CPRE ESSEX POSITION STATEMENT - JANUARY 2022

The proposal to construct two new prisons on the former airfield site raises a number of important issues for consideration.

It is the view of CPRE Essex that decisions should not be taken piecemeal on the future of the land owned by the MoD at this location. It is important to know what the MoD propose for both that part of the airfield not suggested for prison development and for the land occupied by the MoD Police (until 2025). The MoD should therefore publish proposals for the whole site, including the part currently occupied by the MoD Police.

CPRE Essex takes the position that it would be completely inappropriate for houses to be built on the airfield site. Whilst it is in general terms a “brownfield site”, the airfield does not meet the definition of a site that should be included on the Brownfield Register because it is not suited for major residential development, being poorly sited for transport and utility links.

The CPRE National Report (‘Recycling our Land’), November 2021 states :

*“Not all brownfield sites are necessarily suitable for development as they may be poorly located in relation to transport and utility links: a number of former Ministry of Defence airfields and barracks in rural areas fall into this category.”*

The scale of the Wethersfield prison proposals is alarming and hugely unwelcome in this very scenic part of the county with its valued landscape and historic villages. The location of a prison in such a rural setting is inappropriate and because the site is open, exposed and relatively high (95m), it would be visible for miles around. This would impact adversely on the amenity of local residents and is particularly pertinent given the brutal design, height and mass of the prisoner blocks. The MoJ proposals are very insensitive in this regard as the development could not readily be screened by hedges and trees and it would also introduce significant light pollution.

The site is not well served by transport links. It is 9 miles from the A120 and access to the wider strategic road network (M11 and A12). The local road system is inadequate for the proposal and access from the A1017 (and B1053) channels traffic through Wethersfield Conservation Area with its many listed buildings. This relatively remote location could pose potential issues for emergency services when having to respond speedily to crisis incidents at the prisons.

It is not known how many traffic movements will be generated by the construction and operation of the prisons. The recent consultation document provides no light in that regard but indicates that a Transport Assessment is being carried out and mitigation measures will be considered. Paucity of this (and other) information has made it difficult to provide well informed responses.

Essex is a very dry county and supplies of water are already stretched – how would the additional demand for water created by such a big development be met and how would waste water be processed?

There is widespread concern over the impact of the proposals on local biodiversity.

CPRE’s preference would be for the airfield to be returned to the use it had before the Second World War - i.e. agricultural purposes - especially as it lies surrounded by Grade 2 (very good quality) land. Alternatively, if the cost of reinstatement is prohibitive, a mixed use country park and leisure scheme might be appropriate. This would not require removal of the runway, would have much less impact on the local wildlife and would allow preservation of some of the structures built during the Cold War period, which are of historic interest. It could also provide opportunities for active leisure pursuits, such as, walking, cycling and bird watching.