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BY EMAIL

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To Whom It May Concern:

**OBJECTIONS TO PROPOSALS FOR A NEW MEGA PRISON
IN BUCKINGHAMSHIRE (21/02851/AOP)**

Please accept this letter as my response to the planning application for the proposed new prison adjacent to HMP Springhill and HMP Grendon. This builds on my objections that were forwarded to the applicant in January 2021.

I outline the primary concerns my constituents have relayed to me and set out my opposition to this proposed new prison.

The proposal also does not take into account the cumulative impact of High Speed Two (HS2) and East West Rail (EWR) construction projects which intersect approximately a mile from the proposed development. It is a reality that my constituents are having to deal with significant disruption to their daily lives and amenity with multiple state sponsored big infrastructure projects currently under construction. The cumulative impact of another one is simply unacceptable.

While I note that the applicants have heard and responded to some of the concerns raised in their pre-application consultation, they have not addressed the fundamental issue: there is no Local Plan policy for this proposal, and also none in the “emerging” Vale of Aylesbury Local Plan (VALP). This is a **speculative** application, with **no** consideration of the local plan making process, the rural context of the site, and no proven need.

This proposal would take place in a rural area, surrounded by small settlements and served by an inadequate network of rural and unclassified roads that are already under pressure from existing approvals and proposed growth in Aylesbury and Bicester. This rural buffer between two fast growing areas is critical to ensure the rurality of Buckinghamshire is protected.

The proposed site would use existing green land and take additional agricultural land to make the prison effectively a massive extension to a small village and is totally inappropriate to being built in this part of rural Buckinghamshire. It is of a scale of a small town, with large staffing numbers and inmates, not to mention the large numbers of daily deliveries and visitors a site like this would require.



The applicant has not demonstrated convincingly how they have discounted brownfield sites which is a policy direction that Buckinghamshire Council has made clear in the commencement of the new Local Plan. It is my belief that brownfield sites should be considered as a priority for this type of building work rather than causing the loss of green, rural spaces. There are far more suitable brownfield sites available that have much better and safer transport access, and as the applicant admits, they have a “local” area of up to 50 miles radius to search.

In the following section, I break down my objections into policy areas, in alphabetical order.

Biodiversity & Ecology

The proposed new mega prison would result in the removal of a total of over ¾ km of hedging, and trees associated with that hedging. This would have a huge impact on the site’s existing ecology. In addition there would be a loss of a total of approximately 60 acres of open green fields across the whole site. Additional loss of trees would be seen with the creation of the new site entrance from Grendon Road, Edgcott and from the field near Grendon Hall into the main site.

The site is rich in wildlife (and well documented by constituents), which will be put at risk with such a large scale construction project, and the destruction of so much of the habitat.

Saved Policy GP40 presumes against the loss of trees and hedgerows of landscape value, which this application fails to meet.

Cumulative Impact

This speculative application does not address the cumulative impact of having three institutions co-located at the same site, and also does not take into account the local disruption that is already underway with HS2 and East West Rail.

The proposed time scale to build the mega prison is three years. This is an intolerable amount of time for excessive disruption from construction traffic and workers. There is general concern among residents that there will be slippage and this time period will become extended.

From reading the applicant’s Traffic Assessment, it is clear that, in addition to building a new ‘mega’ prison on the Grendon Underwood site, the Ministry of Justice intends to expand HMP Springhill by an additional 120 places. The expansion of HMP Springhill was mentioned in the second consultation document issued in December 2020 as a possibility which was being considered. However, there is now clear evidence that the HMP Springhill expansion will be the next development on this site to come forward. Although no application has yet been submitted for this extension, it is justifiable to consider the further cumulative impact on the overall site.

Design

It is with much regret that the applicant has ignored significant feedback on the design, and this is very important for this outline application as the design fundamentally informs the scale.

The applicant has persisted with proposing an off-the-shelf modular system designed for urban sites, with completely inappropriate design, massing and layout, placed on top of raised topography, which will make this a very imposing development in the rural landscape.



There is no consideration of the rural context, the scale, the roofscape or indeed any architectural thought given to this proposal. This is contrary to the government's very clearly stated policy on quality of design and recently updated NPPF. Indeed, according to NPPF 134, "Development that is not well designed should be refused, especially where it fails to reflect local design policies and government guidance..."

The proposed new mega prison would be on a scale and of a design that would conflict with both the NPPF and the Aylesbury Vale Local Plan. The proposed site is over 29.5ha, significantly larger than the current two prisons on the site. The height of the planned accommodation blocks is four storeys (c. 17.5 m) but given the significant exposed roof top servicing (though some drawings now show a pitched roof), this will result in buildings five storeys high. The support buildings on the site would range from one to three storeys high and c. 9.5-17.5 m high and the scale and height of these will be exaggerated further because many of them will be situated on one of the highest parts of the local landscape.

The proposal will be extremely visible from a large part of the surrounding area and in particular from the majority of Edgcott, Springhill Road estate and the northern part of Grendon Underwood Main Street as well as a large part of the surrounding area. It will also be particularly intrusive to the rural setting with uncontrolled lighting which will affect the surrounding area significantly, especially in the autumn to spring period where large numbers of windows at a high elevation will be clearly lit, and even after decades of tree growth, will not be concealed. This will clearly have an impact not only on existing residents' amenity, but disrupt the local wildlife with light pollution.

Indeed, the whole proposal will dwarf not only the existing prison, but all settlements in the whole area and will be contrary to existing and emerging local policies on design and should be given considerable weight in the assessment of this application.

At the very least, one would expect to see "verified views" from existing settlements and rights of way locations to test the massing and scale.

Economic Benefits

A 25 mile radius from this site is not creating "local" benefits. This would stretch to Northampton, Marlow, Didcot and well beyond Banbury. Any commitment to upskilling would need to specific to local education establishments, and there are very few SMEs scaled to benefit from local contracts. Indeed, the Planning Statement refers to a 40-mile radius which suggests staff could be commuting from London and the Hanger Lane gyratory (as the crow flies), so hardly benefiting the Buckinghamshire economy if 487 of the staff are from this very broadly defined area.

There is a claimed indirect spend of £2.4m retained locally after completion (planning statement 4.36), but given the lack of shops and business in the immediate vicinity, it can only be assumed that this figure is based on urban developments, not remote rural ones.

The Socio Economic arguments submitted by the applicant does not accurately reflect the impact of what is proposed at this isolated rural site location. It fails to take account of significant local factors and uses assumptions drawn from other urban prison proposals that are not comparable.

We are fortunate in having a low unemployment situation in the constituency, so it is highly likely that the vast amount of economic benefit will be for those that need to commute to this site to build it, and commute to the prison to staff it when completed. There is no mention of providing key worker accommodation for staff that want to relocate to this site. All this will of course have an impact in sustainability and transport.

Saved policy RA29 states that except where otherwise allowed for in the Local Plan outside the built up areas of



settlements and identified employment areas, the Council will resist proposals for new employment buildings and for the expansion of established employment sites into the countryside.

Flooding

The area in question is prone to flooding and significant removal of permeable fields will exacerbate the potential for additional flooding in local villages. The large area for buildings and car parking will have a significant consequence on the drainage of surrounding areas where there is already significant flooding in inclement weather. The inclusion of some notional ponds demonstrates a simplistic way to deal with surface water, especially for the long access road, the huge car park, and of course the significant number of buildings without any obvious water attenuation design strategies, and no integrated design solutions.

Grendon Underwood is already regularly under siege by the Water Authorities digging up Main Street to repair the failing sewage system and water piping. Further use caused by the proposed building works, and permanent residents, will not ease the situation. Water supply and sewerage capacity is of significant concern, and proposals would need to be implemented prior to any development to safeguard existing residents.

The entrance to the existing prison, and the ditches along this area already struggle to cope with runoff from the prison landholding. Residents have photographic evidence to show roads and footpaths under water.

I am also concerned to note that the existing site suffers from sewer blockages and leaks, as recently as March 2021, and sadly illustrates why my constituents have so little confidence in this proposal given existing management issues.

Policy EN4 that states that developments should be directed away from areas at highest risk of flooding to ensure that development does not increase flood risk elsewhere. There is little detail in the submission that they have considered in any detail the significant impact this proposal will have on existing surface water flooding and the scale of design, and location at the top of a catchment, will need very significant water attenuation incorporated into the design, and this will have an impact in layout and potentially access.

Heritage & Archaeology

The potential for evidence of Roman occupation on the prison estate is high, given the proximity to the roman road “Akeman Street” and archaeological evidence nearby along the route of HS2. The site is also located in the medieval Forest of Bernwood. Given the scale of the proposals, and the green field nature of the scheme, a comprehensive archaeological assessment is required before detail design of the prison is fixed. Ridge and furrow fields are visible on the western side and provide a historic and green buffer between the existing prison and the main road and village.

I note that the site is adjacent to four listed (grade II) properties; Grendon Hall and the original gates and railings, and two houses to the north and west of the site, and the prison proposals will harm the settings of these heritage assets.

Landscape

The topography of the site means that any new development will have an adverse impact on the rural setting, and will cause irreparable damage to some heritage landscapes, including some ridge and farrow fields. The proposal



compounds this by placing urban scaled pre-fabricated buildings in a very visible location, with exposed building services adding to the impact on the rural landscape. This will be a very institutional intrusion into a sparsely built rural area, and the proposal would have a significant and irreversible, harmful impact on the centuries-old grain character and appearance of the landscape and the setting of Grendon Underwood and Edgcott. Policy GP40 presumes against the loss of trees and hedgerows of landscape value.

I would expect any contentious proposal to attempt to respect and complement the physical characteristics of a site and its surroundings, the historic scale and context of the setting, the natural qualities and features of the area and important public views and skylines. This proposal does not, and makes no effort to consider the architectural intrusion on the landscape.

Indeed saved policy RA3 that states that proposals for the extension of residential and other developed curtilages beyond the built-up area of settlements that would adversely affect the character and appearance of Rural Areas will be resisted.

Saved policy RA8 that states that Development proposals in these areas should respect their landscape character. Development that adversely affects this character will not be permitted, unless appropriate mitigation measures can be secured. There is no proposed mitigation to compensate for the loss of open countryside.

Location

Government policy is brownfield first, and a strong emerging theme in the new Buckinghamshire Plan, but it appears from recent Freedom of Information responses from the Ministry of Justice, that there have been no preliminary discussion with any other local authority which suggest that existing land ownership, rather than a suitable brownfield site, has resulted in this application. From the applicant's own statement of community involvement, they admit that their site process was based on land ownership first, not where the prison is needed and best placed for prisoners (paragraph 5.4).

The proposal locates the prison in an isolated rural location, and significantly erodes the open landscape buffer between the existing site and adjacent residents, to the extent that it will also urbanise this village setting. The choice of location at Grendon Underwood is in direct contradiction of the Ministry of Justice's declared policy of locating new prisons close to areas of demand and where the prison population is forecast to grow most quickly.

The application's pre-consultation documentation seeks to imply that the proposed expansion of the prison estate is comparable with similar projects at Glen Parva, Five Wells and Long Sutton. It is not; the other locations are close to urban settlements, not isolated rural locations surrounded by small rural villages.

At first glance a prison at Grendon Underwood is the easy option. However, a deeper analysis shows that it is not the optimum solution, and indeed the land ownership is not sufficient for the proposals. A better option is possibly at Bullingdon, as identified by Grendon Underwood Parish Council, or another site around the Bicester area which has vastly better transport links, including train, coach and bus. A new prison near HMP Bullingdon would also be served by a much larger main road complex (including the A41 and M40) and the prison would be much easier to get to for visitors. The new prison would be close to the town of Bicester and the train stations and nearer to Oxford, which again would be helpful to visitors. There is no evidence that brownfield sites have been robustly considered, or what level of discussion was held with the Ministry of Defence.

The planning statement refers to the need of "prisoners in the right type of prison at the right time" and this also extends to the right location to ensure links with family and post-release support services. However, there is no evidence that Buckinghamshire is in need of such a large prison, and the planning statement acknowledges that



currently Springhill and Grendon has nearly 50% of a prison population from over 50 miles away (para 6.17). The 50-mile radius is not sufficient to demonstrate that this particular location is meeting the needs of the prisoner's home location – as this includes London and other major cities, and this also emphasises how difficult it will be for visitors to access the prison.

The planning statement para 6.21 suggests that the project will create 550-700 permanent jobs for the local community, but is contradicted by the applicant's own documentation, which defines local as also including London. The applicant will be aware of its existing recruitment challenges at Grendon and Springhill, so it is clear that any further increase in staffing requirements will have further challenges of recruiting, further encouraging longer commuting, and little if no benefit to the local community.

The planning statement outlines the site selection process and it is notable that this proposal fails to meet several of the secondary and tertiary requirements of the site, which indicates how sub-optimal this proposed location is.

The proposed site layout (now horseshoe shaped) of the proposed mega prison does not lend itself to a suitable design of such a large prison with all the associated services and the addition of another parcel of green field since the pre-application consultations show that they have struggled to make this rural location work and having to resort to even more land take outside their ownership. In particular, the access to the main part of the site where the prison buildings would be located is very narrow, at the far end of a field between Grendon Road and HMP Springhill and runs directly between buildings forming part of HMP Springhill and the ecological area of the current prison.

The proposed plan also shows the site of the prison football pitch being made much closer to residential property, and despite minor amendments following the pre-application consultation, it does not properly address these concerns. Residents with young children have complained to me about the noise and language coming from prisoners using the football pitch. There are concerns that foul language will be able to be heard even clearer now that the sports pitch will be closer to residents' properties. I also note that Sports England has submitted an objection based on the lack of replacement facilities which indicates the proposal is also over development of the site.

The field in the proposed plans for the new mega prison which is designated for the new site entrance and the main road into the site, and the football pitch mentioned above, is part of the Historical Park and Pleasure Garden of Grendon Hall. (*Bucks Gardens Trust June 2021*). The field also contains the remains of a much larger area of ridge and furrow and hence is of great historical interest as well as providing valuable green field and amenity space.

Policy GP35 of the Aylesbury Vale District Local Plan 2004 requires proposals to respect and complement the physical characteristics of the site and its surroundings, the historic scale and context of the setting, the natural qualities and features of the area and important public views and skylines. Sadly this proposal does not comply with any element of that policy.

Policy GP8 and GP95 states that in dealing with all planning proposals the Council will have regard to the protection of the amenities of existing occupiers. Development that exacerbates any adverse effects of existing uses will not be permitted, and this development will have significant adverse impact on the amenity of surrounding residents, including impact on the rural tranquillity, light pollution, impact on green landscape, concerns on safety and numerous transport related matters including the impact of traffic through existing settlements.

In the recently dismissed appeal (3 March 2021) for 65 houses on the site immediately to the south of the existing prison entrance, the inspector referred to several issues to lead to the appeal to be dismissed; in paragraph 25 he concludes that the site is not sustainable to due its location and lack of accessibility other than by private car, and a development in this location would erode more open and rural landscape (20/00068/REF).



Public Safety

Category C prisons present a very different potential risk to local communities from the current prisons at Grendon and Springhill. HMP Springhill is a Category D prison and over the years there has been a steady flow of escapees, with police appeals for absconders a regular feature in local papers and social media. This makes the local residents feel very insecure about a new Cat C prison, and adds to the resource pressure on Thames Valley Police.

Over the last three months (April-June 2021) I have been advised that there have been 197 recorded offences involving inmates from HM prisons within the Thames Valley Police area. These range from violence against a person to sexual offences, all requiring different time scales and expertise to investigate, and the current local team is already at capacity.

The location of a Category C prison in a rural area means that it will take longer for emergency services to reach it in the case of any problems, with the nearest police stations being some distance away in Aylesbury or Bicester.

Edgcott and surrounding villages have for some years experienced drug and alcohol ‘drops’ undertaken by visitors who seek to smuggle substances into the prison estate. The expansion of the complex will inevitably increase this problem.

Public Services Impact

Local infrastructure is already overstretched, and the impact of the proposals will increase the existing prisoner population on the extended site by over 200%. The total prison population on the site would be more than double the combined population of Grendon Underwood and Edgcott, the two settlements immediately bordering the development site.

There are serious concerns the local police and NHS will not be able to cope with a development of this size. Evidence from HMP Oakwood shows that the local ambulance service received 358 calls in 2014 alone from a prison of similar size. This would put undue strain on the local ambulance service. Thames Valley Police has submitted concerns that they do not have the resources to manage an additional prison and in-prison crime.

There is concern for those leaving prison in a rural location such as this with lack of council and probation support services in the immediate vicinity.

It should not be left to the local council taxpayer to cope with the long term operation issues in what is currently a sparsely populated rural area with limited policing, utilities and transport.

Transport

There are two critical transport issues as a result of this proposal. A lengthy construction phase, and the operation phase. Both are of significant concerns.

The site is very poorly served by public transport. It is highly likely that the vast majority of construction staff will live remotely given the scarcity of rental accommodation in the area, made worse with HS2 and East West Rail operatives also in the area. This will lead to additional journeys by 1,000 contractors twice daily for a 2-3 year construction phase, not to mention the large number of plant, equipment and materials that will need to be delivered, and potentially very large pre-manufactured units.



The local roads are not designed for an excessive volume of traffic, particularly heavy construction traffic, and struggle to cope with the current additional HS2 traffic which has led Buckinghamshire Council to have to recruit a Marshall to monitor contractor's damage, at the local council taxpayers expense. Given the safety concerns of the adjacent unclassified roads, and a tragic accident history on the A41, this proposal is clearly in the wrong location, and there are no commensurate proposals in the transport mitigations to reduce the risk of increased traffic through adjacent villages or safely accessing the A41.

Post completion, the long term additional 1,400 staff journeys, the multiple service and delivery vehicles that will be needed to visit the site daily will have a damaging impact on the local residents' quality of life and significantly increase local pollution levels.

The applicant's Outline Travel Plan (OTP) appear unworkable in a rural location like the proposed site. The roads are too narrow and dangerous for many people to even consider using a bicycle, and is not taking into account the rural nature of the existing road and path infrastructure.

Despite the proposal including an already landscape hungry number of car parking spaces with a total of 453, and the lack of real alternatives, and that there will be up to 734 staff employed on the site, plus visitors and service vehicles the number of car parking spaces, clearly this is an underestimate and reinforces the views that the applicant is trying to squeeze far to much into an inappropriate site. A similar analysis was carried out at HMP Berwyn in North Wales and an additional 194 car parking spaces had to be added later.

The provision of electric car charging points is a step in the right direction, but 3kW chargers are inadequate for visitors who will have come a long way. I find the notion that 1.6% of staff will arrive by train to be non-sensical as the nearest train station is in Bicester, and another transport method is required to get to the site.

All the quoted travel times to the site are to the main road access point. This is disingenuous for walking and cycling given the significant length of the access road up the hill to access the site's main entrance will add several more minutes, reducing the number of houses located within a convenient walking and cycling distance further. It is telling that the Design & Access statement refers to the changes in the location of the car park since the pre-application consultation for accessibility reasons due to the 400m walk and 10m level rise, which is indicates about half of what a cyclist or pedestrian would be expected to cover from the main road.

Furthermore, buses are infrequent. Only service 16 passes the current prison, the other two of the bus services mentioned in the proposal do not come through Edgcott. The 16 service only covers part of the day on an hourly basis. Therefore, using a bus service to reach the site by employees is untenable.

All major housing areas are approximately nine miles away, in Bicester or Aylesbury. It is important to note that of the prison officers employed at the existing prison, it is reported that only seven live within the Grendon Underwood Parish. Furthermore none of the current staff car share to work unless they are partners living in the same household and work the same shift pattern, overall a very rare event.

The link to the A41 involves a number of narrow and tight bends, goes across a narrow bridge and passes very close to Grendon Underwood Church. In addition, the junction of the A41 and the road to the proposed site is very dangerous and there have been a number of accidents there including fatal ones. Already constituents have had too many close calls with haulage vehicles on the roads. With the years of construction my constituents are very anxious that there will be an incident with serious repercussions. The applicant's transport assessment offers "minor" mitigations to the A41 junction which are wholly inadequate, and it is telling that the traffic assessment includes Google images rather than current photographs, and traffic observations from May 2021, which was well before full easing of lockdown and commuting traffic had not returned to anywhere near pre-covid levels.



The unclassified rural road through Edgcott is already carrying around 3,300 vehicles per day on average, a recent survey by residents showed 35% of these are on average travelling at or above the 30 mph speed limit. Large numbers of HGV's using the road are increasing due to EWR and HS2 and there is a forecast of an additional sub 7.5 tonnes of traffic using the road from these projects to over 500 vehicles a day. HS2 and EWR works are forecast to coincide with the timeframe expected for the development works for the prison.

Even after the completion of EWR and HS2, the IMD Depot being built at Calvert to service the HS2 line will employ c 300 people and traffic increases will result permanently from its' operation. The rural road is unsuitable for this level of traffic.

The proposal would be in conflict with NPPF paragraph 104 which seeks to focus significant development in locations which limit the need to travel and offer a genuine choice of transport modes. For the same reasons it would also be in conflict with the aims of Buckinghamshire's Local Transport Plan (2016 to 2036) (LTP4). NPPF para 111 gives clear grounds to refuse this application on highway matters alone as the proposal cannot in this location ever meet the expectations of para 112.

Policy S1 of the emerging VALP also makes clear that development must comply with the principles of sustainable development as outlined in the NPPF. The proposal also fails to meet policy T1 due to the lack of any convincing sustainable transport vision, and given the remote location of this site, it is difficult to see how the applicant can attempt to overcome this significant planning policy.

Conclusion

The concept of an urban prison in a rural location is wrong on many levels as I have outlined in this submission, and the application does nothing to try and resolve or even mitigate the urban scale, brutal massing, and ill-thought out impact on its green field location, including numerous failures to address local and national planning policy matters, from transport and drainage, to sustainability and design.

This planning application is an enormous issue of concern locally, with many constituents and parish council having contacted me. I therefore trust that my objections will reinforce their own submissions, many of which are incredibly detailed and full of evidence and that these will be given due consideration.

The proposals are designed for easy and fast delivery of a prison which may be commendable in some urban brownfield locations in need of regeneration, but it is clear that this application is in the wrong location for an off-the-shelf modular-designed high-rise set of structures in a rural location, and in no way does it meet the requirements of sustainable development as outlined in local policy (existing or emerging) or the NPPF.

For the reasons above, and the many others from the parish councils and concerned residents, the application should be refused.

Yours sincerely,

Greg Smith MP