

EXTRAORDINARY COUNCIL MEETING held at 7.30 pm at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN on 11 APRIL 2002

Present:- Councillor D W Gregory – Chairman.
 Councillors E C Abrahams, Mrs C A Bayley, W F Bowker, Mrs C A Cant, Mrs M A Caton, R P Chambers, Mrs J F Cheetham, R J Copping, Mrs D Cornell, A Dean, Mrs C M Dean, Mrs C D Down, Mrs S Flack, M A Gayler, R D Green, A J Ketteridge, P G F Lewis, Mrs C M Little, Mrs J I Loughlin, Mrs J E Menell, R A Merrion, D M Miller, D J Morson, R J O'Neill, G W Powers, A R Row, Mrs S V Schneider, R W L Stone, A C Streeter, Mrs E Tealby-Watson, A R Thawley and P A Wilcock.

Officers in attendance: Mrs E C Forbes, J B Dickson, A Forrow, J Mitchell, M J Perry, B D Perkins and M T Purkiss.

C43 QUEEN ELIZABETH THE QUEEN MOTHER

Members, Officers and the public stood in silent tribute to the memory of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother who had died on 30 March 2002.

C44 CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION

Councillor Gregory, the Chairman of the Council, thanked the public for attending the meeting in such large numbers; he said that this had been the largest gathering for a Council meeting for many years. He asked Members to debate the issue based on facts and said that this was an opportunity for local government to be seen at its best.

C45 STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

Before the commencement of the meeting, statements were made by the following persons:

Councillor Douglas James (Town Mayor of Great Dunmow)
 Councillor David Wright (Deputy Town Mayor of Great Dunmow)
 Councillor John Davey (Dunmow Town Council)
 Mr Michael Dines
 Doctor Patricia Dale

C46 APOLOGIES AND DECLARATION OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R C Dean, M A Hibbs, G Sell and R C Smith.

Councillor Copping declared an interest insofar as he was a Member of Great Dunmow Town Council; Councillor Mrs Flack declared an interest as a County Councillor for Great Dunmow and Councillor Gayler declared an interest as a

District Councillor for Great Dunmow and a member of Great Dunmow Town Council.

C47

REMOVAL CENTRE

The Chief Executive updated Members on her report, which provided Members with some background information concerning the proposal by the Home Office to site an Asylum Seekers Removals Centre at or near Stansted Airport.

She confirmed that the Home Office had recently decided to suspend work on progressing the future development programme for asylum seeker provision until the outcomes of inquiries following the fire at Yarl's Wood were known.

She reminded Members that as soon as possible after the announcement by the Home Office concerning a Removals Centre, a meeting had been held between senior councillors and officers and representatives of the Home Office to provide an opportunity to learn more of the Government's plans. Scrutiny Committee 2 (Resources and Environment) had given preliminary consideration to this issue at its meeting on 27 March 2002 and had passed the following recommendation.

“RECOMMENDED that this Council strongly opposes any siting of an asylum seekers' removals centre in the district which impacts upon the economic, environmental and social lives of established communities and that, in the event of an unavoidable requirement for such a centre, asks that detailed consideration be given to under-used or disused airfields within the area surrounding Stansted Airport.”

The Chief Executive confirmed that the Home Office intended to establish a Removals Centre within reach of Stansted Airport. The preliminary site search had identified the sites on the Airport, at Smiths Farm Great Dunmow and Thremhall Priory, Stansted. The Home Office stated that it was open to suggestions of alternative sites. The Administration Group of the Council had issued a press release suggesting that the Home Office should consider the former R.A.F bases at Wethersfield in Braintree District and North Weald in Epping Forest District. A letter had been sent in these terms to the Home Office but no response had yet been received. She confirmed, that when a preferred site had been established, the appropriate planning authority would be formally notified in accordance with statutory procedures.

Over 90 letters of representation had been received from individuals and the vast majority had concerns about security and the proximity of the proposed sites to residential areas. Particular concern had been expressed about the Smiths Farm site in Great Dunmow, and Great Dunmow Town Council had detailed its opposition to the siting of a centre in the town. The Chief Executive reported that a letter had also been received from the Uttlesford Primary Care Trust who were opposed to a centre in Uttlesford due largely to its problems with staff recruitment in the area.

The Home Office had given an assurance that there would be an opportunity for public consultation and comment prior to and during the statutory 8 weeks

comment period. The Home Office had stated that they would attend public meetings and that if there were local objections they would encourage the Secretary of State to hold a local inquiry.

Councillor Chambers, the Leader of the Council, referred to the Home Office proposals in detail and said that they had made it quite clear that there would be an asylum seekers' removal centre at or near Stansted Airport.

The site would be 15-20 acres and would accommodate between 400 and 750 people. However, the Home Office representatives had stated that they were prepared to look at suggestions of alternative sites. He said that safety of Uttlesford residents was the most important issue. The three sites put forward were unsuitable for various reasons and one was too close to residential properties. He said that the site proposed at Smiths Farm was totally unsuitable, being too close to residential property, and was an area designated for commercial use. It would fundamentally affect the viability of a small market town such as Great Dunmow. He reiterated his assurance that the Council would do all it could to prevent this removal centre being sited in Great Dunmow. However, the Council needed to be realistic when it was told by the Home Office that a removals centre would come, not if but when. In view of this, the Administration Group had found it necessary to suggest to the Home Office that they look at the possibility of a site at Wethersfield, North Weald or a site within the perimeter of Stansted Airport.

Councillor Chambers then proposed the following motion which was duly seconded:

"Uttlesford District Council strongly opposes any location of an Asylum Seekers Removals Centre in the District which impacts on the economic, environmental and social lives of established communities and in the event of an unavoidable requirement for such a centre, asks that detailed consideration be given to underused or disused airfields such as the former R.A.F. bases at Wethersfield and North Weald as well as a site within the perimeter at Stansted Airport.

Furthermore, the Council urges the Government to introduce a more effective system for processing the claims of asylum seekers' applications quickly and humanely and asks the Home Office to invest adequate resources to achieve that aim."

Councillor Copping referred to the difficulty of separating local and national politics. He said that he had put an item on the Agenda for Scrutiny Committee 2 so that a response could be made to the Home Office on this issue as soon as possible. He said that he shared concerns about the apparent lack of action by the Council both before and since the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee. He also regretted that the Administration Group had chosen to write to the Home Office prior to the matter being considered by the Council. He said that he could not agree to the motion put forward by Councillor Chambers and moved the following amendment which was duly seconded:

"This Council strongly opposes any siting of an asylum seekers' removals centre in the district which impacts upon the economic, environmental and

social lives of established communities and that in the event of an unavoidable requirement for such a centre, asks that detailed consideration be given to under-used or disused airfields within the area surrounding Stansted Airport.

Furthermore, the Council urges the Government to introduce a more effective system for processing the claims of asylum applicants and urges the Home Office to invest resources that enable applications to be determined quickly and with justice so that people who seek asylum can be dealt with more humanely and the burden on single communities in the UK is reduced.”

Councillor O’Neill said that he could not support the amendment as it did not contain any reference to alternative sites at Wethersfield or North Weald. He did not feel it was nimbyst to suggest other sites. North Weald had better road communications with the airport than the other sites. He said that it needed to be recognised that there were not spare people waiting for employment in a removals centre in Uttlesford and the site at North Weald would be closer to areas of lower employment. He said that the Wethersfield site already belonged to the Government and he understood that it was not fully utilised. He concluded that the Council should show that it was prepared to look at the merits of any sites suggested and needed to discuss these with the Home Office.

Councillor Green said the Wethersfield site was an open area and could be well policed. He felt that both the suggested sites at Wethersfield and North Weald would be more suitable. He also referred to the need to respect the welfare of detainees as well as our residents.

Councillor Gayler said that he was not only opposed to a removals centre at the Smiths Farm site but also at any site. He said that the mix of a large number of people from different backgrounds at all stages of the immigration process would be a recipe for disaster. The proposal to build more removals centres was the most expensive way of dealing with the asylum seekers issue. He said that it also demonstrated the Government’s failure to deal adequately with asylum seekers’ problems and said that the claims procedure needed to be speeded up. However, it had to be accepted that the Home Office was determined to build this centre and he reiterated that Smiths Farm was not suitable as it was too close to residential property and was part of the economic future of Great Dunmow.

Councillor Morson said that the amendment was made on the assumption that no centre should be placed in a residential community. The amendment did not offend other district councils by suggesting sites within their areas. He said that it was wrong that the Administration Group had written to the Home Office before all Members had been given the opportunity to discuss the matter.

Councillor Ketteridge considered that there was no harm in giving a steer to the Home Office of possible other sites in less populated areas. Councillor Mrs Flack suggested that the steer be widened to include sites other than disused airfields. Councillor Jones said that it was important that a clear message was provided and that a site within Stansted Airport should be included.

Councillor A Dean referred to the various crises around the world which were leading to the refugee problem. He also referred to people trafficking and the procedures of the immigration service which were less than helpful. There were few interpreters and people were denied legal support because there were not enough dedicated lawyers who would do the work for the fee concerned. He said that centres such as the one proposed prevented freedom of movement, and to group people from various backgrounds might be a potential for trouble. He said that the Home Office should think again about removal centres, and if they are forcibly going to turn Stansted Airport into an export factory for human misery then we must have a set of minimum demands:

- A far smaller number of detainees than that proposed
- No one to be detained other than people who have exhausted a properly conducted appeals process
- No criminals to be held here
- Meet local authority building standards and designed with low fire risk
- Fire precautions approved by the local fire service
- Designed to meet the needs of Home Office AND the needs of the detainees
- This Council should seek advice from the Detention Advice Service
- Professional support for the frustrations and fears of the detainees
- No lies from the Home Office about the types of detainee held and no deception about impenetrable security, as has occurred elsewhere
- No contractor to operate the centre who has perjured himself in court, as was the case at two centres
- The number of people to be held not to exceed the capacity of the accommodation and only if the centre is fully manned
- On-site services to be fully funded by central government
- Additional funding to be provided in advance of the need for local community services such as health and policing
- Family accommodation for families with children – preferably not at the detention centre
- Children to be given full education services and no action against children that breaks the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

He concluded that there needed to be fair and just treatment for detainees and residents alike.

Following a request for a recorded vote the amendment proposed by Councillor Copping was put to the vote and the votes were as follows:-

For the Amendment

Mrs C A Bayley
W F Bowker
Mrs C A Cant
R J Copping
A Dean
Mrs C M Dean
M A Gayler
D W Gregory

Against the Amendment

E C Abrahams
Mrs M A Caton
R P Chambers
Mrs J F Cheetham
Mrs D Cornell
Mrs C D Down
Mrs S Flack
Mrs E J Godwin

Mrs C M Little
 Mrs J I Loughlin
 D J Morson
 G W Powers
 Mrs E Tealby-Watson
 A R Thawley

R D Green
 D M Jones
 A J Ketteridge
 P G F Lewis
 Mrs J E Menell
 R A Merrion
 D M Miller
 R J O'Neill
 A R Row
 Mrs S V Schneider
 R W L Stone
 A C Streeter

The amendment was lost with 14 votes for and 20 against.

Members then discussed the original motion moved by Councillor Chambers.

Councillor Copping said that he would abstain from voting on the original motion as it was attempting to pass the buck to neighbouring authorities. Councillor Morson asked if negotiations had taken place with the neighbouring authorities affected. Councillor Chambers said that no discussions had taken place but that this was a unique situation. The Home Office would consult on any proposal but retained the right to make the final decision. He said that his proposal was not nimbyst as it was suggesting one site within the district.

Councillor A Dean said that he would also abstain from voting on the original motion as it undermined the credibility of the Council by suggesting sites outside the district which had not been investigated to assess their suitability and it would alienate our neighbours.

Councillor O'Neill said that if the amendment had been carried he would have voted for the substantive motion as there was a need to send a clear message to the Home Office on which all Members agreed. He understood some Members' reservations but urged that all Members should support the motion. Councillor Mrs Cornell agreed strongly that there needed to be a united message. In response to the matter raised by Councillor A Dean, Councillor Ketteridge said that the motion did not undermine the Council's credibility. There had not been time to investigate the suitability of sites. He was also concerned at the implication of statements made by some Members that there should be an open door policy for refugees. He did not feel that this was sustainable and had written to the Home Secretary, stating that the Government appeared to be putting little effort into preventing illegal access to the country. He said that additional police and customs officers should be employed at points of entry into the country, funded by savings made possible by not building additional removals centres.

Councillor Gayler then moved a further amendment which was duly seconded that at the end of the first paragraph of the motion proposed by Councillor Chambers the following words be added.

"Following full consultation with all relevant communities and councils."

Councillor Mrs Tealby-Watson supported the further amendment and said that she was concerned that the original motion would alienate neighbouring authorities. She added that the Council needed to work and negotiate with its neighbours to find a suitable site. Councillor Mrs Cant added that all Members should unite behind this further amendment.

Councillor Powers read out the letter which had been received from the Chief Executive of Epping Forest District Council concerning the suggestion by the Administration Group that North Weald Airfield should be considered by the Home Office as a site for an Asylum Seekers Removals Centre.

Councillor O'Neill said that the further amendment suggested that this Council should carry out consultation which was not appropriate as it was not our proposal. He concluded that it added nothing to the original motion.

Councillor Jones moved and it was seconded that the question be now put.

The further amendment proposed by Councillor Gayler was put to the vote and was lost with 14 votes for and 20 against.

The original motion proposed by Councillor Chambers was then put to the vote as a substantive motion and was carried with 21 votes for and 1 against.

RESOLVED that Uttlesford District Council strongly opposes any location of an Asylum Seekers Removals Centre in the District which impacts on the economic, environmental and social lives of established communities and in the event of an unavoidable requirement for such a centre, asks that detailed consideration be given to underused or disused airfields such as the former R.A.F bases at Wethersfield and North Weald as well as a site within the perimeter of Stansted Airport.

Furthermore, the Council urges the Government to introduce a more effective system for processing the claims of asylum seekers' applications quickly and humanely and asks the Home Office to invest adequate resources to achieve that aim.

C48

CHAIRMAN'S QUIZ SHEET

The Chairman reminded Members that his quiz sheet was available for £1.00 and that proceeds would go towards the Chairman's charity.

The meeting ended at 9.25 pm.

**SUMMARY OF STATEMENT MADE BY DOUGLAS JAMES
(TOWN MAYOR OF GREAT DUNMOW)**

The Town Council is not opposed to asylum centres in principle but is opposed to a removals centre being located less than half a mile away from the town centre of Great Dunmow. The Town Council is also against an asylum centre anywhere in a built-up area. It hopes that the District Council will endorse the views of Scrutiny Committee 2. It is not clear to whom a planning application would be submitted and whether there would be a right of appeal.

**SUMMARY OF STATEMENT MADE BY DAVID WRIGHT
(DEPUTY TOWN MAYOR OF GREAT DUNMOW)**

This proposal affects the whole of Uttlesford. We must operate in the world in which we actually live and not in one in which we would like to live. It was desirable to remove asylum seekers once the process had been completed. I do not agree with the siting of a centre based on the evidence from Yarl's Wood and the residents are right to have concerns. A cool headed, reasoned response is required and the airport is the best place. There are already centres at Gatwick and Heathrow. The transfer to aircraft is easy and fire appliances are available if required. Also facilities are in place for rapid police reaction. It is wrong to suggest sites in other districts and this would sour this Council's relationship to our detriment. I urge the Council to support the recommendation of the Scrutiny Committee.

**SUMMARY OF STATEMENT MADE BY COUNCILLOR JOHN DAVEY
(GREAT DUNMOW TOWN COUNCIL)**

I agree with what has been said by the previous speakers. A high security removals centre would imply the need for high fences and floodlighting as such a centre would only be suitable in a well lit and secure area. The most logical place for a centre is at Stansted Airport.

SUMMARY OF STATEMENT MADE BY MR MICHAEL DINES

The reaction to the Home Office proposal is not a reaction from racists. Dunmow is united in the rejection of the site in the town or in any town in Uttlesford. The proposal would cause irreparable damage to the town, blight business and damage inward investment. Our houses are our homes and we seek an assurance from the Council that it will protect the interests of its residents. Uttlesford has yet to declare its position on Smith's Farm and residents require an unequivocal assurance that the Council opposes the use of Smith's Farm for this centre. It is wrong to identify sites in other districts and this risks alienating two neighbouring councils. Credible sites need to be identified near to the airport but away from residential areas.

SUMMARY OF STATEMENT MADE BY DR PATRICIA DALE

I am a member of Amnesty International but am speaking as an individual and as a doctor concerned about the health and welfare of the detainees.

Whatever our views on the problems of providing a fair system of assessment for asylum seekers we will, I am sure, all agree that it must provide proper standards of care for those detained in, or required to live in, accommodation centres.

We have to recognise that, if a site is identified in Uttlesford, it may be difficult to refuse on planning grounds. However, I would like to make two points:-

Firstly, two sites that have been mentioned in the press are inside the airport or on the edge at Thremhall Priory. Those detained in any building within this area, however well the building is insulated, would be exposed for possibly a number of weeks not only to high noise levels but also to levels of air pollution predicted by BAA to exceed the recommended air quality standards within the next year. The Air Quality Regulations covering public exposure would be breached. It is unacceptable that asylum seekers should be housed in conditions where healthy outdoor exercise is prejudiced.

Secondly, I would ask that the Council ensure that their officers have full access to any proposed centre and can exercise their legal responsibilities with regard to the standards of the premises, and that recognised welfare organisations should also be able to visit. The detainees are not criminals, even economic asylum seekers will be traumatised by their experiences, and many who are to be returned to areas now ruled as safe, such as Kosovo and Afghanistan, will have had past experiences of ill treatment, even torture. They may well require help from or be receiving treatment from such organisations as the Medical Foundation for the Victims of Torture.