

Formal corporate response from Stinsford Parish Council to the Joint Local Plan Review for West Dorset, Weymouth and Portland - Initial Issues and Options Consultation

Chapter 7 – Development at Dorchester

The Context

1. Dorchester is a small, compact, historic, county town. It has a charm that is not so common nowadays and has a very valuable history that is currently relatively easy to access.
2. The town and the immediate surrounding areas have particularly strong literary associations with Thomas Hardy and the countryside he wrote about. The nature of surrounding Dorchester especially to the north and east has historically been rural because of the large historic houses, parks and grounds that exist. This is highlighted in Hardy's comment on our County town being as "compact as a box of dominoes" where the county town gives way to the rural landscape and the very heart of Hardy's 'Wessex' and 'Mellstock'. Whilst there is a recreational value to the broader community one must not forget that there is also an international tourism aspect with people coming from all over the world walking, cycling or driving out over Greys Bridge following the path of Hardy and his many fictional characters and immediately into the area mentioned in so many novels as well as some of his most highly regarded poetry.
3. Equally, the land around Dorchester, and especially to the north, is environmentally important and very sensitive. The water meadows and the flora and fauna associated with them need protecting both for the sake of the wildlife and indeed for the biodiversity we seek. They are also important for the health of the residents and visitors to Dorchester. Settlements with such easy access to beautiful rural landscapes are becoming a rare commodity.
4. Whilst it is acknowledged that there may be some development over time to the north of Dorchester, any prospective development has to be of a scale and sensitivity that protects these crucial cultural and environmental aspects as well as the community identity of the small settlements comprising the parish of Stinsford.
5. For all these reasons any development needs to be very carefully considered. Questions need to be asked about the need for such a development as that proposed in the initial issues and options consultation document, the justification for such numbers, the proposed sites D1, D2 and D3 to the north of Dorchester compared to other areas, the capability of existing infrastructure systems to cope with the proposed increases and the capability of carrying out such a development whilst still maintaining the culture, community and environment that makes Dorchester such an important centre.

The Issues:-

6. **We are concerned about whether the current legislative planning system is capable of achieving what has been outlined above.** The proposals indicate a near doubling of the size of Dorchester in the long-term. It is felt very strongly by the Parish Council and local residents that this needs to be accomplished in a planned, cohesive manner and not through an *ad hoc*, piecemeal granting of permissions to various developers across the proposed sites D1, D2 and D3. Development to the north of Dorchester must be much more than just opening up important tracts of land to commercial development. It is felt this expansion requires the same legislative and town planning framework as were seemingly applied to Poundbury or might apply to the development of a new town.

7. **We are concerned about the imminent changes in local governance** as a result of the current local government review such that maybe the whole development is of such importance that it should all be put on hold until any new Council structure is in place and those officers and elected members involved in the planning will be those to see it through from consultation to completion.
8. **Infrastructure: We are concerned at the lack of information on infrastructure requirements, the cost of those requirements and who should pay for them.** There appears to have been no assessment of the cost of the infrastructure requirements that would have to be in place to accommodate the scale of the proposed development. There are significant challenges already to transport, schools, health and other services in and around Dorchester, any development on the scale indicated for sites D1, D2 and D3 will put an unacceptable strain on these areas. The funding of these infrastructure requirements should be made clear, and outlined from the very start of the review process; residents must be made aware if council tax payers, central government and/or developer contributions will be funding these requirements.
9. **Infrastructure: Transport - We are concerned about traffic problems both within the town and outside.** It is clear that the A35 cannot cope with current demands upon it. It is frequently congested and has several dangerous aspects. Equally, the centre of Dorchester is frequently at a near standstill and pollution levels in the centre are way about permitted levels. No development of the scale proposed should be permitted until the design and funding of an appropriate traffic system has been agreed. Furthermore, the road systems should be improved before the construction of any new housing is started.
10. **Infrastructure: Transport -The issue of the provision of a 'northern bypass':** Building this road would ease the current A35 bypass and town centre traffic problems but equally increase A35 traffic flow in the long term and tempt further re-drawing of the northern development boundary. However, without this bypass the sites D1, D2 and D3 are untenable.
11. **Infrastructure: Traffic - We are concerned that a development on this scale will be detrimental to air quality issues in and around Dorchester.** The 2011 Air Quality Action Plan contained several action points aimed at reducing congestion and traffic levels and gave a commitment that the Air Quality Management Plan would be a material consideration in development control. A development of the size proposed would result in a proportionate increase in traffic levels, therefore a greater area of Dorchester will be affected by poor air quality.
12. **Infrastructure: Rail - We are concerned that the rail links at Dorchester are already at maximum capacity.** Dorchester is served by two stations, however both lines are subject to speed and train length restrictions, reducing passenger capacity and making journeys much longer than is ideal for a 21st century transport link. Any development on the scale proposed would require a major upgrade of both the tracks and stations to accommodate the increase in passenger demand. There appears to be no consideration of how or when this will be achieved and, crucially, how it will be funded.
13. **Infrastructure: Public transport - We are concerned about the current lack of public transport in and around the town** that would allow people to leave their cars at home and walk or cycle into town. To double the size of Dorchester would require an integrated managed public transport system coupled with proper foot and cycle ways.
14. **Infrastructure: Education - We are concerned about the provision of school and college places** should the population increase as significantly as predicted by the proposed housing numbers for Dorchester.

15. **Infrastructure: Health and social care - We are concerned about whether current health and social care systems could cope.** Were it to be the case that a good proportion of the proposed new development were for more expensive housing then Dorchester's older population will grow considerably thus putting greater pressure on health and social care services. This impact needs to be anticipated and planned for before any new development commences.
16. **Housing Need - We are concerned about the calculations leading to the requirement for such large numbers of houses being built.** Dorchester needs both more affordable and low cost housing for younger workers and their families. However, the calculations of how many people work in Dorchester do not appear to reflect the government's austerity cuts on the local councils and the NHS and the loss of jobs in the local public sector employers. We would ask that these figures are re-calculated.
17. **Affordable Housing - We are concerned about whether the current planning legislation is capable of delivering the required percentage of affordable housing.** We need something stronger than the current legislation that allowed the Dorchester prison site to have none.
18. **Environment: Visual Impact.** Dorchester is a relatively compact market town which is of a size that enables it to "nestle" in the surrounding landscape, this is one of the unique and significant aspects of the settlement and is highly valued. Recent development to the west (Poundbury) has created a far greater visual impact on the surrounding countryside. Any large-scale development to the north of the river Frome would increase the visual dominance of the town and have a significant negative impact upon the surrounding landscape. It is noted that applications for both a wind farm and PV solar farm within the area to the north of Dorchester were refused on such grounds.
19. **Environment: River Frome. We are concerned there appears to be no analysis of development impact on an internationally important chalk stream habitat.** The river Frome is a highly valued and sensitive habitat of great importance that would be adversely affected by the large-scale development proposed. Although technical mitigations can be installed, the proposals to the north of the river create significant risks to the river habitat from pollution, both diffuse and accidental.
20. **Environment: Connections to Dorchester across the flood plain.** We are concerned as to how the proposed developments to the north of Dorchester would connect to the town across the floodplain. The flood plain and water meadows of the river Frome are part of an important, and complex flood management process. There needs to be more information on how connecting routes for a development of this scale will affect flooding patterns in Dorchester and settlements downstream.