

Full Council – 10 December 2020
Public Participation

Question 1

Submitted by: Dr Anthony Fincham, Hon. Chairman of the Thomas Hardy Society.

I place this question on behalf of Thomas Hardy Society, which is an international literary society with over one thousand members, dedicated to the promotion of the works of Thomas Hardy, and the preservation of the countryside, which features so prominently in Hardy's novels and poems.

Hardy's Casterbridge (Dorchester) is the central focus of his Wessex – described so clearly in much of his poetry and fiction, most particularly in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, where he describes Dorchester as being 'as compact as a box of dominoes', having 'no suburbs in the ordinary sense. Country and town met in a mathematical line'. Although much has changed in the 140 years since this novel was published, this strict division between town and country persists unaltered along the Roman northern boundaries of the town.

Five years ago, plans to allow a similar large-scale development on Came Down were rejected primarily on grounds of their deleterious impact on a sensitive landscape of literary, ecological and historical importance. The North Dorchester proposal would have a far worse impact on the local environment in all these same categories. It is also nonsensical to build a detached extension to a town, ruining the intervening water meadows and in effect linking Charminster and Stinsford in one hideous conurbation.

The population of Stinsford Parish today stands at 334 which is less than it was in 1840, when Hardy was born there. This proposed development would ruin Hardy's Mellstock – so vividly described in his poetry and early fiction – especially in *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *Desperate Remedies*. The Hardys' Cottage, Stinsford Church and the Kingston Maurward Estate and the countryside of the whole of Stinsford Parish are sites of literary pilgrimage to which people travel from all over the world. The construction of 'North Dorchester' would therefore constitute an act of the most severe literary, historic and environmental vandalism.

I understand that you recently replied to a public question that the local plan '...provides for environmental protection and enhancement alongside development.'

My question on behalf of the Thomas Hardy Society is what enhancements will accrue for Dorchester and Hardy's own Parish of Stinsford with the building of a 4,000-house mixed development? How can you make such a statement when the planned development would destroy all that is most valuable about this unique County Town and its environs?

Response by Councillor David Walsh

Firstly, I would like to emphasise that the documents agreed this week by Cabinet are for public consultation. The council has the difficult task of

preparing a plan that allocates sufficient land to meet the housing requirements across Dorset. We have not made any decisions yet about where these should go, but will be consulting everyone on a range of options including the land north of Dorchester.

We do not believe that development would destroy all that is most valuable about Dorchester and its environs: if that were the case it would not even be considered as an option.

Dorchester is the County Town, and as such provides shops, employment and services to the benefit of its residents and those in the surrounding area. Its growth through the Poundbury development has helped it to sustain this role, but without further growth it is at risk of declining, and people who want to live here will struggle to find suitable homes. As one of Dorset's larger and better provided towns, it is one of the most sustainable locations for growth, and development north of the watermeadows would be within walking and cycling distance of many shops and services.

We have undertaken detailed work on the potential heritage impact of development, and have taken account of its conclusions in the proposals outlined in the consultation document.

Benefits for Dorchester and the surrounding area would include: new homes, including affordable housing; employment land providing additional jobs; new schools at all three tiers; healthcare provision; and a new road link between the A35 and A37.

Environmental improvements would include: the creation of wetlands and other biodiversity enhancements; new copse and woodland planting; enhanced access to the watermeadows; and connections to long distance trails. The consultation document also refers to the development aiming to enhance and better reveal the significance of the heritage assets, and to recognise the Thomas Hardy connections and enable their greater appreciation, for example through interpretation within the site's public spaces.

Question 2

Submitted by: Cllr Alistair Chisholm, Independent Councillor Dorchester Town Council

Given the land NE of Dorchester is marked as unsuitable for development in Dorset Council's SHLAA, why is the Council proposing major housing development in this area, and why is the SHLAA not part of the suite of documents being made publicly available given its important role in guiding development recommendations.

Response by Cllr David Walsh

The Dorset Council SHLAA (strategic housing land availability assessment) has taken a cautious approach in declaring whether sites are or are not suitable for development, generally describing sites as unsuitable if they would require changes from current policy, or if there are further issues that need to be addressed to make them suitable. This is why the site north of Dorchester has been assessed as unsuitable so far, and the same applies with many of the other sites put forward as possible development sites in the current draft consultation document on the local plan.

The SHLAA has been updated recently and is all publicly available online, though in the form of an interactive web page rather than a document.

Question 3

Submitted by: Linda Poulson

When WDDC included DOR15 in its proposals for a new local plan prior to local government reorganisation, Dorchester Town Council expressed strong opposition on behalf of the town, and something like **1,400 objections** were received raising legitimate reasons why the site should not go ahead – yet despite this opposition it has reappeared as DOR13 in Dorset Council's latest draft Local Plan.

Cllr Walsh insists that this is a democratic process, that people's voices will be heard – what level of public opposition would persuade him that it is 'undemocratic' to pursue this site? Please will he explain what tips the balance between 'democratic' and 'undemocratic' with regard to DOR13?

Response by Cllr David Walsh

Local plans are required to meet the housing needs of their areas. We do not have the option of saying no to development across the whole area, but we do have choices to make about where in the council area development takes place, and how it takes place, for example what sort of environment is created and what facilities and infrastructure are provided with it.

These decisions need to take account of a wide range of factors including environmental constraints; where there is demand for development; and where development is most likely to be accessible to existing jobs and facilities. Consultation helps us to identify and examine these matters, and the responses to the previous consultations have helped to influence further work on the sites previously considered.

We will be considering all the consultation responses from communities across the whole of the Dorset Council area, but we need to consider them together in coming to a view about where development is best located.

Question 4

Submitted by: Linda Poulson

I know how DOR13 will benefit landowners and developers – they will make huge profits at the expense of the local community.

I know how DOR13 will benefit Dorset Council – it will assist them in delivering over-inflated Gov housing targets instead of challenging them.

I know how DOR13 will benefit the planners – they will take part in an ambitious vanity project which enables them to stamp their mark on a Greenfield site rather than identifying the numerous brown field sites which are already available.

What I don't know is how Dorchester will benefit from such large scale destruction of the environment and pressure on its already struggling infrastructure. The draft plan makes all sorts of unsubstantiated claims but the huge costs of implementing them cast serious doubts on the site's viability. In the real world, how will Dorchester benefit from DOR13?

Response by Cllr David Walsh

Councils need to provide to meet the housing needs of their areas, and there is a standard national methodology for working these out. This must be followed unless exceptional circumstances justify an alternative approach, which also reflects current and future demographic trends and market signals.

Meeting these needs means that people who want to live in Dorset can do so. We know that there is in-migration of retired people, but we also know that we need people of working age to move into the area if we are going to maintain a thriving local economy, and that there are very substantial affordable housing needs, which development can go some way towards meeting. Development can help to sustain existing facilities, and is an opportunity to provide new ones. Growth at Dorchester will also help to support the town centre and existing businesses and services.

We have identified brownfield sites across the area and these are included in our plans, but there are not enough brownfield sites in a rural area like Dorset to meet all the housing needs.

Development viability is indeed a key factor to be considered through the plan, as we have to be able to demonstrate that development can be achieved. We will be carrying out detailed work on development viability during the next stage of plan preparation and this will be tested during the independent examination.

Question 5

Submitted by: Peter Bowyer Chair of Dorset CPRE

Will the portfolio holder for planning confirm that the draft Dorset Local Plan will be based on central government targets which are 47% above the housing levels in existing Local Plans in Dorset?

Response by Councillor David Walsh

The draft Dorset Council Local Plan consultation document includes housing figures based on the current national standard methodology. This results in a requirement of 1,793 dwellings per annum. Current local plans for the area (including the shortly-to-be-adopted Purbeck local plan) set out figures that add up to 1,682 per annum. The current national methodology figures therefore represent a 6.6% increase in the previous housing levels for the Dorset Council area.

National policy states that the Government's standard methodology should be used to calculate housing needs, unless exceptional circumstances justify an alternative approach which also reflects current and future demographic trends and market signals.

The standard methodology is being revised, as proposed through recent government consultations, and so the numbers for our area will change during the course of plan preparation. The consultation draft of the local plan seeks to make provision for the housing required under the current standard methodology whilst also giving some flexibility to respond to changes in this methodology, to respond to the consultation and to respond to the delivery of sites over the plan period.

Question 6

Submitted by: Peter Bowyer Chair of Dorset CPRE

Will the portfolio holder for planning confirm that the government housing target for Dorset is "in excess of sensible forecasts of local housing need". These words in quotations relate to the conclusions of an important independent report for Dorset CPRE which has been made available to every member of the Dorset Council as well as leading officers.

Response by Councillor David Walsh

As set out in the answer to the question above, the housing requirement figures for the Dorset Council area derived from the national standard methodology are not significantly higher than those in current local plans and are not considered to be in excess of sensible forecasts. It is important to be

aware that we are required to meet the needs of all sectors of the housing market, not only those derived from current local residents.

The current standard methodology does however result in a very high figure for the adjoining Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole area, which BCP Council is certainly unlikely to be able to meet within its area.

Local plans need to consider the extent to which they can meet the unmet needs of surrounding council areas as well as their own, so this would put additional pressure on the numbers to be provided within the Dorset Council area. However the proposed changes to the standard methodology, published for consultation this summer, would result in a significantly lower figure for the BCP Council area, which is much more likely to be met within that council area.