



Dorchester Civic Society

An Independent Voice

Registered Charity No. 268636

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Dorchester Town Centre Master Plan: response of the Dorchester Civic Society to the developing strategy

1. The Society was pleased to attend the stakeholder meeting with Feria Urbanism on 12th June 2018 and believes that the views expressed, and the documents left with Feria [the Society's "agreed stance" and the draft "vision and strategy for Dorchester town centre"], should have been of value in the process of developing a town centre master plan. We strongly believe that the Master Plan must be based on a thorough analysis of the issues facing the town centre, in turn leading to a vision for the Centre in some 20 or 30 years' time with, at the next stage of this exercise, the setting out of a strategy to resolve those problems and deliver that vision.
2. The Society has long believed that the historic core / town centre of Dorchester would benefit from an integrated approach over and above the framework afforded by successive local plans. We welcome the current exercise to gauge local people's views, and particularly the recognition rightly given to the importance of the town's history and culture in setting the tone for an optimistic future. This exercise is the first time that anyone has sought to establish a vision for the centre and the Society is very appreciative of this.
3. We support the need for a vision and a strategy for the historic core, but this must be rooted in:
 - a) a thorough assessment of the attributes, problems, needs and opportunities of the town centre and adjoining areas;
 - b) raising aspirations, but taking account of the deliverability of the strategy's principles and proposals; and
 - c) fully integrating traffic and transport [including car parking] considerations and policies with statutory planning policies and urban design considerations. The town centre plan needs to be set in the context of the town as a whole, with the master plan's conclusions feeding into the ongoing local plan process.

We agree that transportation should not be seen as a starting point for a strategy but it is an issue that has to be addressed as part of the process. Unless these issues are tackled now, any vision for the future cannot be soundly based.

Dorchester Civic Society exists to stimulate people's interest in the town and its setting; promote high standards of architecture, urban design and planning; safeguard buildings and areas of historic interest; and promote civic pride.



4. The Society has noted the Council's brief for Feria, and particularly that the master plan will include "*traffic, transport and parking infrastructure and policies*" and consideration of the means of "*linking key areas of the town*". At this stage of the process, these aspects have not been addressed. We appreciate that the County Council has a key role in providing transport and parking input, and also the District Council in providing parking, finance, and development viability input, and that these are outside Feria's competence. However, these are critical issues to resolve as part of the integrated process of considering other land use issues. The absence of any analysis of transportation makes it difficult to comment on the matters that the consultation does address. Key transportation decisions need to be made now in order that they can inform the next stage in the preparation of the local plan itself. We would ask that you to look again at our submission [*A vision and Strategy for Dorchester*] and in particular section 3 – '*the objectives behind the need for a vision*', section 4 – '*strengths*', and section 5 – '*key issues*' which clearly illustrate an objectives, strengths and issues based approach to developing a vision and strategy which appear lacking in the current approach.
5. The master plan process must address and provide a town centre transportation strategy which will deal with both today's problems and the situation as it may be with the proposed additional housing developments and, hopefully, the development of innovative transport solutions. As it is, the consultation is silent with regard to car parking, bus access, delivery vehicle access, click and collect, transport interchange, park and ride, cycle routes [the town is the focus of two national cycle routes], pedestrianisation, cross town pedestrian routes, non-car access to major uses such as the hospital, Thomas Hardy school, industrial estates, etc. Key issues, such as traffic congestion, and more detailed issues such as the difficulty of using the down side of Dorchester Station, and other obstacles to movement such as the steps leading to Waitrose, are not addressed. These omissions do not give confidence in the final outcome of this process as it is currently been approached.
6. The consultation asks questions but, in the view of the Society, these are not the right questions. The starting point must be agreement on the key issues facing the town centre. Only then can we move forward to a realistic and implementable vision and strategy for the town centre. At present the consultation is in danger of creating what some may criticise as a cosy and romantic illusion which masks the perhaps intractable and conflicting problems of access and liveability that, nevertheless, must be dealt with.
7. **The 8 Design Principles.** The consultation sets out eight design principles and asks whether we agree. Whilst good design is, of course important, it cannot be said to be the starting point for a master plan. The master plan must be based on a sound spatial and transportation strategy. That said there is little that is controversial in the eight principles; indeed it is doubted whether the majority are really 'principles' at all, e.g. '*leading edge*', '*civic life*', and '*future confident*'. The society would, however, generally support these concepts, with the possible exception of '*rediscovering the grid*'. This only exists as a literary image – Hardy's '*chess board*'; the town's current road structure is not based on that of the Roman town. What is worthy of protection are the lines of the Roman Walls, together with, perhaps, a 're-creation'

of the Roman entrance points. On that point, the southern gateway to the town centre is at the junction of South Street and South Walks and not at Maumbury Ring. Also, whilst it is important to look at best practice elsewhere – the Society had in mind looking at examples of how other towns have successfully met the challenges of 21st century shopping trends, traffic and transport problems, rather than simply examples of design solutions.

8. **The character of Dorchester.** The character of Dorchester has resonance with Hardy, but there is much more in Dorchester's cultural and historic heritage than solely Hardy. The Society strongly believes that Hardy's references to the '*clean cut and distinct*' edge to Dorchester and the '*mathematical line to the north of the town*' are particularly relevant in consideration of possible development to the north of the town. Also Hardy's references to the Walls Walks are important as they remain an essential but under utilised part of the town centre's character. Another part of the Walks, namely the walk and associated green spaces along the tree lined Mill Stream by the North Wall, is also deserving of mention. Whilst Hardy is important, the character of Dorchester town centre should not be seen solely through a romanticised literary conception.
9. **Urban design analysis.** This section takes as a starting point that the centre of the town centre lies at the junction of South Street and South Walks rather than at, more correctly, Corn Hill. This misrepresentation leads to the impression that Fairfield and Brewery Square lie in the town centre. They do not; they are peripheral. The centre is bounded by the Roman Walls – as indeed Hardy would have confirmed. This misleading approach places an undue emphasis on the possible development of the Fairfield site rather than tackling real issues such as the present state of Trinity Street and the opportunity that that area presents for the successful revitalisation of the true town centre – with the possible creation of a new axis to the centre along the line of New Street linking possible developments in Trinity and Charles Streets. Trinity Street is not even mentioned in the list of 'key intervention sites.' Also investment is needed in High East Street, another neglected area of the centre which will not benefit from attempts to shift the centre to the south west. Answering some of the set questions:
 - Q1. A competent architect should be able to blend new development with the traditions of the old.
 - Q2. Where appropriate, trees should be incorporated in new development but particularly to reinforce existing and new open spaces. All shared spaces must be attractive, well designed and well used if they are not to become liabilities.
 - Q3. The Charles Street, Trinity Street and Fairfield sites. In general terms, the Society has supported limited development on Charles Street, been enthusiastic about developing Trinity Street, and been resistant to much change at Fairfield. The Society does not believe that it is possible to offer meaningful comment on the suggested layout concepts at this stage, on the basis that this would be premature in the absence of a realistic spatial and transportation strategy for the centre which would set these sites in context. It may be necessary to consider these sites at a future date with development briefs being prepared which accord with the agreed master plan.
10. **Development Strategy.** The section, and indeed the whole consultation, is remarkable in that it does not seek to tackle the major issue that is Trinity Street. How are increased pedestrianisation, traffic, bus access, delivery access, and car parking issues to be tackled in a street which is sorely neglected but which has tremendous potential for enhancement? The section ends with a section on '*urban branding and identity*' and asks what we think. The

Society does not think that this question reflects the gravity of the issues affecting Dorchester. If the strategy is intended as the means of delivering the vision, it must offer innovative but deliverable solutions to identified problems. Currently no answers are suggested. It is hoped that the next iteration of the master plan takes the opportunity to address the real issues and problems affecting Dorchester both now and into the future, and puts forward meaningful and realistic answers to these issues.

11. Other Issues.

- **Affordable housing:** the brief to Feria would appear to dismiss the relevance of affordable housing in the town centre on the basis that sufficient land has already been allocated plus the mooted 'North of Dorchester'. The Society believes that every opportunity should be taken to incorporate all tenures of housing in the centre, not only to meet need but also to help ensure the vitality of the centre.
- **Brewery Square:** whilst Brewery Square has been successful in boosting the night time economy, it has tended to be at the expense of the historic centre. It also owes much of its success to the existence of a large car park immediately opposite – which may or not be there in the future. Whilst aspirations, e.g. for the Malthouse Theatre, are fully supported, we should guard against wishful thinking and any vision that may be criticised as 'pie in the sky'. Realistically, we would emphasise that Dorchester is still a relatively small (county) town. In a highly competitive property and investment market, it is not an attractive 'opportunity' - as Charles Street's 35+ years' history of aborted development schemes show. A different approach is called for – as outlined in the Society's *'Vision and Strategy for Dorchester'*.

12. **Conclusion.** We agree that the process should proceed in the order of *"life, spaces and buildings"* and that transportation issues should not dominate. Indeed, at the stakeholder stage we emphasised the linked themes of *"heritage, environment and lifestyle,"*. However, the current exercise could be seen by some as little more than a thinly designed cover for the District Council's dated and potentially damaging Fairfield and Charles Street aspirations. Furthermore, judged by such key reference sources as the (former) Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment's 2004 publication *"Creating Successful Masterplans: a Guide for Clients"* – what is being produced at present does not amount to a 'master plan' – more 'a visionary roadmap'. On that basis, if the current process and product are honestly described as a *"Vision for Dorchester's Centre"* – rather than a 'master plan', then the Society may be less critical. But such a superficial approach, attractive as it may be, that does not address real problems, is not what is required. It is noted that the Weymouth master plan ends with the note *"Further work will be required to implement the development proposals including a traffic and movement study, public realm strategy..."* We hope that the next phase of this exercise will tackle these fundamental and complex issues. They cannot be simply swept under the carpet to be dealt with at a later stage. Unless there is change in direction based on providing realistic answers to identified issues and problems, this current exercise runs the distinct risk of providing, not a soundly based vision for the future of the town centre, but a fantasy. The Society very much hopes that the final product will be worthy of support and not end up gathering dust on a Unitary Council shelf under the heading of another failed Dorchester Town Centre initiative. We hope that there is still opportunity for the 'vision' to be widened and strengthened along the lines that we have suggested, and that we can maintain a creative relationship with Feria during the next stages of developing the vision and strategy.

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