



## Dorchester Civic Society

An Independent Voice

Registered Charity No. 268636

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### Comments by Dorchester Civic Society on:

#### **West Dorset District Council and Weymouth & Portland Borough Council Draft Joint Statement of Community Involvement: February 2014**

Dorchester Civic Society considers that Section 5 of the Statement, '*Community Involvement in Planning Applications*', must be strengthened if, '*The Importance of Effective Community Involvement*', set out in Section 2 of the Statement and '*The benefits of effective community involvement or participation*' set out in paragraph 1 Section 3 of the Statement, are to be given any real meaning.

The Joint Statement fails to address the issue of public representation when decisions are made by officers under the delegated scheme: this is the way in which the majority of applications are dealt with. There is no public involvement in this decision making event as no members of the public are present when delegated decisions are made and therefore no public speaking. Public speaking can be a very effective way of highlighting issues of concern and giving the decision maker an opportunity to pause for further reflection.

This problem is further compounded where there has been pre-application advice given by officers. Whilst pre-application advice is a proper and reasonable way to proceed it can give rise to perceptions of bias especially where it appears quite detail advice is given inasmuch that there is a tendency to defend advice given against critical appraisal.

As an example of the above issues we would refer to how the Society's observations on application 1/D/13/001418, the Dorchester Community Church at 5 Trinity Street was dealt with. The Society made a very detailed critical appraisal of the scheme in a page and half letter. This letter was summarised in the delegated report in seven lines. In the body of the report under '*Officers Comments*' is a detailed appraisal covering more than one page by the Council's Urban Design Officer who was involved in the pre-application process. Unfortunately the way these comments are written it is not at all clear whether the Urban Design Officer has read the full observations of Dorchester Civic Society or not. Whilst it touches or similar issues nowhere does it directly quote or refute the comments made.

The Society understands and accepts the need to deal with planning applications as efficiently as possible which inevitably means officers making decisions under delegated powers. However if there is to be a greater degree of confidence in the system and meet the objectives of the Statement the following changes are recommended:

- As well as the case officer the officer responsible for making the decision should sign that he/she has read all the letters of objection.
- The delegated report should specifically address points of objection made.
- Where pre-application advice has been given a brief account of this should be noted in the report and where this subsequently conflicts with an objection.