



Dorchester Civic Society

An Independent Voice
Registered Charity No. 268636

www.dorchestercivicsociety.org.uk

A Vision & Strategy for Dorchester Town Centre

1. The adopted Local Plan.

The existing [2015] adopted Local Plan has the following to say about the Town Centre [with proposals in bold]:

- *In 2031 Dorchester will: have an attractive and vibrant sub-regional town centre that people come to enjoy away from motor traffic, and have a high standard of design that promotes the character and heritage that is special to Dorchester.*
- *Town centre regeneration – the development of Charles Street is extending the town centre offer to include further retail and office development. There is potential for future town centre development on land off Trinity Street.*
- *The history of the town is evident in the layout of the area within the town walls of Roman Dorchester [Durnovaria], marked by tree lined walks along the west, south and east sides of the town centre. Much of the built character is derived from Georgian times [as major fires burnt down most of the earlier buildings]. Although the area needs to evolve with the times, its historic character is central to the success of the town.*
- ***“Any development within the Roman Town area should help reinforce the historic character of the area.***
- ***Land at Charles Street is a key town centre site to deliver significant new retail development with ancillary mixed uses. The development of the site will include a significant element of public car parking and provide improved pedestrian links to South Street. On completion, the site will form part of the primary shopping area.***
- *The development of Charles Street will provide a significant boost in the retail floorspace available in the town centre.*
- ***Land off Trinity Street will be the preferred location for future retail expansion of the primary shopping area. Any scheme will need to retain an appropriate amount of public car parking.***
- *There is scope for further expansion of the primary shopping area for the later phases of the plan period through the redevelopment of land to the west of Trinity Street. The amount of land will be dependent on land assembly costs and scheme viability, together with an appropriate amount of car parking. Creating a stronger frontage to Trinity Street would be a positive redevelopment benefit.*

- *Upper floors of any new development could be suited to a mix of residential and other town centre uses.*
 - *Dorchester Transport & Environment Plan – will provide public realm enhancements in the town centre, and more appropriate traffic management. The successful delivery of the scheme is also linked to the provision of adequate park and ride facilities on the periphery of the town.*
 - ***The DTEP will be implemented in the plan period. Any development that would significantly undermine its delivery will not be permitted.***
 - ***Land to the south of Stadium Roundabout is allocated for a park and ride site.”***
2. The Society supports the Local Plan as stated above in italics. The Society has no objection in principle to the proposed development of a food store in Charles Street linked to a two tier car park provided that it is well connected with South Street and Trinity Street. Unfortunately, the current retail proposals of WDDC either contravene or put in jeopardy some of the stated policies and proposals. No evidence has been put forward for the Trinity Street proposal being abandoned other than that it is ‘too difficult’. The Society believes that a positive and comprehensive vision is required to take forward the local plan proposals in a way that is in harmony with ‘*the character and heritage that is special to Dorchester*’ and supported by the local community.

3. The objectives behind the need for a vision are:

- To establish a unified, holistic and comprehensive strategy to deal with key issues and for the development of the town centre to 2036.
- To provide a framework for change whilst protecting and enhancing the character and heritage of the centre – including its archaeology – and its unique sense of place.
- To propose improvements to access and movement around the centre [public and private transport, parking, cycling and walking].
- To improve the viability and vitality of the centre for shopping, community uses, housing, entertainment and other commercial interests.
- To tackle key issues whilst taking full advantage of the Town’s strengths and the opportunities that already present themselves.

4. Strengths

The town has many strengths including:

- Its status as a County town with a rich archaeological, historical and literary legacy and strong potential for heritage and cultural tourism and associated activities.
- Its well defined town centre set within the Roman Walls and walks.
- Its attractive tree lined roads and views of neighbouring countryside.

- Its main shopping street [South Street] forms a friendly community hub, including a number of small independent shops and buildings of domestic scale.
- The historic Charter market which draws visitors from a wide area.
- Despite recession and growing online competition, the retail sector, in comparison with many towns, has remained reasonably buoyant.

5. Key Issues

The strategy for the town centre must deal with identified key issues, including:

- Safeguarding and strengthening the present town centre [centred on South Street and High Street] and immediately adjacent streets.
- Develop and invest in the historic charter market – on its present site.
- Further reduce traffic congestion in the town centre.
- The current poor state of Trinity Street and the need to enhance and capitalise on its potential, including examination of the viability of redeveloping the area opposite New Street in order to provide an axis to the retail centre linking through to Charles Street via the Hardy Arcade.
- Maximise the potential of the town's historical, archaeological and literary assets to help create both a cultural and retail destination attraction.
- The need to adapt to the modern economy so as to create a vibrant centre and destination for heritage and cultural tourism combining with retail and community activities.
- Fully involving the public in genuine consultation in order that any new development reflects **community** needs.

6. A Vision for the Future

A vision needs to be comprehensive and to cover:

Heritage – historical and cultural issues.

- Environmental quality – open spaces, urban design, listed buildings and conservation issues.
 - Transport and movement.
- Shopping, commercial, leisure and visitor attractions.
- Opportunities for development.

All of the above and more, for example affordable housing, must feature in a 'vision' for the centre. These five elements may also be considered under the three linked and overlapping themes of 'heritage', 'environment' and 'lifestyle'. No topic, e.g. shopping, can be considered in isolation from a comprehensive agreed framework. The vision must:

- Work with the key strengths of the centre – including its heritage assets.
- Carefully reshape the built and spatial environment to take account of archaeology and conservation requirements – for the benefit of the local community and visitors.
- Create a successful centre through genuine consultation and partnership – coordinating public and private sectors.

7. Heritage.

The Society stresses that any vision for the centre is sensitive to archaeological issues associated with the historic fabric above and under the ground. A strategy for the centre must take account of the archaeological landscape that informs its historic character and sense of place. The English Heritage document **‘Sustaining the Historic Environment’** highlights several issues that should be addressed under sustainable development aims:

- *“The role of archaeology and history in modern life in ensuring that the past takes its proper place in the present and in creating stronger public participation in conservation debates.*
- *The need to protect and enhance local distinctiveness, while still succeeding in protecting from damaging development those monuments and buildings which are of most importance.*
- *The need to keep alive the sense of discovery and to promote public enjoyment of important heritage features.”*

These issues underline the need for a thorough analysis of archaeological investigations to date, and to be both creative and sensitive in conservation and interpretation of the historic fabric of the town centre.

Historical and cultural context: what defines the town centre?

- Early settlement, Roman, Saxon, medieval, Georgian, and later remnants;
- How it has been shaped culturally and economically: military, industry, commerce, county town, market, literary associations;
- Its built heritage, listed buildings and conservation area;
- The very form of the town centre and the way in which it is contained by open spaces and the lines of the Roman Walls;
- Its current role as a centre for shopping, entertainment, commerce and entertainment.

These issues lead to the need to:

- ✓ Tell the story of over 2000 years of historical development through effective interpretation;
- ✓ Investigate the use of modern technology to reveal key historic sites eg prehistoric henge remains and the Roman Baths;
- ✓ Investigate the use of virtual reality technology to display the town’s network of tunnels;
- ✓ Consider the possible development of a Roman mosaic centre in All Saints Church;

- ✓ To link the main heritage, visitor and other attractions to create an 'integrated experience' [better signing etc.]; together with appropriate interpretation through a visitor/heritage centre.

8. Environmental Quality.

Ideas could be assembled under the following topic headings:

- Townscape issues e.g. townscape quality, urban edges, landmarks, gateways etc. How can the historic pattern of the centre be strengthened? For example, the centre has good gateways at the west and east ends of the High Street and the southern end of South Street. It has very weak edges along Charles Street/Acland Road and parts of Trinity Street.
- Activities
- Places and spaces and the links between them – what are the core places and spaces that need enhancing? Cornhill is important. Some linking alleyways are unattractive.
- Community safety issues – hostile or friendly areas? The High Street is not user friendly due to traffic issues.
- Development/redevelopment opportunities. Which are the key ones? Charles Street and Trinity Street are the obvious large sites
- Public and private realm – attention to detail. For example, the need for more public seating.

These themes suggest the need to:

- Connect the centre to its surrounding natural and historic features e.g. river and walls walks, as well as its catchment within walking and cycling distance.
- Enhance the environment by improving the built form and [importantly] the spaces between – streets, alleyways, focal points, open spaces, car parks.
 - Pay attention to detail – improve overall appearance, lighting, improved shop fronts, shop signs, paving etc.
 - Improve the appearance of town centre car parks using appropriate landscaping.

9. Transport and Movement.

Need to ensure that the centre is easily accessible to all – with well located car parking, appropriate bus routes, and easy and safe routes for walking and cycling.

- Walking and cyclingbetter routes into and across the centre and greater pedestrianisation in High Street and Trinity Street.
- Vehicle traffic circulation.....
- Public transport – rail, bus, taxibus stops in Trinity Street are unsatisfactory and perhaps a better location can be found

- Parking [on and off street / long and short stay] – for shoppers, commuters, tourists and visitors, - with a logical sequence of car parks from edge gateways, and coordination of street parking and parking charges.

10. Shopping, leisure and visitor attractions.

What attracts people to the town centre? Shopping facilities; entertainment and the evening economy; museums, historical and cultural attractions; markets; community events; parks and open spaces.

Dorchester has never, and never will be able to compete with regional shopping centres. It needs to position itself differently in the market place. For example, by promoting the town as a specialist and quality retail destination and carrying out small scale improvements to the town's shopping provision rather than major new retail developments. However, there is an acknowledged need to retain and improve its multiple retailing. The existing multiples anchor the town's retail offer and are major attractions for large sections of the population. Opportunity should be taken **both** to knit the damaged townscape [Trinity Street and Charles Street] back together **and** provide new and larger units which better suit the needs of modern retailers including facilities for 'click and collect' [possibly in the Trinity Street area]. Taken together, these will reinforce the vitality and viability of the town centre. Given current retail trends, the Society does not accept that the town needs additional retail space – there are already over 30 empty premises.

In order to improve the shopper and visitor experience and meet the 'lifestyle' needs of all the community, the strategy needs to:

- Provide for an appropriate mix of facilities for young and old,
- Improve pedestrian facilities, particularly in High Street and Trinity Street,
- Support the role of South Street as the centre of the shopping centre [rather than provide a competing centre such as currently suggested at Fairfield],
- Support the role of Brewery Square as a focus for arts and entertainment,
- Support the role of the High Street as a focus for cultural activities,
- Encourage the night time economy throughout the centre,
- Retain and carefully expand niche retail,
- Encourage more town centre living including residential flats over shops and affordable housing,
- Secure the long term viability of the charter Market,
- Encourage regular themed markets in South Street,
- Encourage quality independent retail outlets,
- Improve provision and quality of public toilets and
- Provide convenient access to public sector facilities including library and Council offices.

11. Opportunities for development and redevelopment.

In considering opportunities for development, it is essential to take a comprehensive look at all land uses – shopping, leisure and entertainment, health and fitness, community, housing, hotels and accommodation, food and drink, commercial, car parking, and Council offices. What are the best sites for these different but connected land uses?

12. From vision to strategy.

The above paragraphs have indicated the need to focus on the three intricately linked areas of heritage, environment and lifestyle. The central theme and aim of the Society's vision for the town centre is to maintain and enhance the attractiveness and performance of the town centre in order to ensure that it is a distinctive, vibrant, and thriving place where people enjoy living, working and visiting. We suggest that this can be achieved by:

- ✓ Strengthening its local and distinctive retail offer,
- ✓ Creating an axis to the retail centre by locating any additional shopping in the Charles Street and Trinity Street areas together with an attractive pedestrianised link via New Street.
- ✓ Retaining the Charter Market in its present location but with greater investment in improved facilities including refreshments, toilet facilities, and public seating.
- ✓ Encouraging people to live in the town centre,
- ✓ Effective management and marketing of its heritage assets,
- ✓ Promoting the town centre as a visitor destination,
- ✓ Encouraging a greater variety of commercial uses in order to cater for a wider range of users,
- ✓ Improving links out from the centre to the river, walls walks, and parks which give the town centre its unique townscape setting,
- ✓ Improving streetscape and open spaces, and
- ✓ Encouraging housing in new development and over shops.

13. Conclusion.

The Society believes that a strategy for Dorchester Town Centre should focus on:

- Strong urban design influencing future developments,
- An integrated approach to heritage, leisure and shopping that will add vibrancy to the visitor offer,
- Transport and accessibility initiatives that activities, including key community facilities, depend on.

In combination, these elements will help secure the future of the town centre as a vital and viable centre and help to enhance its status as a niche retail and heritage visitor attraction. But more will need to be done to help ensure that the 'right' shops are attracted possibly by some form of positive 'curating' working with landlords and the retail sector.

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