



Dorchester Civic Society

An Independent Voice

Registered Charity No. 268636

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Dorchester's Centre – Retail Enhancement

Concerns of DCS Policy Group

The Group's concerns about the '*retail enhancement*' report can be grouped under eight headings:

- 1. Restricted in scope.** Why is the report, at this stage, restricted to retail development? There are many other issues critical to ensuring an attractive, healthy and vibrant town centre which need to be considered comprehensively at the outset and not as a part of a future stage in the process. The report, indeed, refers to the '*wider context of challenges and opportunities*'.
- 2. Dorchester in isolation?** Retail developers will be looking at the whole of western Dorset and will have various scenarios to consider. Does this report take into account shopping trends and opportunities in Weymouth and other towns within striking distance of Dorchester?
- 3. Prematurity.** Why are these proposals coming forward in advance of a '*master plan*' [town centre plan?] and public consultation? The way that the report is presented [e.g. the extensive delegation given to officers] gives the impression that the retail decisions have already been made. Several issues need to be resolved as part of a comprehensive, robust and publicly discussed town centre plan before retail can be considered:
 - Planning policies for the town are currently being reviewed – due autumn.
 - Transport and parking strategy – including park and ride.
 - Pedestrian and cycle routes, greenways and open spaces.
 - Other town centre commercial uses including tourism.
 - Historic, cultural and archaeological legacy.Given current uncertainty about retail, isn't it important to make a fresh start and take a comprehensive view based on the most recent data and trend forecasting? We need to be looking at least 20 or 30 years ahead.
- 4. Transparency.** There are five reports, decisions or issues referred to which do not appear to be in the public domain:
 - Cushman and Wakefield report.
 - Conclusions of Charles Street Working party on 26 June.
 - The '*required format*' for additional shopping.
 - Blue Sail report.
 - Parsons Brinkerhoff report.

Unless this information is in the public domain [as part of a comprehensive town centre plan], it seems inevitable to us that that the current retail proposals will lack public credibility.

5. **The character of Dorchester.** What type of shopping centre should Dorchester be? The report assumes that, because there is 'leakage' to higher level shopping centres, more shopping is needed. This does not necessarily follow. Evidence elsewhere point to successful small, market/county towns as needing to offer something different - based on character, streetscape, history and culture; not necessarily '*large retail boxes*'.
6. **Risk.** It is considered that, particularly in the absence of an overall plan, the current proposals based on two peripheral sites risk killing the heart of the town. Fairfield is not a town centre site. We are concerned that its development for retail would threaten the vitality and viability of the traditional shopping centre. Trinity Street has many problems and may offer the solution to bringing the shopping area together, and yet the car park site [and related buildings] is dismissed as being too difficult. Why? How can decisions affecting Charles Street and Fairfield – [the town's main car parks] be made in the absence of a parking strategy? Also the market risks being pushed to a smaller site without its issues being fully considered, including access and car parking.
7. **Archaeology.** Why is archaeology only regarded as a constraint? Is it not also a cultural and economic resource? Even if it is merely regarded as a constraint, would it not be sensible to carry out all the necessary excavations at this stage in order that prospective developers can have certainty?
8. **Emphasis on revenue to the Council.** The appearance is given that '*site disposal price*' and '*revenue streams*' may outweigh the wishes of local people and the best interests of the Town's character and overall commercial prosperity. The emphasis on development on two sites ignores the many issues – the '*very real challenges*' - facing the Town, new opportunities that are now being presented, and the need to look at the town as an interconnected unit where a wrong decision now could adversely affect the health and prosperity of the Town for many years to come.