

## **Dorchester Reinvigoration: A Plan from Dorchester Conservatives.**

### **Reset and Recovery**

#### **Background.**

There have been concerns about the lack of any strategy for the town of Dorchester since the inevitable collapse of the idea that it could become a retail driven centre. The recent lock down as a result of Covid 19 will accelerate changes that were already taking place with many empty shops, lots of charity shops and a general air of decline. It has brought the need for a comprehensive plan into sharp focus, covering immediate actions within the next 12 months, a medium-term vision for 5 years and a long-term view of some 15 years. It is inevitable that patterns of retailing, the way people work and travel will change significantly as a result of Covid 19. It is also important to remember that the overall impact of the pandemic on the whole economy may last for years.

#### **The Key Points.**

There are many detailed proposals in this paper, but the 3 key points which underpin this are:

1. There has to be a plan, so we don't just end up with steady long-term decline.
2. Town centres as we know them, including Dorchester, are not coming back. Councils have to enable and encourage conversion to residential use and to small independent local enterprises (including retail) in the town centre.
3. Environmental improvement (air quality, traffic management, more attractive open space and state of buildings) needs to be a cornerstone of the plan.

#### **Agree a Plan.**

The key stakeholders and the wider community need to have a "discussion" about the future of the town and agree a vision for the town centre. This needs to be based on a realistic appraisal of the changes in behaviours and technology which will inevitably come about in the next few years.

Working from home, autonomous vehicles, continued transfer of retail to the internet etc should all shape the strategic vision. At present the Dorset Council strategic plan says little about any town centre in Dorset and the Town Council do not seem to have a strategic vision for the town at present. This has to change.

The reality is that the demand for retail space is going to reduce further and plans have to embrace this reality with a focus on converting retail and commercial property to residential use and encouraging innovative use of empty retail space. This needs to be done in the context of an agreed overall plan.

If there is no plan, decisions will continue to be made without any strategic context. If the town is not to die, we have to "retarget" Dorchester's future taking account of these changes. It is also clear that there are a series of "enablers" which are required to make a success of the plan. These are not in the control of either the Town or Unitary Councils, but they must be pressured into making representation to central Government to ease restriction on change of use in planning submissions

and seeking reform of business rates. These must not however be used as an excuse to avoid action. There are many things the local councils can do and work needs to start now.

### Short Term Actions.

1. **Car Parking:** Revise car parking charges in the town to favour longer stays by shoppers beyond the first hour. This does not necessarily mean lower revenue, just a redistribution of the charges regime to encourage people to stay longer than the minimum they think they require. This needs some modelling, but there must be examples that could be copied. This may be achieved by introducing the long planned and awaited “pay on exit” parking regime to overcome shoppers feeling pressured to leave the town when their ticket expires.
2. **Empty Shop:** Encourage ‘pop-up’ shops to show continued activity. Could be used to promote local activities/charities.
3. Have a fund to paint and vinyl empty shops so they don’t look derelict. Make sure the colours are bright and bold. There is nothing worse than filthy windows and bits of shop fittings lying on the floor with a pile of unopened post abandoned by the letter box. This reinforces the view of visitors that the town is in terminal decline.
4. **Tourist Information:** Return the Tourist Information Centre to the town centre and ensure it remains open when most needed particularly on Bank Holidays and peak tourist season weekends.
5. **Shoppers Incentives:** Have a town loyalty card or local currency where people get discount of say 5% on purchases at participating businesses and attractions, including museums, cinemas etc.
6. Arrange a voucher scheme where people arriving by bus or train in the town get say a £1 voucher to spend in participating businesses. This would encourage people to use public transport and help limit congestion.
7. **Disabled Access:** Encourage improving disabled access by removing any barriers to visitors and retail users with particular emphasis to listed building.
8. **Bicycle Users:** Provide secure cycle storage at key locations in the town centre with e-bike and mobility scooter charging.
9. **Signage:** Provide improved signage throughout the town to improve awareness of heritage assets and places of interest. (See medium term actions also)

### Medium Term Actions.

1. **Clean Air and Environment:** There must be an overarching plan on environmental improvement. This needs to include measures on air quality, traffic management, reduced speed limits, creation of green space and improvement to the appearance of many buildings. Owners must be pursued by Dorset Council to repair and renovate decaying historic buildings under existing planning powers.
2. **Expanded Market:** Force the issue over the former West Dorset Council proposals for a new market premises in the Charles Street area. This will integrate a market into the main retail area of the town. As part of this, it is essential that proper coach drop off and pick up is provided “off road” to reduce traffic congestion on market days. This could be easily done by designating part of the Charles Street car park for coaches only on market days.
3. Consider operating the market on more than 1 day per week.
4. Reconsider the consultation work undertaken by Feria Urbanism on the area.
5. **Public Transport:** Reorganise the bus routes in the town so that the dreadful facilities in Trinity Street can be removed. Consider using Acland Road in both directions for buses and

provide proper pull-ins with suitable cover on that site, hopefully adjacent to the new market location.

6. Press Network Rail to upgrade the Weymouth/Bath/ Bristol line and reinstate the direct Exeter link as a sustainable mobility and development priority. Also to complete the long awaited disabled access to Dorchester West Station.
7. **Comfort:** Improve/replace the public toilets in the town. This must include ongoing cleaning and maintenance provision. These need to be located in line with the emerging vision of the town in terms location of retail and entertainment facilities.
8. **Wi-Fi:** Upgrade the existing public Wi-Fi to provide full and seamless coverage in the town centre area and Brewery Square with greater available bandwidth and remove the gateway signup procedure so visitors can find their way around without the need for excessive street signage.
9. **Electric Car charging:** Provide far more electric charging points in town car parks.
10. **New Business:** Provide office space/meeting centres in the shopping area for short term hire by the hour to encourage local people to network, hold meetings, interviews etc in a non “coffee shop” environment. This should be subsidised by the Council in the short term, but should become self-sustaining in the longer term. This reflects the changes in work patterns which will accelerate in a post Covid 19 world.
11. Provide financial relief to any new local business (i.e. not chains stores) to permit reduced rents and business rates on a sliding scale for up to 5 years.
12. **Business Rates:** Press for revision of business rates to reflect turnover rather than notional value of property.
13. **Planning Issues:** Support revisions of planning conditions to make change of use easier in order to facilitate conversion of commercial property to residential purposes.
14. Consider rezoning the non-core sections of our retail areas to make it easy and inexpensive to convert retail outlets into commercial or residential in these peripheral areas thus focussing the footfall on core areas
15. Make sure that any redevelopment is sympathetic to the vision of Dorchester as an historic town. This can be done, take the “White Hart” conversion. Any empty property not suitably historic or in keeping, should be demolished and replaced with something much more sympathetic to the long-term vision. Consider compulsory purchase powers as a last resort.
16. Encourage the conversion of ground floor former retail facilities to professional service operations, like accountants, solicitors, artisan workshops etc. so that the town centre has life and footfall with as many premises occupied as possible. Convert upper floor areas to residential use. Make sure that residential conversions are of a quality that encourages long term occupation in the town centre by residents.
17. Develop plans to deal with those parts of the present commercial centre which become unused.

### **Long Term Actions.**

The world of employment and technology is going to change significantly. Dorchester has many plus points. Beautiful countryside nearby at present, a great heritage with many historic buildings and sites of interest, excellent schools, a good hospital, frequent trains to London, to name just a few. The vision for the town needs to build on these assets to attract new residents in a knowledge-based economy, where working remotely will become the norm for many people. “Live and work here rather than in a big city”. Dorchester will only thrive if we can attract well paid employment, but we do not need offices and factories to generate these jobs. A strategic plan needs to consider how local mobility can be optimised as autonomous electric vehicles become common.

What does this do to car park requirements as they become redundant due to greater use of autonomous electric vehicles and to traffic congestion and air quality? What level of internet connectivity will be needed? How can the town use the surplus buildings it will have to make the town attractive to visit for leisure and entertainment? These are big issues, but they need to have context in terms of a long-term plan. We cannot go on with piecemeal decision making which has no framework.

**Next Steps.**

We must not spend years on consultation, repeating the exercises of past years. We need to get an alliance of businesses and elected representatives with other key stakeholders, to agree what the long term looks like and to focus on practical steps that will lead to the long-term realisation of the vision. It is likely that Government funding will be available at least to start the actions. Go for it!