

Big Conversation Briefing

Priority One: Communities for all

Make Dorset the best place to be a child (education and children's social care)

Making Dorset the 'best place to be a child' means achieving good outcomes for all and putting children and families at the heart of everything we do. We are not only meeting a moral obligation for the youngest people in our community, we are also setting up our future adults for a happy, healthy and rewarding life which means they are better equipped to play their part where they live.

One of Dorset's most significant challenges is how do we retain/attract young people in Dorset. We want Dorset to be the best place to be a child, somewhere where young people feel a part of their community and achieve good outcomes in adulthood, whether their adulthood is in or out of Dorset.

Make Dorset an all-age friendly county

Making Dorset an all-age friendly county means ensuring strong communities. Within Dorset we have an ageing population. We have the highest proportion of residents 65 and over and 80 and over of any Unitary Authority in England. Dorset's working age population has also fallen over the past ten years, and this trend is projected to continue.

By being an all-age friendly county, we can support residents through every stage of their life. Age-friendly communities foster healthy and active ageing, making it possible for people to continue to stay in their homes, participate in the activities that they value, and contribute to their communities, for as long as possible. In practical terms, an all-age-friendly community adapts its structures and services to be accessible to, and inclusive of people of all ages, with varying needs and capacities. We see ageing as something everyone does, and want it to be enjoyed, not endured.

Hold conversations with communities – listening and working together to develop solutions

This means engaging with residents to meet their specific community's needs, using local strengths while acknowledging that each community is unique. We will bring together our services and co-produce these with residents in our communities.

Dorset has a range of different communities with their own strengths and challenges. We need to be listening and developing solutions together. We want to make sure all residents and communities are given a voice in decision-making within their area.

Priority Two: Respond to the climate crisis

Reduce Dorset's impact on climate change

We want to reduce Dorset's impact on climate change. As a council, we will work to lower our impact across Dorset. To stay within the county's carbon budget Dorset still needs to cut its emissions by over half by 2030.

Scientific evidence shows that climate change is happening and is due to human activity.

Recent reports highlight the need to act quickly to cut emissions to avoid the worst impacts of climate change, which could occur if global temperatures rise above 1.5 degrees.

This is a huge global challenge, but many solutions are local.

In 2019, the council declared a Climate and Ecological Emergency. And committed to becoming carbon-neutral by 2040 and helping the wider-county become carbon neutral by 2050. These targets are now being moved forward to 2035 and 2045.

Dorset residents currently have an average carbon footprint of 4.6 tonnes of CO₂e per year, which is low for the region. However, to meet government targets, this must drop to nearly zero by 2050. We all need to consider how we travel, use energy and water, create waste, and what we eat to achieve a carbon-neutral future.

Support the recovery of nature

We will support the recovery of nature in Dorset. Dorset's natural assets are protected by many designations and worth up to £2.5 billion a year to our economy. We want to illuminate the beauty of our county for our residents and our visitors whilst working to protect, enhance and restore our natural environment.

There are now 2,930 terrestrial and freshwater species and 157 marine species that are of conservation concern locally. Everyone has a role to play to make Dorset nature-positive by 2023.

Dorset is known for its natural beauty and is home to lots of nature areas with a variety of wildlife. But over the years the amount and variety of wildlife has reduced and many areas for nature have been split up or lost.

The UK is now one of the world's most nature-depleted countries, it is in the bottom 10% globally and the worst in the G7.

The council recently declared a nature emergency and committed to taking action to restore, enhance and connect spaces for nature in our county.

Help communities adapt for climate change impacts

We will help our communities adapt for the impacts of climate change.

Climate change is happening now, so Dorset must manage growing risks to ensure that our county's people, prosperity and nature are resilient to the growing likelihood of things like extreme weather or the spread of pests and disease.

Small shifts in average climate can trigger big changes. Nationally, heatwaves are now twice as likely and will occur every other year on average by 2050. Summer rainfall could drop by a

quarter and winter rainfall may increase 16%. Sea levels have already risen 16cm and this will continue. Extreme weather will cause more local flooding, coastal erosion, landslips and wildfires on Dorset's heaths and woodland. Global impacts may be felt locally too, like climate refugees or supply chain disruption.

Priority Three: Provide high quality housing

Increase the supply of housing that local people can afford to rent or buy

Dorset's average house prices are twelve times the average local wage, this is one of the highest ratios outside of London and the South East. We want to increase the supply of housing that local people can afford to rent and buy. This includes increasing the supply of affordable housing and social housing (also known as council housing) - by working with developers and with Registered Providers of social housing / Housing Associations.

Dorset has become a popular place for people to move and retire to. But some of our working-age residents are struggling to afford to live here as house prices rise. Over 80% of the households currently on our social housing register are of working age (16 – 64 years). This statistic shows we need to prioritise and increase housing supply.

Improve the quality and standard of homes to rent or buy

During 2022/23 the number of households losing their private rented accommodation increased by 50% in Dorset following national trends.

This accounted for 17.8% of all homeless approaches, where households were unable to find other rental properties, and impacts the council's ability to discharge its homeless duties.

Social housing in our area makes up approximately 12% of the total homes. These are provided by locally active Housing Associations, also known as Registered Providers of Social Housing.

As of September 2023, just over 360 landlords have joined our Landlord Forum and we are encouraging new members from across the whole Dorset Council area. Whilst this is a sizeable number, membership is mostly landlords with properties in the west of our area, who have been established as a group since before Dorset Council became a Unitary Authority in 2019.

Our NHS Trust in Dorset tell us our community hospitals have a small percentage (5%) out of 208 beds of people who cannot be discharged due to housing related issues. The reasons include:

- housing is not fit to return to
- people don't have a home base but were staying with friends or relatives previously and are not fit enough to return there
- life changing physical conditions that require a change in housing provision
- properties not on national grid and therefore equipment cannot be used that requires power

In a survey of Dorset landlords, 25% of respondents said that they were planning to leave the market or reduce their number of rental properties, within the next 5 years.

We need to work with landlords and other housing providers to improve the quality of accommodation for Dorset residents, not least because in turn this will help to improve people's health and wellbeing.

Reduce the number of long-term empty homes in Dorset

Empty properties can make an area feel run down and undermine community spirit. They can also become the focus of anti-social behaviour, fly tipping and rodent activity.

Returning an empty property to use can not only resolve these environmental and social problems, but can also provide a 'new' home, which helps meet housing demand, reduces pressure on new build development and can also provide an income and asset for the owner.

We want to encourage owners to bring empty properties back into use as homes. We recognise that properties are often empty for a wide variety of reasons and our role is therefore to initially influence and encourage property owners. This can include advice about undertaking repairs, selling the property or renting it. However we may also take appropriate enforcement action where these informal negotiations fail.

We have information for owners of empty properties and also information for those affected by empty properties, such as neighbours and local residents.

Our new administration wants the council to do more work on this, so proposes investing to increase the size of the empty properties team.

Priority Four: Grow our economy

Support more businesses to grow and thrive

Dorset's productivity is 15% lower than the national average. There is, in general, a low wage, low skill economy. By working with local Chambers of Commerce and BIDs, we want to support businesses in Dorset to grow and thrive, bringing employment and prosperity to our residents.

This involves running networking events and training programs to help new businesses to start up and small businesses to build their capacity. It also involves Place marketing to attract investment to the area and improving the infrastructure in Dorset such as our digital connectivity, making it easier to do business.

One of Dorset's most significant challenges is how do we retain/attract young people in Dorset. We want to support local businesses to make Dorset a place to grow.

Kickstart the regeneration of Weymouth and surrounding areas

We want to support the regeneration of Weymouth and its surrounding areas. Some of the areas around Weymouth and Portland have the lowest levels of social mobility and the highest deprivation in the whole country. We need to address this and support our residents in these areas, creating opportunities for them to improve their lives – e.g. through education and skills. In turn, and over time, this will reduce pressure on public services, including social care, health and policing.

The closure of Portland's Naval Base and the Royal Naval Air Station along with the relocation or closure of other major employers have contributed greatly to the area's economic decline. We need to support the regeneration of Weymouth and the surrounding areas and create jobs, industry and prosperity.

The £19m Levelling Up scheme in Weymouth aims to attract private sector investment to develop key sites in the town. This will create jobs and provide new facilities and homes, regenerating the area. The council is also refreshing its planning policy for Weymouth, building on the 2015 Weymouth Masterplan. This will focus on development (the creation of new commercial and residential spaces), transport connectivity, and community facilities, as well as creating and supporting employment opportunities.

Dorset Council's focus is not just on Weymouth however. Our new Market Towns strategy will enable further support and economic growth opportunities to our other towns across Dorset, working alongside town and parish councils to achieve this.

Support local and sustainable tourism

Tourism is an important sector for Dorset, contributing around £1bn annually to the local economy. As a council, we want to support local and sustainable tourism. In Dorset we have unique events, businesses and festivals across the county that cater to visitors to our county throughout the year. Dorset's museums delivery approximately 1200 events annually. We want to attract more visitors to Dorset throughout the year. We see the role of the council as supporting the tourism sector to thrive through promotion and place marketing, and by bringing businesses together to work collectively.

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