



Dorset Deserves Better

Campaign for Re-think of Dorset Local Plan

Newsletter 6: 22 April 2022

Highlights

- New letter to Spencer Flower 22 March
- DDB Statement at Full Dorset Council meeting on 14 April
- STAND Skimmity Ride protest and Solent TV Interview
- New population projections from the ONS have significant implications
- Local Plans grind to a halt in several Counties
- UK Government issues British Energy Security Strategy
- Growing support for DDB Campaign – **now with 60 partners and almost 85,000 people**

Editorial

It has been a frustrating month for your “Dorset Deserves Better” team as there is still no response from Spencer Flower, Leader of Dorset Council, to our latest letter sent on 18th March. This prompted us to make a statement, in person, at the full Council Meeting last week to which Cllr Flower responded. Despite this we continue to have strong support and we welcome six new partners: Carlton Marshall Parish Council, Burton Bradstock Parish Council, Symondsburry Parish Council, Friends of Rodwell Trail, Wimborne Town Council and Studland Parish Council. Please keep pressing your local council or organisation to support our campaign.

STAND (Save the Area North of Dorchester) mounted a well-supported protest on 2nd April, based on the “Skimmity Ride” which features in “the Mayor of Casterbridge” by Thomas Hardy. Effigies of a land-owner and a developer were paraded through the streets. Read about the speeches and subsequent interview with BBC Solent.

Other relevant news includes: Interesting information about what is happening in other planning authorities; new population data from the ONS which undermines the assumptions in the Standard Method for calculating housing need; the Government has published its very weak “British Energy Security Strategy”, full of fine words and promises with precious little detail; encouraging news from MP Chris Loder; and finally a plea from Burton Bradstock Parish Council for land for affordable housing.

Michael Dower, joint leader of our campaign, has been ill this past month with a spinal infection. He is now back from hospital and recuperating at home. We wish him well and a speedy recovery.



Letter to Spencer Flower and Statement to Dorset Council

Following our revised Campaign Strategy, agreed by the Alliance Partners, we sent a new letter to Cllr Spencer Flower on 18th March. We welcomed his broad approach, but expressed our continuing concerns about the risk of pre-emptive development, the lack of a coherent forward plan and our frustration at the Council's almost total lack of engagement with the public.

The Council is asking the government for two more years to re-think the Local Plan and for exemptions from key planning rules in order to prevent a breakdown in the planning process. However, there is no guarantee they will get any of this and the Council seems to have no fall-back if the government continue to play for time. Since most of our current Local Plans are technically out-of-date, there is a growing risk of pre-emptive development led by landowners and developers. Even more important, we lack the modern planning framework which is urgently needed to provide truly affordable housing, to protect and restore our green spaces, to urgently reduce our carbon footprint and to strengthen the county's economy with 'green' jobs.

In our letter to Spencer Flower, we urged the Council to

1. **Publish a Scope and Timetable for the new Local Plan process.** To include publishing a detailed analysis of last year's consultation exercise and of all studies and evidence that underpin the Plan.
2. **Reduce the risk of pre-emptive development.** To include measures to bring existing approved Local Plans up-to-date and to maintain the 5-year housing supply by promoting housing development that meets local needs and is supported by the community.
3. **Engage with the public.** Start a process to involve local organisations actively in rethinking the Local Plan. In particular, gain public support for a vision for the future of the County which reflects the needs and aspirations of the people of Dorset – unlike the draft Plan, of which the central development strategy was rejected by 92% of those who commented.

We again asked that senior Councillors meet with the Campaign Alliance to discuss these issues. To date no answer has been received. So, last Thursday Giles Watts made a statement at the full Council meeting, and also had a brief talk with Spencer Flower. In his formal response at the Council meeting, Spencer Flower acknowledged the Campaign but said that he did not want to meet with us until he had concluded discussions with central government. He claimed that discussions were going well and that he and Matt Piles (Corporate Director - Economic Growth and Infrastructure) had spent 30 minutes with Michael Gove (Secretary of State for Levelling Up) and Andrew Stuart (the new

Housing Minister). On a separate occasion, he had also met Joanna Averley (the Ministry's Chief Planning Officer). However, nothing has been conceded by government. So, our questions to Dorset Council remain valid: what is your current process for re-thinking the Local Plan, how will you protect against unwanted developments, what will you do if government do not change the rules for Dorset, and how are you proposing to engage with the public? Clearly we need to step up our campaign and demand a response.

Click [here](#) for a link to the Full Council Meeting: David Walsh's response to a question from Jane Ashdown on viability is at 8.37-9.14, the DDB statement is 9.25-12.44 and Spencer Flower's response is 15.06-18.37.



British Energy Security Strategy

Last week the government published the "[British Energy Security Strategy](#)". This lightweight document is full of flowery language praising the government's exemplary record, but is desperately short of any real substance. It starts with a preamble about the worldwide demand for energy and how the Russians have caused the current Energy Crisis but provides no balanced statement on our own shortcomings from a chronic lack of strategic gas storage and the inflexibility of our centrally driven energy supply base. The solutions discussed are long term (decades) rather than short term (years) and are based around a strong emphasis on Offshore Wind and Nuclear power, plus a short-term boost for oil and gas from the North



Hinkley Point C Nuclear Power Station, Somerset

Sea. Missing is anything about reducing energy wastage through better insulation of homes, any significant support for heat pumps and a complete muddle about onshore wind (our lowest-cost source of renewable energy). Gravely disappointing is the lack of a serious discussion about the long-term options for energy security based on green energy generation and how to achieve them.

The crucial challenge is how to supply a reliable baseline energy provision while accelerating the production of cheap renewables. Battery packs can only go so far in providing that stable base. The government seems intent on relying on a resurgence of nuclear energy when most countries see the solution in “green hydrogen” from electrolysers fuelled by offshore wind and then used in conventional turbines. Nuclear is by far the most expensive and riskiest option when it comes to technology, cost and safety but the government seems to want to saddle us with centralised high-cost energy for many decades to come. More than this, there is the longer term issue of whether energy should be centrally controlled (like the current British system) or devolved to municipal level, with community-led local generation schemes (more like the system in Germany). In practice, we will need both of these options, but many experts believe locally-based, flexible systems that involve EV car batteries, smart devices and local energy generation is the way to go. Sadly, there is scant discussion of these key issues in this government’s document, which is very disappointing and alarmingly short on inspiration and a real vision.

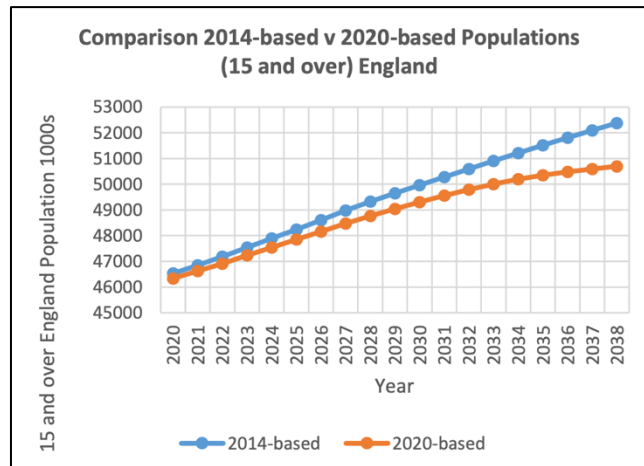
New Population Statistics from the ONS - *Mike Allen*

Population projections are very important as they are a major component of housing “need” in the government’s “Standard Method” for calculating the housing requirements. A lower population projection would result in a significant drop in the number of new houses that are needed.

In January, new [population projections](#) were published by the ONS for UK based on 2020 data. This is national-level data and, unfortunately, nothing is available yet at county level or from the 2021 Census.

The data include new population estimates for 2020 to 2045 and show that the natural population (deaths exceed births) is flat then decreases from 2025 onwards. Any growth thereafter is due solely to net immigration which is estimated at around 200,000 people per year. Any Local Plan surely needs to take account of the long term decline in population growth that is being projected.

The Standard Method for assessing housing need is based on 2014 data. Comparing this with the latest statistics shows that by 2038 (the period of the draft Local Plan) there are now projected to be 1.7 million less people aged 15 or over in England than projected on the 2014 base. Over the 10 years from 2020 to 2030 the expected growth is now 14% less, and by 2038 the



annual growth rate declines to only 37% of that expected in the 2014-based projections. The implications for housing are clear. **In the next 10 years less housing will be needed than was previously thought; and, as the years progress, the decline accelerates. So, the long-term expectations for population growth are much reduced.**

So what does this mean for our Local Plan ? Dorset’s household growth over the 15 year period 2023-38 is projected to be 17,261 households and then declines fast. The draft Local Plan seeks 39,285 while we are suggesting a figure around 22,000. Beyond this, the population statistics suggest a much smaller number of ~9,000 households for the following 15 years (2038-2053).

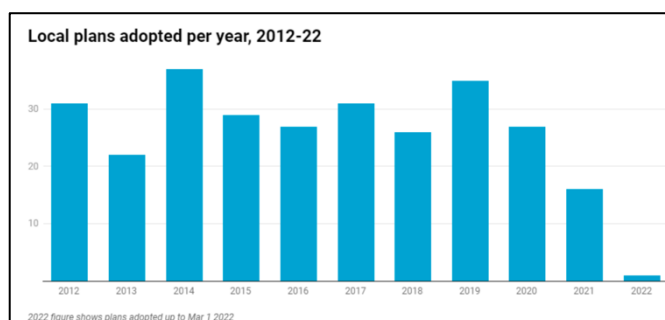
Signs that the local plan system may be grinding to a halt

from David Blackman of [Planning Magazine](#).

Dorset Council is not alone in challenging the Government’s basis for preparing Local plans. At least ten local planning authorities have either withdrawn, paused, or delayed their local development plans over the past six months, prompting fears that the system is becoming paralysed – see the table at the end of this article. Seven of these authorities are in the Greater South East and nine are in the Green Belt. The latest jolt was the Essex district of Basildon which voted last month to withdraw its draft Local Plan from public Examination. Observers cite uncertainty over the government’s planning reforms and local political opportunism - particularly over controversial release of Green Belt land - as key reasons.

It is a decade since the local plan-making system was in as poor a state as it is today, said Matthew Spry, senior director at planning consultancy Lichfields. “Paralysis” is “creeping” across the local plan system, said former planning inspector and ex-council planning policy manager Derek Stebbing. Meanwhile,

Paul Brocklehurst, chairman of trade body the Land Promoters and Developers Federation, said his members are “very frustrated” by the current impasse.



Figures from the Planning Inspectorate, meanwhile, show that the number of plans adopted last year (16) was the lowest since the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was adopted ten years ago.

Joanne Averley, chief planner at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), last week wrote to local authorities encouraging them to carry on with the process set out in the NPPF. However, the message is “not really getting through”, said Brocklehurst. The main problem is the uncertainty surrounding national planning policy. Ever since the Conservatives’ shock loss in the Amersham by-election last June, was blamed partially on the government’s insistence on high numbers of new housing, Ministers have been back-peddalling on the issue. Housing and Levelling Up Secretary Michael Gove is reported to have told Tory backbenchers last week that there won’t even be a standalone planning bill in May’s Queen’s Speech.

Decisions to pause or withdraw draft Local Plans appear to be partly political as some of the authorities going slow on their plans face local elections in May 2023, and may hope that their housing delivery requirement will be cut. But time is running out for local authorities to hit the government’s December 2023 target date for adopting their local plans. The government must clarify its intentions on planning reform.

Council	Region	Green Belt Authority?	What’s Happened	Date of Action
Elmbridge	London	Yes	Elmbridge have put forward a local plan with a target less than the Standard Method - the first authority to do so in the current planning era	Mar-22
Basildon	East of England	Yes	Members voted to withdraw its emerging local plan from examination due to concerns about the level of green belt release and the levelling up white paper. However, plan withdrawal now paused due to senior officers’ legal concerns.	Feb-22
Dacorum	East of England	Yes	The council approved a new plan timetable under which the draft document will not be submitted for examination until 2024, after the government’s December 2023 adoption deadline.	Feb-22
Hertsmere	East of England	Yes	Members resolved to abandon its newly- published draft plan due to opposition from residents about the level of proposed green belt release.	Jan-22
Mid Sussex	South East	Yes	Members voted to defer discussion of its draft updated local plan to await the outcome of any change in government policy.	Jan-22
St Albans	East of England	Yes	Council is considering pushing back the adoption of its new local plan by three years due to resourcing pressures.	Jan-22
Dorset	South West	Yes	Council has requested a two year extension and exemptions from the housing secretary to allow more time for the plan to be developed.	Jan-22
Ashfield	East Midlands	Yes	Council has paused work on its local plan, while it waits for clarification on housing targets from the government.	Oct-21
Sheffield	Yorkshire and Humber	Yes	Council has announced a 15-month delay to the adoption of its local plan, citing Covid and government changes to housing targets.	Oct-21
Arun	South East	No	Council paused work on its local plan to await proposed reforms to the planning system.	Oct-21
Welwyn Hatfield	East of England	Yes	Council paused work on its local plan to await clarification on government policy, but work has since resumed.	Oct-21

STAND Skimmity Ride and Protest



On 2nd April our alliance partner STAND (Save the Area North of Dorchester) organised a protest and march through the streets of Dorchester against plans to build up to 4,000 houses on the outskirts of Dorchester. During the march, they recreated one of Thomas Hardy's most memorable scenes – the Skimmity Ride from *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. This rural tradition was intended to heap shame on adulterers or other miscreants. In their version, STAND recreated the scene with the effigy of a land-owner and a developer accompanied by the braying of slogans and beating of pots and pans.

The speakers on the day included Jane Ashdown (Chair of STAND), Alastair Chisholm (Town Cryer and councillor) and Giles Watts (Dorset Deserves Better Campaign). While later interviews were recorded by Keep FM and BBC Solent to be replayed on the local TV and Radio news providing excellent publicity for both STAND and Dorset Deserves Better.

The proposed development site is on the northern side of the Frome river valley and so is cut off from Dorchester. It poses significant risks of flooding and water quality, and would place heavy pressure on the already congested infrastructure of the town. Its carbon footprint would be substantial unless strengthened by much higher building standards and inbuilt renewable energy schemes than the developers are willing to afford.

The area is huge – a greenfield development almost twice the size of Poundbury – with subsequent loss of wildlife habitat. It is also of significant landscape value and cultural importance having been described by world-famous writer Thomas Hardy as “the land adjoining clean-cut like a chessboard on a green tablecloth : it was untouched by the faintest sprinkle of modernism”.

The development to the North East of Dorchester has been proposed twice before and rejected due to lack of financial viability. Despite being reborn as a supposed “Garden City” development, it is another example of an old, recycled proposal being pushed through without any coherent plan as to what is best for Dorchester, and in the teeth of local opposition. Dorchester would be much better served by redeveloping many available brownfield sites and masterplanning the town centre where services, infrastructure, jobs and a vibrant community already exist. In re-thinking the draft Local Plan, Dorset Council should drop this damaging and unpopular proposal.

Support from Chris Loder MP

In his column in Bridport News on 7 April, West Dorset’s MP Chris Loder supported the wide public opposition to the proposal for development on the North side of Dorchester. He wrote: “The protest through Dorchester on Saturday last week set out very clearly the extent of dissatisfaction with the proposal to build 4,000 houses on the edge of our county town which I also do not support. I have been working hard to get the Council to re-think this plan and am working with the Leader of the Council to achieve progress on it.”



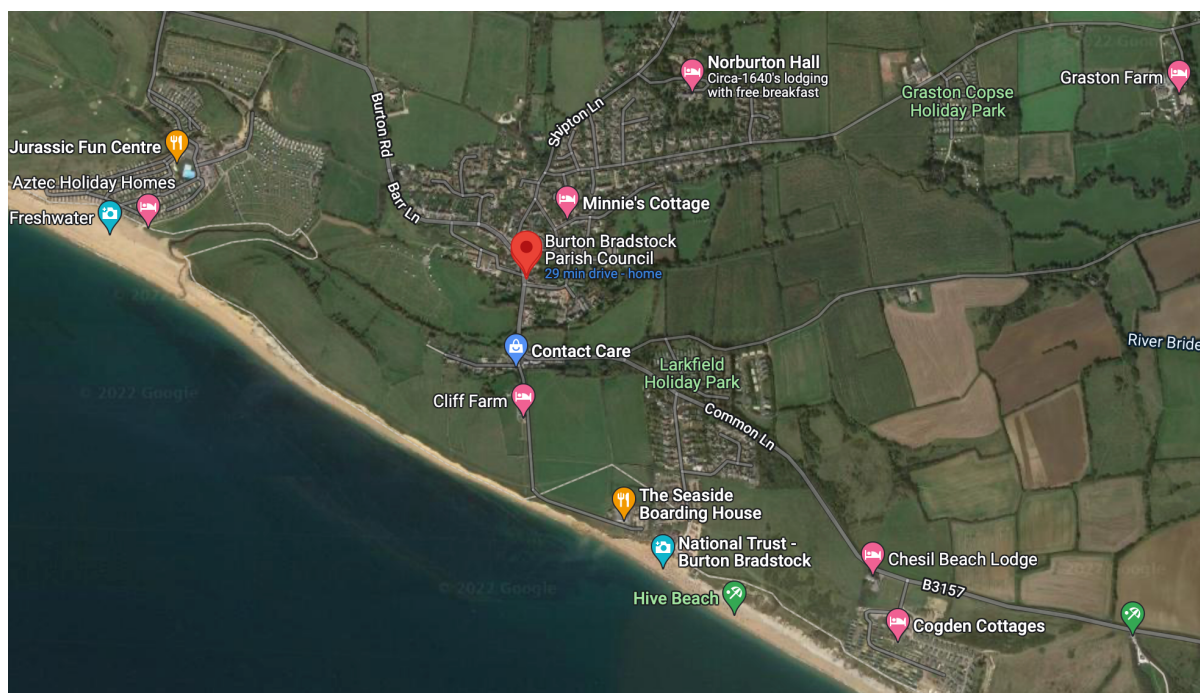
Chris Loder went on to express support for one of the key ideas in the Dorset Deserves Better campaign: “In Bridport, Dorchester, Sherborne and villages across West Dorset, we have a broad range of Community Land Trust and housing projects in various stages of progression. With the pressures we experience, it is more important than ever that we prioritise these sorts of schemes that help to ease the financial burden their accommodation places on people. I have written recently to the Levelling Up Secretary Michael Gove to outline the importance of these community schemes and to emphasise the need for greater priority now that the Community Housing Fund has finished.”

Land search for affordable housing

A major theme within the Dorset Deserves Better campaign is the widespread need, within our towns and villages, for truly affordable housing for local people. Some of this need may be met by insistence upon affordable housing quotas within open market housing schemes. But in our view, it must be made possible – particularly in villages – to achieve much of the truly affordable housing through housing schemes which are devoted only to affordable housing. To be financially viable, such schemes need to be built on land which is modestly priced, which can be achieved through the mechanism of ‘exceptions sites’ and by the action of community land trusts and/or housing associations.

The challenge is to find the land at a modest price, which is not easy to do at a time of rising market value of potentially developable land, particularly in fashionable villages along the Dorset coast. One such village is Burton Bradstock, where the Parish Council has joined the Dorset Deserves Better campaign precisely because it fears that the combination of strict planning controls (within the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the Heritage Coast) and the aspiration of developers may soon lead to speculative planning applications for development which would pre-empt the (now seriously delayed) draft Local Plan.

In this context, the Burton Bradstock Community Land Trust has put out a plea to local landowners for a small site within the parish suitable for affordable housing.



Campaign Communications

The main page for Dorset Deserves Better is <http://www.dorsetcan.org/ddb>

For general enquiries and communications, email:

dorsetdeservesbetter@gmail.com

For media enquiries, or sharing social media content, email:

mediaddb@gmail.com

For the News Release & Open Letter go to: <https://www.dorsetcan.org/ddbpr>

Send us your news on: dorsetdeservesbetter@gmail.com

Social Media

To keep up to date with the Campaign :

- Visit our website at: <http://www.dorsetcan.org/ddb>
- Follow all of our social media posts at:
 - Twitter: @Dorset_CAN;
 - Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/147832150657785>
 - Instagram: @dorset_can;
 - Snapchat: @dorset_can;
 - Dorset CAN (Climate Action Network) Facebook Page:
<https://www.facebook.com/DorsetCAN>

Join the Campaign

If your organisation wants to join the campaign, please fill in and submit a form here: <http://www.dorsetcan.org/link>. Individuals can join the campaign at:

<https://bit.ly/DorsetDB>

Join the Campaign Team

Please write to us at dorsetdeservesbetter@gmail.com if you can help us with the campaign especially:

- Gathering news from partners and preparing the weekly newsletter
- Research to strengthen our arguments as we build the campaign.