

Dorset Green Councillors' comments on Dorset Council Draft Corporate Plan

We have the following comments on Dorset Council's draft Corporate Plan.

Our most important point – that the climate and ecological emergency should be treated as a priority, not as a section of the Leader's introduction – is taken first, and then followed by comments on the draft as it stands, taken in the order they appear in the draft, not necessarily in our order of importance.

Many of our comments concern omissions, for example culture and sport, road safety, economic and social inequality, crime, democracy and, in particular health, and combatting health inequalities.

The Climate and Ecological Emergency

The Climate and Ecological Emergency has a curious status, looking like a bit of an afterthought. Climate change (we recognise that the ecological emergency had not been added at the time this version of the plan was drafted) has a paragraph in the Leader's introduction, with a reference to the Executive Advisory Panel, but is not one of the numbered priorities. It is picked up from time to time within the priorities, eg on renewable energy in the Environment section and energy efficiency in the Housing section (and there are others) but this risks suggesting that these are the only things that matter. Moreover, mention in the leader's introduction surely does not amount to the same status as the actually adopted priorities. It's surely significant that the Snap survey on the web version of the consultation on the Corporate Plan only asks about the named priorities, and then asks the open question as to whether there should be others. Climate change as such gets no explicit mention.

The suggestion that it is OK to do it this way because climate change is cross-cutting, affecting all the rest, doesn't really work. First that is not explicitly stated. Second, 'cross-cutting' applies to the other priorities too (see para 4.2 of the Cabinet paper). Our economy won't work if our health policies don't keep people well. Our housing policy won't work if the economy doesn't deliver the incomes needed to pay rents and mortgages. Visitors won't come as tourists supporting our economy if we don't look after our environment. And so on.

We think that there should be a separate Climate and Ecology priority, drafted roughly along the following lines, which incidentally should include responding to climate change (adaptation) as well as working to prevent it (mitigation). We could add some of the material in other sections here (eg the 3 relevant mentions in the environment section) but it's probably better to leave them where they are and keep this section at a more general level:

Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency

The Council will lead Dorset's efforts to achieve net-zero emissions and protect our residents and environment from the effects of climate change and other ecological deterioration.

What will we do?

Immediately begin reducing greenhouse gas emissions from the Council's own operations to net-zero

Use our influence to encourage households, businesses, landowners and other organisations in Dorset to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions associated with their own activities

Protect Dorset's ecosystems and preserve and seek to increase biodiversity.

Help Dorset adapt to the climate change that will now inevitably take place.

How will we do it

Lobby central government to change planning guidelines to allow greater control of building standards, prioritisation of building wind turbines, and exception from requirements for 5 year housing land supply in rural areas

Meanwhile, use the planning system to encourage renewable energy so far as is legally possible.

Meanwhile, use the planning system to encourage land use changes that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase carbon stored in the land, so far as is legally possible.

Introduce genuine biodiversity offsetting into the planning system.

Encourage public transport and walking and cycling.

Produce a detailed quantified plan to achieve net-zero emissions by specified dates for the Council and the County respectively by end June 2020, with a management information system to monitor progress.

Produce a detailed assessment by October 2020 of how the changing climate is predicted to affect Dorset and its people, with a plan setting out the main measures that need to be taken to adapt to those changes.

We have not inserted a date here by which to reach net zero emissions as we are aware this is under consideration by the EAP.

Leader's Introduction (page references here and below to the Cabinet paper of 3 October)

32 'It incorporates the political vision of your new councillors.' This suggests a greater degree of unity and agreement than we expect the final draft to command. Whether you can keep this depends in part on how much of this critique of the plan you accept!

How about 'This is the plan agreed by Dorset Council's Cabinet after extensive consultation with all councillors and the general public.'

32 'support local economic growth' Replace with 'support the local economy.' See general remarks on the economic objective below.

32 Are the reductions in numbers of councillors and the savings of £400,000 net of the extra Weymouth Town Councillors and the costs associated with that additional Council? If not shouldn't they be? Similarly for the other savings identified.

32/33 Reference to the climate emergency should be widened to include the ecological crisis.

33 Suggesting saving over £120m was achieved entirely by increased efficiency. Surely some services were reduced, eg local bus subsidies, youth club support....

33 penultimate paragraph, aren't children's social services a third demand led service that is stretching our budget and where we should be 'making government aware of the need for better funding nationally.'

Understanding Dorset

34 'Crime is consistently low in Dorset' unless of course you live in Melcombe Regis, at 10 times the Dorset average! We'd re-draft this section as follows, as it suggests as it is drafted that Weymouth and Portland is part of the rural idyll:

Rural life in Dorset may seem idyllic, and it is for many. But there is deprivation in rural areas due to isolation and barriers to housing, transport and essential services. Moreover, our coastal towns, especially Weymouth and Portland, contain significant geographical pockets of deprivation. Crime is generally low in Dorset, but there are issues in some urban areas.

34 Penultimate para. Oil is only a valuable mineral for as long as regulation permits burning it. It's value is threatened by the Council's own commitment to respond to the climate emergency. A very complicated issue, and perhaps best avoided by simply skipping the reference.

34 Last para. How about a figure for cycleways?

34 This page would be improved by a brief culture, arts and sport section (the Olympics sailing surely deserves a mention), and perhaps it could go with the heritage bit.

35 No comments on the wheel diagram, but there are consequentials from the other comments if accepted, eg adding another climate change sector, or our comments on the Safe and Well section.

Economic Growth

First a comment on the use of the word 'sustainable' . It appears in both the economic growth and environment objectives. 'Sustainable' is a deeply ambiguous word. It has two distinct strands of meaning:

- economic sustainability – it is an activity that one can continue to carry on for the foreseeable future from a financial point of view. Thus a social housing project may be sustainable because the rents will cover the costs of the housing (the principal and interest on a loan) over the medium to longer term, or economic growth is sustainable if it can be continued for many years without recession.

- environmental sustainability – it is something that doesn't harm, and maybe improves, the environment, whether through the climate, biodiversity, resource conservation (both renewable and non-renewable) and so on.

Now one of these does not imply the other, in particular many economically sustainable activities are deeply environmentally unsustainable.

We think if you are going to use the word 'sustainable' you should at least be clear what you mean. You could for example use the well known, longstanding and respected Brundtland definition:

'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generation to meet their own needs'

and include that in the text. But if you do so we think it is extremely debatable whether 'delivering sustainable economic growth' is possible.

36 We don't think economic growth should be the target, but instead the opening piece should be:

'The Economy

We will build a sustainable economy, providing properly paid secure jobs to all who want them.'

where sustainable has the Brundtland definition.

Such an economy may or may not be bigger in GNP terms than the one we have now, size should not be the objective. Moreover, increasing labour productivity may well prove problematic in an economy utilising less energy, so we would stress it less. Productivity is not the only thing to influence pay, it is also influenced by the relative shares of wages, taxes and profits.

Even if you keep your formulation (and we understand that our heresy is unlikely to be acceptable to the government), economic growth may make Dorset a great place to live and work, but it is visited by many partly because of the relative lack of economic development, so the 'visit' is not appropriate here.

36 third indent, delete 'transport and'. Serious action on climate change will mean on the whole less transport. One way of reducing it is through digital connectivity.

36 fourth indent, add 'and equality.' The aspiration should not just be to improve social mobility between different levels of income and society, but to make those levels closer together.

36 It's great to see no new roads here! But perhaps a commitment to look after the roads, pavements, cycleways and roadside equipment we have (eg lights, signs) we have would be a good idea, it's one of the basic things our residents look to us to do. Curiously as it stands we are going to look after the verges (page 38) but not the roads!

36 How about adding an aspiration for Dorset to have more places of higher education within the Dorset Council area?

Unique Environment

38 In the heading, the strapline as explained above should be in terms of the Brundtland definition of 'sustainable'.

38 First indent. We don't provide an environment, it's there independently of us and our job is to see that we don't ruin it. We'd prefer to see a first indent that says

- protect and conserve Dorset's unique ecology and environment, and seek to reverse the decline in biodiversity.

38 Fourth indent. Good to see an aspiration to reduce waste, so it's a pity the Council have just adopted a ten year waste plan that sees it growing by more than 1% a year. Does this imply we going to revisit the plan?

38 Recognise the importance of green spaces to physical and mental health by adding in the how section

- promote ready access for all to natural green spaces to promote both physical and mental health

38 And also add

- promote small scale local organic food production by encouraging allotments and small holdings

Suitable Housing

40 Add to the what section

Demand the highest legally possible standards of energy conservation and generation in new homes.

40 In the how will we do it section add

- Introduce as soon as it is legally and financially possible a Dorset Council Council Housing programme, providing, via new build and acquiring existing properties, homes at affordable rents.
- use so far as is legally possible a definition of affordable housing that relates to local wages rather than local house prices or rents.

Strong Healthy Communities - culture and sport

42 While there is a brief mention of heritage, there is no mention in the draft of the important contribution of culture and sport to people's quality of life, and the role of the Council through supporting things like museums and sports and leisure centres in achieving that. We accept that the Leader acknowledged the culture point at Council on 17 October.

It's not terribly clear under which priority heritage, culture and sport should be put, but given the huge importance of the voluntary sector in delivering heritage, culture and sport, this is perhaps the best section for it. It can then be related to the funding suggestion made in the next paragraph.

42 One of the measures of the strength of a community is the number and vitality of the voluntary organisations it supports (not just heritage, cultural and sporting organisations), what David Cameron used to call 'The Big Society.' The Council has an important role to play here in support given either directly as grant aid, or indirectly as business rate relief. Some communities, often those deprived in other ways, have far fewer such organisations than others, and there should be an aspiration here to

- support voluntary organisations more evenly across Dorset.

42 We were very pleased to see 'provide additional support to communities with the greatest challenges' since it recognises that such communities face issues that are greater than the sum of the issues faced by individuals and that an individual based strategy alone is not sufficient. A reference to significant geographical areas of deprivation in some of our seaside towns would make the point more strongly.

42 This point is especially important in relation to public health. If public health input is spread evenly then rich healthy areas get just as much help as poor poorly areas and the difference in life expectancy will remain fixed or even widen. So we would add

- '- Prioritise and redirect public health resources into areas of high deprivation'

This could of course be said instead in the Staying Safe and Well priority on page 44.

42 A particular point about strong communities might be a commitment to seek to do something about communities where education is less than satisfactory:

- Use such means as are available to the Council to ensure that every community has at every level of education access to schools and colleges that are rated as at least satisfactory by OFSTED

42 In the how section, after bus services add '(especially in rural areas)'. We would favour applying to be able to run a franchising scheme under The Bus Services Act 2017, and perhaps considering this could be added to the plan.

42 In the how section how about adding

- seek to assist the communities in rural villages who are trying to protect or restore essential facilities such as village shops, post offices and pubs.

Staying Safe and Well

It's a bit curious that this section comes last – the activities here, education, social services and our relation to health are collectively the services that dominate our gross spending. Perhaps you intend to move it, we notice it comes first in the web consultation questionnaire.

The scope of the section doesn't seem to fit the heading. Education, mentioned in the second indent, isn't part of 'Staying Safe and Well'. But safe includes freedom from crime, which is not mentioned. And 'Well' implies there should be something on health, which doesn't seem to be there. Isn't the intended scope of this section covered better by something like 'Looking after our people.'

44 To encompass health how about adding

- '- Act on health inequalities and poor health outcomes in deprived areas ' and in the how section 'Invest in public health preferentially in areas of need to improve life expectancy" (if not included on page 42, see above)
- Tackle the social determinants of health; regulating poor housing standards in private rental sector, substantially improve air quality through regulating polluting vehicles and promoting cycling or buses, work on ensuring LEP invests in Dorset's poorest areas by securing better paid secure jobs
- do what we can to discourage the consumption of junk foods and drinks
- 'Using our responsibility for highways to improve road safety.' Then in the how bit 'Make road safety the priority in roads where people live.'
- 'Maintain and enhance locality health and wellbeing boards with identified public health professionals and a budget to secure local improvement"

If you accept the reference to pollution above we could then remove the bit about pollution (and the too weak commitment to managing it) at the bottom of page 38.

44 Surely we need a reference to crime somewhere, and here is perhaps the place. It might include something about protecting young people from exploitation by criminals, and the importance of youth clubs and similar provision.

Values

47 The values section is headed by

'we are an advocate for Dorset on a local, national and global stage.'

An earlier draft said something like 'our principal function is to serve the people of Dorset.' This change is quite a shift in meaning. One way we serve the people of Dorset is to be their advocate on this wider stage, but there are many other ways – like providing effective local regulation of planning and licensing, providing social services, looking after most of the highways etc. It seems a bit odd to leave all that out, it is after all what most of our residents think we are for, and the original draft captured it.

We have a more fundamental objection though to the original draft. The people of Dorset themselves have obligations to a wider world – to pay their taxes for example or take their part in securing national security, the usual requirements of being part of a national community. And we all have responsibilities to the wider international world. Mitigating climate change in Dorset will do vanishingly little to affect climate change as it affects Dorset; the point is that it is a contribution to an international effort to secure a global objective.

We'd suggest something like

'we serve the people of Dorset, and support Dorset's place within and obligations to the wider world'.

47 Our final value is to 'value people.' We might add that we value them by ensuring our staff and those of organisations we contract for services all receive no less than the Living Wage.

47 There is no commitment to democracy in our values. We are tempted to say that this is probably correct for a Council that adopts the leader and cabinet system, and we accept that this was required by law on our formation. And we are genuinely impressed that the current leadership tried to operate in a more open and collegiate way than some of their predecessors. But we would suggest that democracy should be one of our values, and so we offer as a last forlorn hope to add to the values list:

- democracy, and when we review our constitution will consider the possibility of moving away from the Leader and Cabinet model.

The silhouette

48 Isn't it a bit urban apart from Durdle Door? How about a few hills and trees?