

Community Engagement January 2023

Purpose of the Report

To summarise the responses received from the community to the neighbourhood planning survey carried out in January 2023.

Background

The community engagement that took place in January 2023 was made at the suggestion of our consultant. He felt it was important to share the evidence gathered so far and its interpretation, so the public be kept abreast of progress and plan development. It was also an opportunity to test public opinion on some of the policy options, particularly those that related to potential land categorisation and possible development allocations. The response to the survey was reported to various ‘theme-based’ focus groups that took place during February 2023.

During the period of the engagement a third-party leaflet was published which included misleading information on the Neighbourhood Plan and a third-party public meeting was held where this information was repeated. This resulted in a distortion of the results of the survey which was evident in questions 7 and 8. As a result of this the responses to these two questions were discounted. The analysis supporting this decision is provided under the Undue Influence.

This concern was reported to the Democratic Officer at Dorset Council who chose not to investigate deeming the matter to be ‘nuance’. Further advice was sought from Locality (the government funded adviser on Neighbourhood Planning) who deemed the matter unfortunate and suggested a further public engagement. This has delayed the production of this report.

As a result of a further public engagement is planned for August which will seek feedback on each site individually.

Overview

Almost 600 people chose to complete the online questionnaire over the relatively short engagement period. A further 23 people submitted written replies. The answers they have given to the ‘yes/no’ questions provide some clear and significant messages which should be heeded as we prepare the first version of the Neighbourhood Plan.

For the key questions, the people of Weymouth have responded in combination as follows:

Regarding the environmental objectives:

Question 1:	Yes		No		Don't Know		Total
All new developments should minimise the emissions of greenhouse gases and be as near to carbon neutral as possible?	395	66.5%	52	8.8%	147	24.7%	594
All new developments should include measures to conserve and enhance the biodiversity of the area	434	75.7%	28	4.9%	124	21.6%	573
All new developments should maximise the sustainable use of natural resources, the re-use and recycling of resources, and minimise energy consumption and waste	436	73.0%	30	5.0%	131	21.9%	597
All new developments should result in no increase in flood risk and provide adequate resilience to extreme weather events	480	80.7%	18	3.0%	97	16.3%	595

Regarding specific renewable energy projects/initiatives:

Question 2:	Yes		No		Don't Know		Total
Solar panels on buildings	467	78.2%	21	3.5%	109	18.3%	597
Solar panels on land	262	44.0%	145	24.4%	188	31.6%	595
Onshore wind turbines	288	48.3%	150	25.2%	158	26.5%	596
Neighbourhood biomass scheme	208	34.9%	113	19.0%	275	46.1%	596
Neighbourhood heat source scheme	268	45.0%	90	15.1%	238	39.9%	596
Hydroelectricity generation	312	52.4%	59	9.9%	224	37.7%	595

Regarding the protection of valuable open land and green spaces:

Question 3: Responses = 596	Yes		No		Don't Know	
<i>Considering protecting areas of land as potential local green spaces from development. Do you agree?</i>	437	73.3%	32	5.4%	127	21.3%

Regarding the provision of new allotments and more community growing spaces:

Question 4: Responses = 596	Yes		No		Don't Know	
<i>Promoting the provision of neighbourhood allotments and community growing spaces</i>	402	67.4%	36	6.0%	158	26.6%

Regarding green gaps and buffers:

Question 5: Responses = 596	Yes		No		Don't Know	
<i>Protecting community buffers and coastal recreation areas around distinct settlements</i>	399	66.9%	21	3.5%	176	29.5%

Regarding the cycleway network:

Question 6: Responses = 595	Yes		No		Don't Know	
<i>Safeguarding and improving the cycle routes by extending and connecting existing cycleways</i>	365	61.4%	96	16.1%	134	22.5%

Regarding making best use of redundant building:

Question 9: Responses = 593	Yes		No		Don't Know	
<i>Redevelopment of obsolete, under-used and redundant buildings for mixed use employment / residential / leisure. Do you agree?</i>	429	72.3%	34	5.1%	130	21.9%

Regarding allocating sites for business development:

Question 10: Responses = 592	Yes		No		Don't Know	
<i>Encouraging development for employment purposes. Do you agree these sites should be considered?</i>	288	48.6%	84	14.2%	220	37.2%

Undue Influence

Two further questions were included in the questionnaire:

- Question 7: *Regarding the allocation of sites within the defined development boundary for residential development*
- Question 8: *Regarding the allocation of sites outside the defined development boundary for residential development*

Detailed analysis¹ has established that the community response to these questions was significantly affected by inaccurate information that was made public in parts of the Weymouth area during the engagement period. A publicity leaflet was circulated from the 23rd January 2023, and a public meeting held on 25th January 2023, which both inaccurately reported the status of the Plan its development proposals, and purpose of the engagement.

573 people took part in the online survey. 137 completed the survey before 23rd Jan and 436 after.

The major obvious impact is that on Q8 where the 3 sites in the leaflet are referenced the responses changed. Please note the leaflet also referred to car parks which features in Q7 as 2 of the 5 sites being considered.

Responders were asked to indicate support by voting Yes. The raw results are shown below.

Of the 573 responses	Yes	No	Don't Know
Question 7	35%	34%	31%
Question 8	18%	64%	18%

Analysis of the responses on a day-by-day basis shows the results changing dramatically after the 22nd January.

Question	Period	Yes %	No %	Don't Know %
7	Up to 23 rd Jan	57	19	24
	From 23 rd Jan	28	39	33
8	Up to 23 rd Jan	42	32	26
	From 23 rd Jan	11	74	15

As a result of this intervention, the number of responses increased and the character of the response to questions 7 and 8 changed markedly, from the 23rd January 2023. Many of the responses came from residents who were recipients of this misleading information. The disproportionate response from one area has resulted in a significant distortion of the collective views of the community of Weymouth. The Steering Group chose to disregard the results of questions 7 and 8, whilst remaining aware of the concerns that exist in parts of Weymouth, and to seek further clarification through a further public engagement presenting detailed information for each site.

¹ Separately reported to The Monitoring Officer, Dorset Council in February 2023

Analysis

Along with the opportunity to answer the questions directly, respondents were invited to add comments and make suggestions, especially regarding specific sites and locations. Each of the questions, has been read and categorised to aid understanding of community opinion and to help frame relevant discussion questions for the upcoming focus groups.

Members may have observed that the written submissions vary in length, specificity, and complexity. Fortunately, the majority are constructive and positive in intent. From each relevant written comment, the implied or inferred position of the respondent has been captured. Categorisation of the written comments that were received online, or in writing, and initial observations are set out below, on a question-by-question basis.

Environmental Objectives (question 1)

It is comforting at this stage of the neighbourhood planning process to have firm evidence that current public opinion is aligned with the proposed strategic environmental objectives. They had been based on an interpretation of the evidence findings and previous community engagements. It is good to have that interpretation endorsed.

Three of the objectives received the support of around 75% or more of respondents. The fourth objective of minimising carbon emissions received the support of two-thirds of the respondents (together with a “don’t know” from almost a quarter of respondents).

There is evidence of uncertainty amongst the population regarding every one of the four environmental objectives and the application measures being proposed; but few people are opposed to trying. The focus group, that followed, was asked to consider how the community can be encouraged to recognise and actively support the role of the environmental objectives in influencing future development proposals.

Renewable Energy (question 2)

Question 2 sought to explore public opinion regarding many of the energy technologies. Only one renewable energy measure received a majority approval. That is solar panels on buildings, a technology which is now well understood and accepted. Also hydroelectricity received support by a smaller margin.

Interestingly several of the other forms of renewable energy generation were not dismissed. The use of open land for either arrays of solar farms or wind turbines, for instance, was only opposed by around a quarter of the respondents. The community, it seems, may be open to the new ideas and methods if they can be accommodated without unacceptable harm or intrusion. The focus group was asked if the draft Neighbourhood Plan should consider endorsing or facilitating any specific measures.

Green Space (question 3 regarding the protection of valuable open land and green spaces)

The answer to question 3 was positive. Only a small proportion of respondents disagreed with the question; and most of those that did, chose not to explain why. The written comments are dominated by suggestions of which green spaces should be protected. Not surprisingly many respondents took the opportunity to suggest areas of land regardless of whether they satisfy the NPPF criteria to be designated as 'local green space'. The focus group was asked to consider the merits of the sites suggested and on what basis they might best be protected from development. There were few doubts expressed about the LGS sites already identified.

Question 3: Comments categorised	No.	%
Support general	8	7.8%
Support or nominate specific site (s)	72	70.6%
Conditional support	13	12.7%
Concerns	6	5.9%
Opposition general	0	0%
Opposition specific site(s)	3	2.9%
	102	100%

Allotments (question 4 regarding new allotments and community growing spaces)

Few respondents oppose the idea of promoting the provision of more allotments in the Neighbourhood Plan. The main matters of concern, or opposition to expansion, relate to the ability of those running the allotments to keep them productive. The focus group was asked to consider where new allotment sites should be promoted and how they can be facilitated.

Question 4: Comments categorised	No.	%
Support with area/site suggestions	15	22.7%
Support in principle	21	31.8%
Conditional support	6	9.1%
Concerns specific	3	4.6%
Concerns general	10	15.2%
Opposition	5	7.8%
Other	6	9.1%
	66	100%

Gaps and Buffers (question 5 regarding green gaps and buffers)

Question 5 conflates two aspects of interest, that of green gaps between settlements and that of coastal recreation strips. Most respondents focussed on the former and were in support of retaining gaps between settlements. Many seemed most keen to prevent further housing development, rather than safeguarding distinct character areas. For many, it is important to retain the "important open gaps" designated in the present Local Plan. The focus group was asked to consider whether the green gaps still have relevance, still have community support and to what extent they need adding to or adjusting. The relative lack of written response regarding coastal recreation areas is likely because they are not considered to be under any kind of development threat.

Question 5: Comments categorised	No.	%
Buffers, support for specific areas	23	31.9%
Buffers, support in principle	17	23.6%
Buffers, doubts, and sceptics	18	25.0%
Coastal recreation, support for specific locations	5	6.9%
Coastal recreation, support	5	6.9%
Coastal Recreation Sceptics	1	1.4%
Other	3	4.2%
	72	100%

Cycleways (question 6 regarding the cycleway network)

Local opinion about cycling is mixed. Around a fifth of respondents expressed concerns about the functionality and safety of parts of the existing network. More than a third of all respondents have doubts about the need or value of extending the cycleway network, because of cost, safety issues and the impact on the motor vehicle network. The focus group was asked if there are ways that the cycleway network can be improved, extended, and made more complete that will be generally acceptable to the community.

Question 6: Comments categorised	No.	%
Support with specific suggestions	15	12.3%
Support in principle	31	25.4%
Concerns about existing cycleways	27	22.1%
Concerns about extensions to cycleways	21	17.2%
Opposed to extensions to cycleways	20	16.4%
Oppose to current cycleways	2	1.6%
Other	6	4.9%
	122	100%

Development Sites within the DDB (question 7 regarding prioritising sites for affordable housing)

Please note that the results to this question were influenced by the misleading information circulated on 23rd Jan. Analysis of the written comments shows the following.

	Period	In Favour	Opposed	Concerned	Other
Question 7	Pre 23 rd Jan	48.6%	21.6%	16.2%	13.5%
	23 rd to 25 th Jan	38.2%	14.7%	44.1%	3.0%
	Post 25 th Jan	29.5%	43.8%	19.6%	7.1%

Up to 23rd Jan there was a majority in favour of site development. This started to shift between 23rd and 25th January and with a reversal of the response pattern after the 25th Jan.

The focus group was asked which are the key housing development sites within the Defined Development Boundary and what should the housing function and mix on them be.

Development Sites outside the DDB (question 8 regarding exception sites for affordable housing)

Please note that the results to this question were influenced by the misleading information circulated on 23rd Jan. On Q8 there was a majority in favour of the sites being considered before 23rd Jan but after the 23rd Jan this shifted to a majority being opposed.

	Period	In Favour	Opposed	Concerned	Other
Question 8	Pre 23 rd Jan	56.4%	34.7%	8.7%	0%
	23 rd to 25 th Jan	12.3%	59.6%	22.8%	5.3%
	Post 25 th Jan	8.0%	70.8%	20.1%	1%

Nearly all the objections refer to the Wyke Oliver, Budmouth Avenue and Lodmoor tip sites and not the other 7 sites under consideration.

The focus group was asked which sites outside the DDB may be acceptable to the community if an affordable housing scheme can be put together.

Redundant Sites and Buildings (question 9 regarding making best use of redundant building)

A high proportion of respondents support a development strategy that focusses on the regeneration potential of obsolete and redundant buildings and sites for mixed-use developments. Several specific sites and locations largely in and around the town centre have been suggested. A few respondents fear that redevelopment would adversely change the character of an area with which they are familiar or content. The focus group was asked to consider the merit of the several suggestions and if and how they might be realised.

Question 9: Comments categorised	No.	%
Support general	34	35.1%
Support with specifics	30	30.9%
Conditional support	19	19.6%
Concerns and doubts	12	12.4%
Opposed general	2	2.0%
Other	0	0%
	97	100%

Employment development sites (question 10 regarding allocating sites for business development)

The majority opinion expressed in the written comment associate with Question 10 is that more employment land development could be good for the area, especially if it focusses on the right type of jobs in the right areas. There is significant opposition to development on some of the land shown on Map G, for various reasons. The focus group was asked to consider how it will be possible to deliver new jobs and better jobs within the local area, without significant greenfield development, and if there are acceptable greenfield sites.

Question 10: Comments categorised	No.	%
Support specific sites	6	5.0%
Oppose specific sites	24	20.5%
Support in general	18	15.4%
Conditional support	33	28.2%
Concerned and doubts	16	13.7%
Oppose for whatever reason	10	8.6%
Other	10	8.6%
	117	100%