

Lytchett Matravers Parish Council

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Councillor David Walsh, Portfolio Holder for Planning, Dorset Council

CCs : Dorset Council Eastern Area Planning Committee
Michael Tomlinson, MP for Mid Dorset and North Poole
Andrew Starr, Dorset Councillor, Lytchett Matravers/Upton
Bill Pipe, Dorset Councillor, Lytchett Matravers/Upton

Dear Councillor Walsh,

I refer to the conversation and email exchange you and I had in early 2020 just before lockdown was imposed. This was specifically about the role of Parish Councils in the planning process. The Localism Act reflects the aspiration for planning at a local level, with an emphasis on Neighbourhood Plans and local communities being able to shape and influence their environment.

Despite that I must report considerable dismay and frustration about Dorset Council's planning performance from our villagers and my colleagues on the Parish Council. This is not so much about the delays in the planning application process (that is understood given Covid and staff shortages) but rather about your strategic policy approach.

Our concerns broadly fall into four headings, namely:-

1. Green Belt
2. Climate Change Emergency
3. Infrastructure
4. Role of Parish Council/ Community Planning and the by-passing thereof

Green Belt

Lytchett Matravers is surrounded by Green Belt and has been since the early 1980s. During those 40 years of Green Belt 'protection' the village has doubled in size to c1700 dwellings through constant erosion process allowed by Purbeck District Council, an approach now about to be perpetuated by Dorset Council.

The principal Green Belt function is to maintain an undeveloped zone around major conurbations to prevent 'sprawl' but also to provide green space and recreation for the conurbation

Our Prime Minister expressly announced only two months ago at his party conference, that it must be brownfield sites first and that no longer can greenfield sites be seen as land waiting to be developed. In addition, our local MP has written to Cllr Spencer Flower supporting this strategy stating that 'The Government has made it clear that building on the greenbelt should happen only in very exceptional circumstances'. It

seems to me that unless and until all other avenues have been explored, that high barrier and that high test has not been met.

Notwithstanding that the proposed PLP2 wants to add a further 150 houses and now the emerging Dorset Local Plan wants to add another 200 houses! This is extraordinary and completely inexplicable to our villagers who are now angry and upset. There seems to be a complete mismatch between our politicians' fine statements and the mad scramble for more houses at any cost.

We understand that as the Local Planning Authority you seek to do the Government's bidding in looking for more housing sites. But surely, given that we are still in a state of uncertainty over how Brexit and migration will evolve, whilst also still in the midst of a major pandemic with work and shopping patterns changing and newly vacated large office and retail buildings becoming available for residential re-use, the emphasis must be redirected from green field sites. Pragmatic re-use of existing resources must take preference over developers' convenience and landowners' aspirations.

Climate Change Emergency

Dorset Council has declared a Climate Change Emergency. This is the most fundamental crisis facing all of us which cannot be addressed by fine words alone. COP26, just last month, made that very clear and it follows that it is incumbent on all of us represented by Dorset Council, to urgently review all strategic planning policies with a view to meeting the net-zero commitments announced and agreed at COP26.

Focussing new highly energy efficient zero-carbon housing in the most sustainable locations is key to this. Sustainable locations means arranging homes, schools, workplaces, etc all within easy short walking/cycling distances and where that is not possible, with direct access to frequent efficient public transport networks. A prime example which has proved how this can work is here in Dorset at Poundbury.

The emerging Local Plans must be reconsidered to achieve these simple objectives – housing sites must be close to their infrastructure facilities and public transport networks. They must not perpetuate the discredited notion of dormitory suburbs relying on car commuter links. Wherever housing is proposed it must be balanced with employment and communal facilities in the same close locality. It is simple to achieve and makes for more attractive and popular living environments which in turn engender thriving communities and a healthy economy.

Infrastructure

Lytchett Matravers is served by minor country roads, with a sparse bus service and distant from rail connections. There are very limited local employment opportunities and yet the village demographic is largely made of working families. It follows that with all the housing growth since the 1980s, we have increasingly become a car-bound commuter dormitory. It is an unsustainable model which should now be redressed, not exacerbated.

In terms of the wider service infrastructure, we have met with Wessex Water who are very aware of sewerage and drainage overloads to their system with consequent contamination of downstream watercourses and the well-publicised contamination and damage to Poole harbour's eco-system. However, they are seemingly not empowered to resist further development pending solutions to these problems. Their only remedy would appear to be to form a reedbed on third party land which could lead to pressure for further Green Belt release.

Role of Parish Council/ Community Planning

Our Parish Council endeavours to be pro-active in supporting and developing our village as a thriving and sustainable community and we have had considerable success and support from our residents in that. Our Neighbourhood Plan was adopted 2017 with a focus on village centre viability and an emphasis on walking accessibility to village amenities. Good progress has been achieved already with a new safe walking route to school, a consolidation of the village centre and the formation of active village work parties keeping our paths,

pavements and green spaces in good order. We were even the first Parish Council in the country to put in public Electric Vehicle Charging Points (well before Dorset Council!).

In preparing the NP, Purbeck DC's officers would not allow any reference to the probable further growth of the village into Green Belt land; that despite the then already well publicised emerging Local Plan. We were obliged to remain silent on the subject. Hence, we do not have any role in the location, layout, design or linkages of the emerging developments, one of which (6/2021/0282 - 95 houses off Wareham Road), has already been submitted prematurely. We are put in a position where we can only react. Instead, we should be in a position to be proactive, hence we are now embarking on a NP refresh (NP2). We sincerely trust that your officers will be instructed to engage constructively with us in that process.

We reasonably expect support from your officers when planning applications are submitted at variance with our adopted NP policies. However, in the case of a developer who ignored the terms of his PP by converting a shop into a flat (expressly contrary to NP policy NP4), your officers declined to take any action whatsoever. A retrospective application was instead supported by your officers who were naively persuaded by 'non-viability report'. An intelligent interpretation of the report demonstrated that the premises would have been viable and its retention would have contributed massively to the sustainable self-sufficiency of our community.

On other occasions our PC has pointed out examples of planning breaches/non-compliance with Conditions etc, but your officers seemingly disregard us. The increasing perception, both on the part of our PC and by residents, is that the local view is of no import to your officers.

An ongoing and serial example is the increasing number of 'essential' new buildings being allowed in the Green Belt around the village. The 'essential' buildings are invariably sited to obtain the best elevated views only to then qualify for Class Q PD rights for change of use to dwellings. The PD referrals are no longer notified to our Parish Council but instead are dealt with by lax and inexperienced officers, unaware of local circumstances (and probably too pressed for time to go into detail). The result is an increasing and damaging impact on the Green Belt – inappropriate buildings in non-sustainable locations.

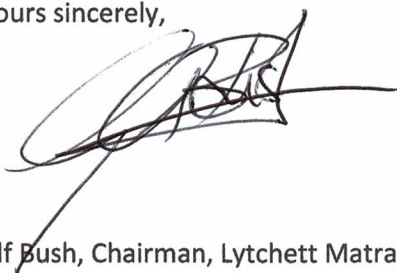
We have also seen several planning applications where the Parish Council has been omitted as a consultee, despite the application being for a building in the Green Belt. For at least two of these neighbours have been allowed to comment, but the Parish Council was informed for information only. What process is this and when was it published (see below for case details).

We understand that the planning enforcement process has effectively now been included in the remit of the case officer. This is clearly not the independent review as it was in the past. Further we were informed by Dorset Council's own Democratic Services Officer that if we wished to challenge any planning decision, we had to initiate a judicial review. How can that hugely costly legal process be a function of a parish council?

The clear question is, what is our role in the democratic process? The Parish Council is not an expert planning team, we do not have the resources of planning consultants to aid us in every application and we certainly do not have the resources for judicial reviews.

The Parish Council represents the community and is the foundation of the local democratic process. There needs to be formal recognition of that status and an integration of all Parish Councils with a clear elevated role above that of resident. We need to return to the principles of the Localism Act and that aspiration for planning at a local level.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alf Bush', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Alf Bush, Chairman, Lytchett Matravers Parish Council

Green Belt Planning Applications in November/December 2021:

6/2021/0302	Change of use from agricultural to dwelling house.	The PC were not even copied on this one. A neighbour raised out attention to the application in progress. No consultees were allowed for this application
P/PAAC/2021/04126	Conversion of existing agricultural building to a 1-bedroom residential dwelling.	PC informed for information only. Neighbours invited to respond
P/PABA/2021/05355	Erect a new agricultural building, but there is no farm and there has not been any farming activity in many years	PC informed for information only. Neighbours invited to respond