

## ***Feeling Towns: Pride and Dorchester***

### **Partner Report for Dorchester Town Council**

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#### **Executive Summary**

The *Feeling Towns* project, in collaboration with officers at Dorchester Town Council, explored the meaning and value of pride, culture, heritage and the environment in Dorchester. Research was undertaken between February and June 2023, when local government and stakeholders sought to understand different strategic visions for the town and its resident communities. We undertook fieldwork, speaking with approximately 300 people using a variety of research methods, including interviews, fieldwork and facilitated creative workshops. We also undertook desk-based research, placing Dorchester's cultural, heritage and digital strategy within a wider comparative context.

We found that there was much to celebrate and feel proud of in Dorchester: its green spaces, its heritage and heritage assets, its community and workers, and its role as a county town. These were all sources of obvious pride. We found that this was also an active community, with a rich culture and history of volunteering, community engagement and care from the local authority and beyond. We also noted that it is not immune to the issues facing many small, rural towns: the depletion of the High Street, the retention of young people in skilled work, the lack of housing, and the character of new housing developments. These were all sites of shared, and recurring, concern.

In our fieldwork we noted that *change* was viewed differently by Dorchester's various communities. We propose that understanding—and communicating across—different views could present change in very productive ways for the town. We also think that the high levels of community engagement in the town offer rich possibilities for facilitating and creating community-owned narratives and identities. Most of our specific recommendations support these two overall insights. We found, for example, that Dorchester saw itself both as a community connected to the wider region and as a small, close-knit town that resisted change. We found that there was a significant concern about a lack of affordable or rented accommodation and a concern about the location and identity of new housing developments. We found that residents want to actively relate to, and feel ownership in, the ways in which Dorchester presents itself—its heritage, its history, its present and future.

In our deskwork, by placing Dorchester's strategies into the context of comparable places, we noted that although Dorchester has rich heritage assets, it could do more to develop a community-led digital shopfront, services specifically aimed at young people, techniques of community engagement, and conditions for a vibrant evening economy.

#### **Our central recommendations are to:**

- develop a programme of hyper-local, hidden histories in Dorchester to celebrate the different identities and areas of the town so that residents can share new stories for taken-for granted places and that new developments are given a wider context;

- support spaces and opportunities for young people to co-create activities with older generations, particularly focusing on the possibilities of shared skills and interests that the emphasis on sustainable food and fashion suggest;
- enhance community ownership of green spaces, by establishing a series of allotment projects that are accessible to a wide range of groups and celebrate these spaces;
- celebrate the stories and communities of minority groups, with more place-based research undertaken to understand the attachments of minority groups in Dorchester and their contributions to the town;
- design an inclusive communication strategy for a new physical and digital shopfront that celebrates Dorchester's engagement and commitment to place;
- develop a community ownership strategy that builds project development and bidding capacity, placing Dorchester more visibly in national conversations about small towns to understand shared issues and develop specific solutions (e.g. around the future of high streets, young people and skills).

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## Introduction

[\*Feeling Towns\*](#) is an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded knowledge exchange project led by the University of Southampton. It explores the role of place and identity in governance and local policy, paying close attention to the government's [Levelling Up](#) agenda, which identified "restoring pride in place" as one of its 12 guiding missions. We have brought together a community of practice from a range of sectors, communities and geographies to share knowledge and expertise to better understand the correlation between pride, place attachment—understood as the emotional bonds developed between people and place—and the health of local cultural ecologies. With our partners, we developed a co-produced case study approach to address the specific needs of each organisation and place. We have conducted fieldwork and developed our creative methodologies with the communities who live, work and volunteer in these places.

The project responded directly to the Council's need for research to establish a clearer but more nuanced understanding of place attachment and the role of heritage, cultural and the environmental assets for Dorchester's residents. Findings from previous and comparable projects allowed us to contextualise deskwork on local policies and quantitative data about Dorchester and the region. This work informed meetings and interviews with local council officers, leading to a co-creation sandpit in which we identified:

- The Council's need to better understand local resident, business and third-sector feelings about the town, particularly in the context of an extant culture and heritage strategy focused on promoting tourism, as distinct from the needs of residents
- The Council's particular need to better understand the feelings of younger residents (specifically under-18s and 21–30 year olds) for their town
- A series of five community and stakeholder events to meet these needs, using the variety of facilitated creative research methods that have been tried and tested in previous projects
- A final presentation of findings to participants, stakeholders and council partners

In this context, the purpose of this report is threefold: i. to articulate specific challenges in Dorchester that relate to the understanding of pride in place, culture, heritage and the

environment; ii. to summarise the project's activities in Dorchester; iii. to present key themes, findings and recommendations.

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### **Challenges for Dorchester**

Dorchester faces several challenges relating to the relationship between its tourist and resident communities; providing local opportunities for its young people; and developing its “shopfront” in ways that make sense to a range of local stakeholders. As noted in recent strategic reports, these challenges require consultation methods that enable stakeholders to visualise new futures for Dorchester and different spaces to articulate the aspirations of the communities who live, work and volunteer there.

In the [2020 Heritage Tourism Strategy](#), Dorchester Town Council emphasised the need to spotlight its heritage assets, stimulate its tourist economy and encourage people from across Dorset to visit the town. This ambition has been supported by efforts to build a new long-term vision, develop a digital marketing approach, deliver volunteers' training, make tourism sustainable and improve the visitor experience. This significant programme of work has been sustained by focusing on the diverse interests of visitors and tourists, in line with the Dorchester's aim **“to become known as a progressive and welcoming town in Wessex, passionate about and celebrating its wonderful and extensive heritage and its environment.”** Our discussions with senior Council officers demonstrated that while attention to the heritage tourism economy has been crucial to Dorchester's economic and cultural development, this work should be complemented by focusing on the needs of different resident communities in Dorchester.

Specifically, we see opportunities for the Council to engage with communities it has identified as seldom heard, including young people, many of whom leave Dorchester for new lifestyle and career opportunities. In this respect, the project echoes the priorities outlined in the [Dorchester Directory of Aims and Aspirations \(2017–20\)](#), which promises “ways of engaging and supporting minority and isolated groups” and to **“promote and encourage diversity and equal opportunities to increase community cohesion.”** [Consultation](#) on the Dorchester BID also calls for further support for youth organisations. Feedback from organisations on a [Community Action Plan](#) argued that young people require more assistance with “housing, jobs/training, activities and emotional well-being.” The repetition of these challenges in recent strategy documents reveals that sustaining engagement with young people remains an ongoing challenge.

The research and consultation work undertaken for this project has highlighted the need for a Dorchester branding and “shopfront” that represents the interests, aspirations and priorities of residents as well as visitors. The [Dorchester BID Business Plan \(2018–23\)](#) alludes to this balance, stating that the town should promote and market itself “to attract more visitors and residents” so that they are “staying longer, visiting more frequently, and spending more in local businesses.” Yet to understand the needs of residents and the spaces they use, which may not map onto the spaces important to visitors, more work on pride, place attachment and civic engagement is required. This approach addresses [feedback](#) on Dorchester's Community Action Plan, which called for more ways to **“encourage civic pride in open spaces, i.e. through developing nature walks, open garden schemes, [and] improving town décor.”** The *Feeling Towns* research on pride and place attachment also contributes to

the wider policy context: where competitive place-making relies on subjective government metrics, and where pride is a key indicator for understanding the social fabric of hyper-local communities.

Responding to these challenges, we co-produced the following research questions with Dorchester Town Council:

1. **Heritage:** How do Dorchester's resident communities engage with local heritage?
2. **Community:** Which assets are important to resident communities? What are their aspirations for the town's development?
3. **Pride:** How do pride and place attachment facilitate local decision-making?

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### **Research Methods**

Methods included desk research and informal, online interviews with senior officers from the Council. Fieldwork was conducted during five events in different locations. We facilitated a creative consultation at a volunteers' workshop in the Corn Exchange, using timeline drawing and poetry collage to elicit responses and generate qualitative artefacts.

We used creative methods including emoji mapping on South Street and poetry collage at a Youth Council meeting, which we replicated in Dorchester Market and at Vivo Lounge at a workshop for young people. We presented the findings and analysis drawn from this research at a stakeholder consultation, which included Council officers, community groups and research participants.

### **List of activities**

- 02–04/23: Deskwork on data and previous research on Dorchester; town typologies; creative methods
- 28/02/2023: A creative workshop with volunteers' in the cultural, environmental, and heritage sectors, using timeline drawing and poetry collage activities
- 16/03/2023: A poetry collage workshop at an under-18s Youth Council meeting
- 20/04/2023: A poetry collage workshop with 21–30 year olds in a café, Vivo Lounge
- 16/03/2023: An 'Emoji mapping' activity on a weekday in a commercial location, South Street
- 20/04/2023: An 'Emoji mapping' activity on a weekday in Dorchester Market
- 09/06/2023: A presentation of findings and analysis at a stakeholder consultation, including council officers, stakeholders, and research participants

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### **Key Themes and Findings**

#### Heritage

- **Invisible and unsung heritage.**
  - Some participants—particularly volunteers—wanted more attention paid to what they understood as Dorchester's "unseen" heritage assets, using effective branding and communication. Assets participants regarded as

“unseen” included the Roman baths, the tunnels and the stone circles.

Participants suggested more signage for Borough Gardens and the Roman Town House, as well as better access to the stone circles via car parks.

- Yet participants reflected on increasing signposting in these spaces: they balanced concerns that signs would generate crowds and interrupt the quiet qualities of the space with reflections on past events in Borough Gardens that have generated crowds, but in a positive, welcoming way. These thoughts suggest that future consultation opportunities would be met with nuanced thinking about heritage-focused street furniture.
  - The history of Dorchester was evoked in nostalgic, multisensory ways. Participants remembered the aromas of hops from the old brewery and the smell of coffee beans from the cafes during the 1970s. What was considered heritage could also be highly personal or even apparently mundane: some participants highlighted the steamroller in the Kings Road play area as an evocative source of pride. Others praised the jumble trail on Monmouth Road as an integral part of the town’s recent local identity. These views suggest highly creative methods Dorchester might deploy to engage long-standing residents in future cultural activities that exceed established heritage routes.
- **Protecting heritage from development.**
    - In an emoji mapping exercise, some participants used the south-west margins of the map to indicate Maiden Castle and the hillforts, because they were “nice, historic, protected.” That the area could not be built on by developers proved particularly crucial to participants, with one explicitly stating that Maiden Castle was attractive because it was “safe from development.”
    - Across the consultations, this impulse to protect Maiden Castle was not entirely inward-looking, with some participants understanding it as a symbol of connectedness to communities beyond Dorchester. Several volunteers expressed pride in the fact that Dorchester was twinned with Bayeux, with one poem stating that “a movie of Dorchester would be a travel film—a road movie linking with Bayeux and a closing shot over Maiden Castle, with the channel in the background.”
    - Many respondents referred to the new development under construction in the north of Dorchester in negative ways, placing angry and despairing stickers on the proposed site. Residents often turned to using humorous language, referring to the development as “Norchester,” imbuing the site with otherness, understanding it as separated from Dorchester itself.
  - **Green heritage.**
    - The 21–30 group valued the environment in Dorchester, and specifically mentioned the pleasures of going for long walks in the area. This reflection suggests that Dorchester’s heritage trail has an application for residents as well as tourist communities. However, the group tempered this positive feedback by agreeing that Dorchester presents its heritage assets as “interesting in their own right,” without much attempt at marketing towards specific, underserved local communities.
    - While many participants identified a generational divide in home ownership and certain community engagement settings, there was also a real sense that

the enjoyment of green spaces and heritage activities crossed generations. There were several instances during the marketplace consultation where parents and grandparents talked about day trips with children and grandchildren to museums and parks across the town, and a small number spoke of how those early visits inspired relocation to the area in later life. One participant gleefully compared Dorchester to “a Blue Vinny cheese” because it is “rich and creamy, rustic and with a deep blue vein of culture!”

### Young People and Community

- **Housing developments.**
  - There was a sense that the town needed more residential and rental accommodation, especially for young people, but that the housing estates and new developments, those which had prompted a defence of built and green heritage sites, were not the answer. One volunteer hoped that young people would be “looked after” in the future, and that there would be more social housing to accommodate them.
  - Discussions about the new development in North Dorchester were ambivalent at best, and often provoked strong negative feelings. Some participants felt a generational divide, too, noting that new developments were positive for older people, who are more likely to have existing assets, but negative for younger people, because of the perception that they drive up house prices in the area.
  - Participants often cited housing issues to explain the difficulty Dorchester had in retaining young people. For example, one volunteer noted that their son had moved to Weymouth to rent, because he could not afford to remain in Dorchester. Similarly, one young person stated that while it was “valuable to love this town,” they needed to move to a city “to do the things I want to do.” This sentiment reveals tensions between a sense of nostalgia for the place with a need to fulfil aspirations in another place.
  - This tension was also reflected in the creative responses. For example, one young person thought that if Dorchester were a film, the closing shot would be a character walking away from the camera because people are always leaving. As the group put the poem together, it was agreed that “we should finish the poem with the person walking away.”
- **Intergenerational empathy.**
  - While negative comments about Dorchester’s housing developments indicate a generational divide, groups of various ages were alert and sympathetic to the problems faced by young people in the area. For example, some volunteers stated that Dorchester does not feel as safe as it did when they were children and they worry more generally for the safety of young people.
  - This empathy became more nuanced when the 21–30 group talked about residents in Dorchester younger than themselves. As one participant noted: “there’s nothing to do in Dorchester and they get into trouble for causing trouble.” There is motivation within the community to better serve young people, and targeted engagement and volunteering opportunities could cross generations.

- Likewise, while young people attributed some problems to older generations, they also exhibited a keenness to find space in community groups traditionally populated by older people, but found that they often struggled to do so. During a poetry collage, one young person joked: “I have a theme emerging—slow, old!” Another participant suggested that “there’s always drama in Dorchester,” mostly relating to older people. At the same time, the 21–30 year-olds clearly wanted to find space for themselves in community groups traditionally populated by older people, mentioning that the lack of activities outside work hours, and the sense that a particular event was *for* older people, prevented them from attending.
- **Lack of spaces.**
  - Young people—particularly those over the age of 21, returning or moving to Dorchester after university—want to feel like something is happening in the area. The perception is that there are things for children and older adults to do, but little for young people in this age group. Many events targeted at young people revolve around alcohol or are aimed at parents with young children. There was anxiety that from a marketing perspective, people in their 20s were not distinguished from children, with one participant noting: “we need space for play [too].”
  - Young people wanted a chance to experience culture and the arts, but noted that these opportunities often felt geared towards children or the elderly.
  - Young people often brought up the topic of boredom and how it was dictated by the seasons. While summer brings festivals and outdoor entertainment, winter is understood as a four- to five-month period where little is happening, compounded by the fact that there are few indoor spaces. Those that exist do not always feel welcoming to this age demographic. A young person compared Dorchester to “a rowing boat with a hole in,” which prompted another to say that they are “constantly having to create their own fun.”
  - The market consultation also showed instances where community groups had been lost due to understaffing or a lack of funding. During an emoji mapping exercise, a young woman in her teens placed a sad face sticker on the site of her old gymnastics club. She did not make friends easily at her SEND school, but spoke with enthusiasm about the club and friends she had made. She listed certificates she had won and skills she had learned. Lamenting that the club had closed, her mother noted that it gave her daughter “a sense of community” that she subsequently missed.
- **Night-time economy.**
  - In Dorchester, the lack of night-time economy became another issue that highlighted generational divides. During a poetry collage session, one volunteer noted the “juxtaposition” of interests between young and older people, citing the example of a popular nightclub that had closed down because of neighbours’ noise complaints.
  - As stated in the case study research, the best spaces for day and night economies are multi-functional and attuned to sustainability discourses.

- **Dippy.**
  - There was an immediate, strong sense of the National History Museum dinosaur exhibition: positive feelings of pride are still associated with it. It was important that Dorchester was the first place to exhibit Dippy and that the whole town was involved, illustrated by the footsteps from the train station. It was also important that all volunteers from different organisations came together: that it was open, accessible and generative.
  - The number of visitors—154,000—was remembered by many volunteers because it demonstrated what was possible. Memories of Dippy, and the dig that followed in the museum, were powerful, positive and shared.
  - However, particularly among the volunteer group, it was felt that the energy and potential of the exhibition was not built upon and many voices called for more joined-up thinking, especially on communication and visibility. This tension was summarised by one participant, who, citing Dippy, described Dorchester as a “slow-moving” dinosaur. The focus of these conversations on momentum and joined-up thinking echoed aims outlined in Dorchester’s Community Action Plan.
  - These comments also demonstrated that it is not necessarily local heritage that is important to Dorchester’s communities, but the idea of Dorchester being positively represented on the national and international stage.
  
- **Place attachment and scale.**
  - Volunteers thought that Poundbury detracted from the identity of the town.
  - Participants across the consultations demonstrated their attachment to Dorchester at a variety of scales and in a range of contexts. Dorchester Town FC was mentioned as an important part of the community, particularly in respect to its neighbours. A recent football match still resonated, where Weymouth fans comically referred to Dorchester as “dirty, Northern bastards.”
  - The West Country was occasionally evoked as a regional identity of which Dorchester was a part. One participant referred ambivalently to the area as “the land that time forgot.”
  - While at times participants amplified Dorchester’s role in wider geographies, they also sought to maintain the town’s distinctiveness and its smallness, particularly in opposition to unpopular development projects.
  - In a mapping exercise, one participant placed a “monkey covering its ears” emoji on the Town Council building, because they felt that the Council does not listen, and were concerned that the town would obtain small city status if it continued to expand. The participant emphasised that Dorchester needs to stay a “beautiful, historic, small market town,” because it cannot cope with being otherwise. The participant concluded that the school is “full to bursting,” there is no teacher recruitment, and “they are desperate to put housing up.”
  - Pride in Dorchester’s smallness and its green spaces translated to a deep connection between pride and geography, with one participant going so far as to say “my pride is the landscape.”
  - In contrast, one participant mentioned that the generation above theirs (aged 80–90) included many people who had spent their entire lives in Dorchester, but who were nonetheless unfamiliar with key cultural landmarks.



- Pride extended to hyper-local spaces. Fordington was a popular and delineated locale within Dorchester – many residents who lived there were keen to emphasise its sense of community and its various amenities, including a chip shop, postbox and convenience store.

### Digital Shopfront

- **Visibility.**

- Volunteers were particularly conscious about what Dorchester might look like to outsiders. Several were concerned that cruise tours disembarking at Portland Bay are often more likely to visit Salisbury than Dorchester, which led to some participants expressing a fear of being missed out.
- One volunteer raised the question of Dorchester’s visibility. The point was made that Dorchester is a County Town but doesn’t feel like it, because there is a perception that Bournemouth and Poole dominate the coastline.
- Younger participants were more likely to make jokes about the pervasiveness of Thomas Hardy in local branding and culture, whereas the older volunteer cohort repeatedly placed Hardy at the centre of their creative responses to the area: imagining Hardy movies, documentaries and statues. This difference brings into relief comments made at the 21–30 workshop, where participants noted that heritage assets are often presented as being interesting and engaging in their own right.

- **Communication.**

- Across the groups, but especially among the volunteers, there was a desire for more effective communication for tourists and residents. Suggestions varied from the traditional to the modern, with participants requesting: a town crier; a tourist information office; digital and paper newsletters; better connectivity and shared ticketing across the museums; and more local information events.
- Yet existing digital communications gave rise to complaints among some participants. For example, the feeling that Poundbury was now prioritised over Dorchester, or that one elided the other, was reinforced by the Council’s slides at the volunteer event, which used images of Poundbury to illustrate Dorchester. Similarly, a young person noted that the “Dorchester News and Views” Facebook group was a regular source of “drama.”
- While these responses are varied, they suggest that for residents, a successful digital shopfront establishes consistent internal and external communication that is alert to place attachment and local identity. This point echoes recommendations from our desk research (see Bridport and Ledbury Summary Reports).

### Regeneration

- **Shopping and the market.**

- There was anxiety about closed-up shops, which was perceived as a local rather than a national issue. While some wanted more small shops—to be

more like Totnes—others wanted fewer coffee shops and more residential housing in the town rather than outside of the town.

- Volunteers understood shops as a pull factor for Dorchester. One participant related this observation to Dorchester’s standing in the county, stating that “we need shops to bring people to the county town. Shops support the museums and vice versa.”
  - The high street is seen as one of the few positive things about Poundbury.
  - The market is understood as a declining site in need of regeneration. One participant placed a “despair” emoji on the market, noting that it gives her a feeling of sadness: because it is “all falling apart” and it does not look like a county market; because current market stall holders do not feel supported; and because the artisans—those who make the market distinctive—have disappeared. Again, this impetus to regenerate is motivated by a sense of what Dorchester looks like as a county town on regional and national stages.
- **Broken window syndrome.**
    - At the market consultation, one participant stated that “the heart of Dorchester has gone,” and noted that on the High Street there are few independent shops. Dorchester only has the “big shops everyone else has” or the shops are empty. They ascribed this problem to issues with business rates and buildings containing asbestos, describing it as “broken window syndrome.”
    - The participant also noted that this feeling of exclusivity is felt beyond a business context, explaining that they liked Brewery Square, but that it felt clichish, a sentiment echoed by young people in another consultation.
  - **Poundbury.**
    - Poundbury was seen as a “retirement community,” a “pastiche” and a “toy town.” It was often compared to the TV series, The Prisoner, and there was awareness that a recent dystopian fiction had been filmed there. More pressingly, it was seen to “take resources” from Dorchester. One participant found it emblematic that the Council “cut up” her favourite footpath to develop Poundbury, which is almost universally viewed as a negative addition.
    - Yet there was some acknowledgement that Poundbury was attractive to people because of its “kudos,” its connection to King Charles, and the relatively low maintenance of its newly built homes.
    - There was a feeling that the “old, original” Poundbury should be remembered. This point, coupled with enthusiasm among volunteer communities to make more of smaller heritage sites, suggests the need to amplify Dorchester’s hidden histories.
  - **New developments.**
    - One participant was part of the protest against the North Dorchester development but lamented that those in charge “don’t listen” and that consultations are purposely set up to fail: one town hall meeting was described as having only 150 seats with 400 attendees and no microphone.
    - In the emoji mapping exercises, many participants placed “angry” emojis on the site of the proposed development. One participant, who had identified the

area as a concern, later returned to the stall with a scrunched up piece of paper that simply read: “desecration.”

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### **Analysis and Recommendations**

There exist often difficult and sometimes competing questions about Dorchester’s identity, culture, topography, economy and social disparities. A key concern for resident communities in Dorchester is **not feeling visible enough or for the right reasons**. Volunteers, in particular, worried about heritage assets not being sufficiently promoted, and groups across consultations variously expressed feelings that museums, shops and social spaces were closed, exclusive or invisible spaces—for residents and visitors. Capturing this sentiment, one volunteer suggested that Dorchester is “asleep” because it is “complacent about what it’s got,” that is, its heritage assets, its history as a market town, and its natural beauty. Both the Council and the people living in Dorchester were seen as taking these things for granted. Nonetheless, residents often playfully interrogated “heritage” as an idea and as an instrument of local policy, with one participant noting the term had “mystical” connotations that were only undermined by the fact that “Waitrose serves heritage sausage rolls.” Scale is important: there are tensions between Dorchester’s view of itself as an open, regional, connected space and the imperative that it remains a small, defined, capsular entity.

Feelings about Poundbury were generally critical, but within those criticisms often lay insights to feelings about Dorchester itself. Many residents in Dorchester were keen to make assumptions about Poundbury and the “kind of people who live there.” Issues included: the lapwing community destroyed by the increased size of the estate, the difficulty of advertising businesses in the area, and the sense of it existing as a blank space that residents could not quite understand. There was a sense that residents could not imbue Poundbury with the same kinds of local character that they could for Dorchester. For one resident, Poundbury feels “like a film set” and “it doesn’t have a soul.” At the same time, some of the **feelings about Poundbury also extended to places within Dorchester**, such as Brewery Square, where people used to work but now mostly shop. This evolution in its purpose was not always celebrated, with some participants feeling excluded from the area.

Participants widely felt Dorchester’s complacency extended to its treatment of young people, who needed more activities specifically aimed at them. Poundbury was not popular with young people, illustrated by the perception that grit was laid on the pavements to prevent skateboarding. Volunteers thought this summed up the ethos of the place. Yet young people also had little enthusiasm for many spaces in Dorchester. One poetic collage developed with members of Youth Council exemplified this sentiment, describing Dorchester as variously:

**A depressed 9–5 accountant.**

**The old ship boat that’s brown that sinks (like in Frozen).**

**Depressed office worker, repeated life, grey + boring.**

**Doesn’t talk much, just shrugs. 9–5.**

**Old Titanic when it has already sunk.**

**A dark forest with spiky brushes + trees.**

**Plants with no leaves or flowers.**

**Old-fashioned movie with a film reel in black and white.**

**A grey garden with no flowers or bright colours.**  
**Old person with lots of memories and stories to tell.**  
**Premix mash (Smash!)**  
**A grey squirrel → boring, mundane, compared to others (red squirrels)**  
**A pigeon. It wouldn't move because it would be dead.**  
**Gravel with snails on it that you had to avoid stepping on.**

The Youth Council members were thoughtful, ironic and reflexive when evaluating the merits of the town, but there was a keen sense that Dorchester did not appeal to them, and it did not intend to. On the main, they felt safe in Dorchester, but this sense of safety led them to communicate feelings of stasis, boredom and repetition. The collaboration between the Youth Council and Local Councillors at this workshop indicates possibilities for more events that build on the intergenerational empathy of young and older people in Dorchester.

**Our research has shown that while young people are underserved, migrant communities are marginalised.** Across our consultations, Dorchester was acknowledged as culturally diverse because of employees, specifically those from Nigeria, who worked at Dorset County Hospital. However, there appears to be little sustained engagement with migrant communities. The desire to engage more with minority groups was illustrated by one volunteer poem, which simply read: “GREATER DIVERSITY | LESS/NO PREJUDICE.” The Hospital itself is a source of pride for many in Dorchester. One participant described it as a “second family,” and having worked in twelve different hospitals, thought this one was the best. We experienced a lot of residual affection for the Hospital: from staff, patients, visitors and residents. Yet there was an acknowledgement that the nature of healthcare had changed over the years, that the workforce was more diverse, that there were tensions between agency and permanent staff, and that many doctors and nurses were tired and underpaid. Dorchester Town Council might elaborate on the enthusiasm for more diversity and the challenges of the Hospital to generate momentum for new, integrated forms of community engagement.

Residents were proud of green spaces, public footpaths and being well-connected. Dorchester was seen as having a role within Dorset and the wider region, known for its cheese-making, its agricultural land and its “geological variety.” Agriculture was seen as its defining characteristic compared to other places in the UK, and many participants took joy in the allotments situated throughout the town. In contrast, people were concerned about where new developments were being built and their overall suitability. The North Dorchester development sits on a flood plain, which often provoked disbelief and consternation among residents. There was awareness that Dorchester Town Council was not responsible for selling off assets and that questions of land ownership were complicated, particularly given the role of the Duchy of Cornwall in the area. Nonetheless, **it is important that communities understand the jurisdictions and responsibilities of the local authorities that serve them.** There were sometimes misunderstandings about the accountable body for a given asset, service or policy, which led to anger, apathy and frustration among residents. People in Dorchester often claim that “it’s not fair” when responding to Council initiatives and local developments. That said, residents acknowledged that the Town Council only had limited means and could not be blamed for the county-wide, national and international factors that bear upon Dorchester.

Residents were keen to compare Dorchester to other places when articulating their attachment to the area and when envisioning how it might be improved in the future. One volunteer who lived in Yeovil emphasised that they do not come to Dorchester just because it has better shops—they like it better as a place to be, to walk around, and to engage with history. A young person who relocated to Dorchester suggested: “Dorchester in my head was like *the* nice, smart, posh place,” whereas “Weymouth is a dying seaside town.” One volunteer cited Boston in Lincolnshire as “like walking through a foreign country,” and felt that it was important residents had a “choice” in how communities changed. Some acknowledged that a feeling of “fear” towards outsiders was present in Dorchester, but that racism was much more blatant in other places like Southampton. What these comparisons suggest is **the importance of place-based contexts in residents’ assessment of the Dorchester’s benefits and challenges.**

Yet there was a sense that social mobility was possible in Dorchester: one participant, who had moved to Dorchester later in life, situated her history in the town around her husband, who had moved from abroad to be a labourer in Dorchester before starting his own business. She was proud of his ability to make a life there from a position of relatively little and thought this indicative of what it had to offer newcomers. This brought into relief a key tension for residents, some of whom reckoned with the quality of “stranger-ness” in the town’s identity. As one participant noted: “Strangers... that’s what we’ve got in common.” Others claimed that while Dorchester is wary of strangers, it also has a “heart of gold.” **Class became as contentious as race across our consultations**, with Dorchester understood as being a “middle class bubble,” a sentiment echoed throughout the research. These expressions sometimes led to concerns about poverty, illustrated by one volunteer, who imagined Dorchester as a documentary that moved through time: “Back to William Barnes / Thomas Hardy / Tolpuddle Martyrs. Forward to [...] Food banks / Hunger / Impoverishment.” Considering the intersections of deprivation, class and race in Dorchester is crucial for developing a layered, multiple and shared sense of pride in place. As one volunteer put it, Dorchester is “a cinnamon bun, waiting to be unravelled.”

In response to these findings, we make the following **recommendations**:

### 1. **Develop a programme of hyper-local, hidden histories in Dorchester**

A programme of events might be developed to reflect on the hidden histories of Dorchester and those of its multigenerational communities. Sharing celebrations of heritage and **understanding the long, complicated histories of places can improve residents’ place attachment and [sense of wellbeing](#)**. One iteration could be based around Poundbury, drawing on the sentiments from our fieldwork that the “original” Poundbury should be foregrounded, reevaluated and remembered. This engagement with Poundbury’s past might allow for different, more positive reflections about its present and its relationship to the rest of the town. Other sources of pride identified in our research included the Steamroller and the Monmouth Road jumble trail. Recent social histories based around felt assets such as these might appeal to senses of place attachment among both visitors and residents. Bridport offers a useful comparison for this work, providing [ropemaking for young children](#), a [mezzanine floor](#) for visitors to experience views of the bay, tours of [hidden Bridport](#) and a [sculpture trail](#). Our findings on intergenerational empathy, too, suggest a solid basis for future consultation work on culture, heritage and the environment,

capitalising on the shared understandings we have identified across the demographic groups in this research.

Pride in place is a key indicator for understanding the social fabric of hyper-local communities. Areas within Dorchester such as Fordington possess specific civic imaginaries that could be further drawn out, interrogated and celebrated. We advise engagement officers to undertake training in [creative methodologies](#) to imagine and see the places in which they live in new ways. This training could include workshops with communities to develop more imaginative uses of buildings such as the Corn Exchange and Shire Hall. In line with the Dorchester BID, it could support the development of small businesses or Community Interest Companies that might invigorate the high street and include grassroots organisations in the project development pipeline. Local providers could host and contribute to the planning of these workshops.

## 2. Support spaces and opportunities for young people to co-create activities

This emphasis on community ownership and the co-production of projects can be extended to **young people, who should be encouraged to co-ordinate and shape their own events**. Offering young people a stake in the opportunities available to them supports the cultivation of positive place attachments and long-term retention. Increasing pride among young people in Dorchester is essential to retaining them. Our research has suggested that a sense of pride in place is attached to agency rather than simply longevity. Young people want to be in a place where they feel as if ownership of some kind is possible. Examples of this work can be taken from Lewes, which marked [Black History Month](#) with panellists, spoken word poets and musical performances, and celebrated International Women's Day with the [Girls Big Night Out](#), a comedy club-style event for young women and girls under 30. Allowing them to be active in developing their own places in the town by including them in volunteering opportunities, which young people value for very different reasons, might improve retention and preventatively respond to the few incidences of antisocial behaviour that concern the community.

A young people's advocacy role might help to bring together key stakeholders and develop a long-term strategy that advocates for funding and partnerships in support of future projects. This person could augment the specialist skills and embodied knowledge of youth, arts and community development workers. This action should be understood as a long-term investment and process, not as a reactive, piecemeal project. Establishing continuity for young people is important as it gives them the opportunity to learn from their mistakes, to build trust in themselves and others, and to make incremental developments in their training. Ledbury uses its [poetry festival](#) to work with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, with creative workshops offering [bursary places](#) and facilitators running [Arts Award workshops](#) at a local pupil referral unit. We also found, for example, that young people are especially attuned to sustainable behaviours that benefit the environment. The value of locally-sourced food, plants and upcycled clothing are all important to them and also brings generations together in meaningful ways. We recommend a festival, or a high-profile programme of activities, focusing on the collective potential of Dorchester's green spaces, identified as a key part of the town's identity and a source of collective pride.

### 3. Establish a series of accessible, grant-funded allotment projects

Discussions in the community have often focused on the Dorchester allotments, assets of which people are very proud. We recommend undertaking more work to **recognise these communal spaces and to make sure that they are accessible for a wide range of groups, including young people**—perhaps through specific funding. Programmes could be developed in partnership with local schools, colleges, creative organisations and businesses to support the allotments and also cement their important role as a Council-owned community asset. Bridport Town Council, for instance, has successfully supported [a gardening club](#) for the disabled, elderly and carers. The Town Council is responsible for [five allotments spread across Dorchester](#). (There are two more sites in Poundbury not operated by the Council.) Grants could also support creative, participatory projects to develop basic, transferable citizenship skills such as teamwork, communication and confidence. Allotments might host activities to encourage and recognise these abilities within the community.

### 4. Celebrate the stories and communities of minority groups

We recommend more place-based research to build on the excellent Council-led work on pride and place that understands the needs and attachments of minority groups in Dorchester. In partnership with Higher Education Institutions, this project might include research into perceptions of food, education and culture targeted at local demographics including minority groups. [Anti-racism initiatives](#) have proved effective in comparable towns, and communities in other places have tackled these issues by thinking about what different community groups contribute to the lives of small towns: in this case we recommend **celebrating the hospital and stories and communities that are attached to it** would not only provide Dorchester with new kinds of heritage but also signal its openness to those not from Dorchester—as well as to those who are from the town.

### 5. Design communication strategies for a new physical and digital shopfront

A key aim for the Council and stakeholders should be to develop a robust community ownership strategy that builds project development and bidding capacity, and that works with communities to develop links with charities and universities. This emphasis on community ownership should also be present as the town seeks to develop its shopfront—both through digital means and its cultural heritage offer. Community-run initiatives could draw inspiration from various sources, including [Home Baked](#) and [Granby Four Streets](#). More work should be undertaken to curate Dorchester's stories and places, by bringing its cultural heritage into conversation with contemporary needs and voices. We recommend a communication strategy—for the website, events, engagement, marketing, signage—that can bring together these strands. It could include the local schools, drawing inspiration from [The Big Malarkey Festival](#). Such initiatives would create valuable opportunities to develop volunteering skills and capacities, developing on the learnings from the [Hull2017 Volunteer Programme](#). These collaborations can provide the basis for **an attractive, up-to-date physical and digital shopfront that includes the evolving place sensibilities of different resident communities**.

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## Appendix

The *Feeling Towns* team would like to thank the Dorchester Town Council officers who contributed to this report:

Emma Scott, Community Development Officer  
Matilda Manley, Tourism Development Officer  
Tony Hurley, Assistant Town Clerk  
Connie Hollings, Development Assistant

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We would finally like to thank the attending stakeholders from the final consultation event, which included members from:

Art in Poundbury CIC	Food Share
Skills and Learning	Friends of Dorchester West Station
Casterbridge Rotary	Help and Care
Divas and Dudes	Houseworks
Dorchester Area Community Land Trust	Julia's House
Dorchester Arts	Love Poundbury
Dorchester Family Support	Read Easy South Dorset
Dorchester Food Bank	Relate
Dorchester Islamic Centre	Shire Hall
Dorchester Men's Shed	South West Dorset Multicultural Network
Dorchester Poundbury Rotary Club	The Gap
Dorchester Poverty Action	Tom Browns
Dorchester Strollers	Transition Town Dorchester
Dorchester Child Contact Centre	u3a
Dorset Council	Volunteer Centre Dorset
Encompass	