

Summary – Beaminster Town Council Meeting Re Parnham

Held at Beaminster Town Hall on 17th December, 2025.

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The meeting focused on the planning application to build 82 houses on Parnham's historic deer park, presented as an "enabling development" to fund the restoration of the Grade I listed Parnham House, which has been on Historic England's at-risk register since the 2017 fire.

1. Enabling development – the central issue

Enabling development is being used by the Parnham owners as the core justification for building 82 new homes in a protected landscape. Under planning rules, this type of exception allows development that would normally be refused only if it is the minimum necessary to secure the future of a heritage asset, and only if the public benefits clearly outweigh the harm.

Opponents argue that this test is not met. They question whether the works proposed amount to meaningful restoration rather than limited stabilisation to support a largely private hospitality venture. They also challenge whether the public benefits – restricted access, no affordable housing, no Community Infrastructure Levy contribution and primarily private commercial gain – genuinely outweigh the significant and permanent damage to the Dorset National Landscape, Mill Ground Meadow and local wildlife.

Enabling development is also intended to be funding of last resort. Critics argue that the applicants have not demonstrated serious exploration of alternative routes such as charitable ownership, grants, disposal of non-core land, or different business models, nor have they transparently justified why so many large executive homes, rather than a smaller number or different mix, are unavoidable. Taken together, these concerns led many to view the enabling development case as overstated, insufficiently evidenced and an inappropriate basis for such a major departure from planning policy.

2. Serious doubts about the financial case

A detailed challenge was presented by a qualified accountant (Guy Brunford?), who questioned whether 82 houses are genuinely required to fund conservation:

- The claimed conservation deficit (£17.8m) was disputed
- Independent analysis suggested only 29–38 houses may be necessary
- Key information was missing, including:
 - How any funding gaps would actually be covered
 - Where any surplus would go
- A previous £24m property sale (Angelo House) appeared not to have contributed to restoration
- Fears were raised that this could set up future development phases if funding again "fell short"

This evidence significantly undermined confidence in the claim that the scale of development proposed is the minimum necessary, as required for enabling development.

3. Major environmental harm highlighted

Strong objections focused on irreversible ecological damage:

- Mill Ground Meadow described as a rare and sensitive habitat
- Risks to protected species including barn owls, kingfishers, dormice, otters and badgers
- Development proposed on a natural floodplain, raising concerns about pollution, run-off and increased flood risk
- Plans for three new sewage treatment plants close to the River Brit caused particular alarm, given the risk of flooding or system failure leading to pollution of a highly sensitive river environment, with further impacts on already pressured wildlife.

It was also pointed out that the development is not proposing any financial support for the Brit Valley Project, which is working along the length of the River Brit, including through the Parnham site, to restore habitats and improve river health. Instead, the applicants have indicated only that they will seek to *mitigate* the damage caused by the development itself.

These impacts were widely seen as incompatible with both local environmental protections and the site's designation within the Dorset National Landscape.

4. Infrastructure and access problems

Multiple weaknesses were identified:

- Access via the A3066 pinch point was widely seen as unsafe
- No pedestrian access to Beaminster - no pavement and limited space to put one.
- GP surgeries and pharmacies already overstretched

Critical details were missing or deeply concerning, particularly in relation to access:

- The proposal involves a new bridge over the River Brit that is capable of carrying cars, lorries and emergency vehicles, including fire engines
- This would effectively create a new road driven through Parnham Park and across the meadow, cutting through one of the main walking areas used by Beaminster residents
- Once vehicular access and buildings are introduced into this open countryside, many felt it would set a dangerous precedent for further development in the future

Concerns were also raised about construction access routes and long-term traffic impacts, which were not clearly set out.

5. Weak public benefit case

Councillors and residents repeatedly questioned what the community actually gains:

- No affordable housing
- Very limited public access to land
- Parnham House itself would become a hospitality and events venue, but it would remain privately owned, with access limited and discretionary
- Apparent avoidance of the Community Infrastructure Levy, estimated at £2.7m, which would otherwise support local services such as healthcare, schools and infrastructure

The balance was widely described as all pain, no gain for Beaminster.

6. Heritage claims challenged

There was an unresolved dispute over what is actually proposed:

- Developers described the scheme as “restoration”
- Critics argued the plans amount to stabilisation rather than full conservation
- Serious concern was expressed that the historic setting of Parnham, not just the building itself, would be permanently damaged

Past precedent was cited, including a previous Perkins enabling development at Aynho, which reportedly still required additional funding nine years later, raising concerns about similar outcomes here.

7. Developer’s defence

The developer highlighted:

- Five years of preparation involving 28 consultants
- Pre-application discussions with Historic England and Dorset Council
- Claimed economic benefits, including:
 - Around 102 construction jobs to build the development
 - 50 permanent on-site jobs, said to be primarily for young people
 - A claimed £3m annual GVA contribution to the local economy
- Sustainability features such as heat pumps, solar panels and on-site sewage treatment

However, many felt these points did not address the fundamental concerns about scale, location, environmental harm and the necessity of such extensive development.

8. Process and timing concerns

Some councillors openly admitted:

- They had not had time to read the 50+ documents submitted
- The Christmas consultation period was criticised
- At least one councillor stated he did not understand the ‘financial figures’
- There was concern that Dorset Council could override local opposition regardless

9. Decision

- Beaminster Town Council voted to object to the application
- The crossing of the River Brit was cited as the primary reason
- The objection will now go to Dorset Council’s Planning Committee
- Final determination rests with Dorset Council, which has the power to override the town council’s decision