

# Roman Town House

## Design, Access & Heritage Statement

This statement outlines the overall design, heritage and access strategy that underpins the project and demonstrates our commitment to design that is accessible and inclusive to all.

### 1. Landscape Design brief

Dorset Council Landscape Services currently maintain the grounds surrounding the Roman Town House. The team includes two Landscape Architects who were asked to produce proposals to address issues with the setting of the Roman Town House and its relationship with the surrounding context of Dorchester. The Dorset Council Historic Environment Team began the project by creating a questionnaire open for Town House visitors, Dorchester residents and local office staff. The results from this questionnaire began laying the foundations of what the key design objectives should be and the how the space should develop.

The County Hall complex in Colliton Park contains two Scheduled Monuments - the Roman Town House itself and the north-west corner of the defences of the Roman town of Dorchester. The Roman Town House and the wall of Colliton Park are also protected by listing (see section 8). The Roman Town House is popular for visitors, schools and residents of Dorchester, but comments from those visiting the site often refer to the difficulty in locating and accessing the Town House. Due to its location behind County Hall and the rather convoluted and poorly sign-posted route to discover it, it often sent visitors through the County Hall car park, which many people feel significantly impacts on the enjoyment of the site.

#### Aims

The projects main aim should be to enhance the overall setting of the Roman Town House, to improve access and circulation, to make the maintenance of the site more sustainable, to improve interpretation of the site and enhance its context in the historic town of Dorchester.

#### Key Objectives

- Improve access and circulation.
- Improved parking for the site
- Enhancing the interpretation
- Celebrate the historic importance
- Enhanced seating
- Enhanced lighting
- Use of local materials.
- Address maintenance issues.
- Create a space which is adaptable with mixed uses e.g. education/performance/exhibition space/installation space.
- Create a unique identity within the grounds of Colliton Park.

#### Outputs

- Site Plan – Existing arrangement and enabling works
- Site Plan – Proposed arrangements
- Proposed path sections

### 2. Site location and context

The site's location in Dorchester is relatively central and only a short walk from the main streets. Historically the Town House is located just inside the north western defences of the Roman town of *Durnovaria*. During the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Dorchester's Roman defences were converted into boulevards known as The Walks, with a path running along the top of the inner bank. Borough Gardens, southwest of the Roman Town House and just outside the Roman defences, were laid out in 1895 after the site was acquired by the town. The Gardens and Walks are still well used public spaces and routes today which link the town and form the historic context of the Town House.

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Fig. 1\_Site plan – Existing arrangement and enabling works required for the proposals.

The following images illustrates the historic context and setting of the Roman Town House in Dorchester and within the surrounding 3-mile radius. The Town House is clearly visible in the north west corner of the Roman town defences. Dorset County Museum and other historic attractions, as well as the train stations of Dorchester South and West, are all a short walk from the site.

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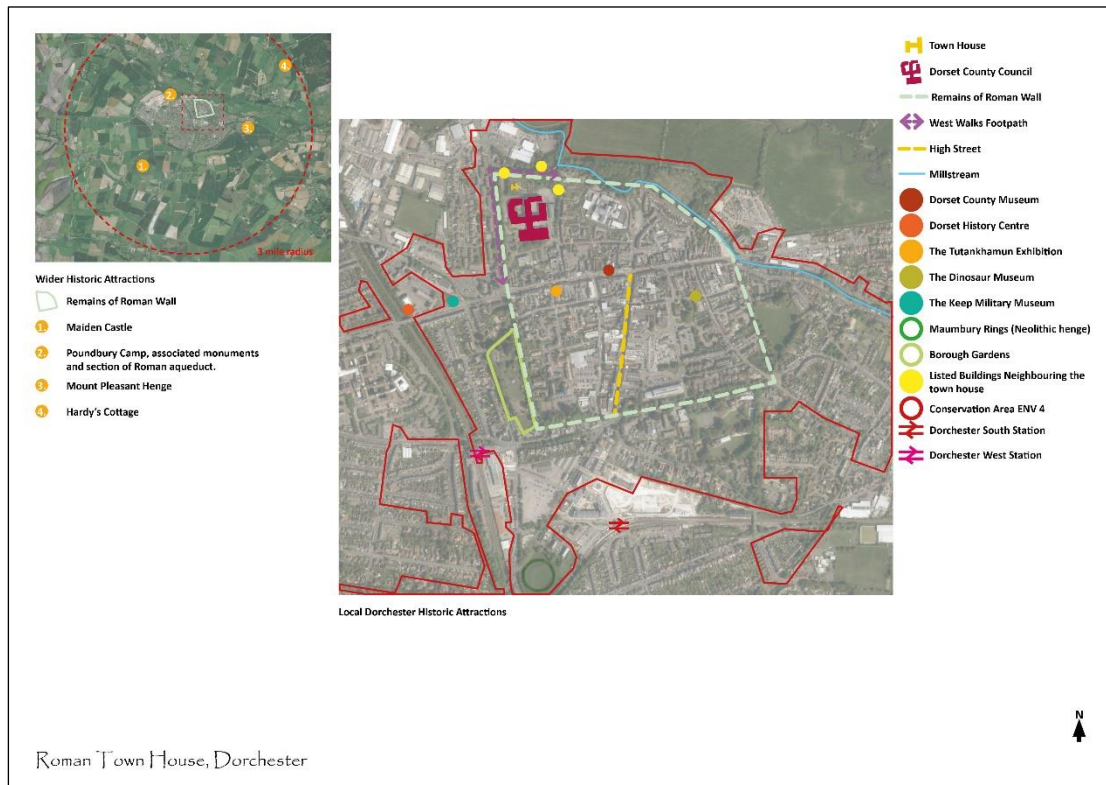


Fig. 2- Context plan

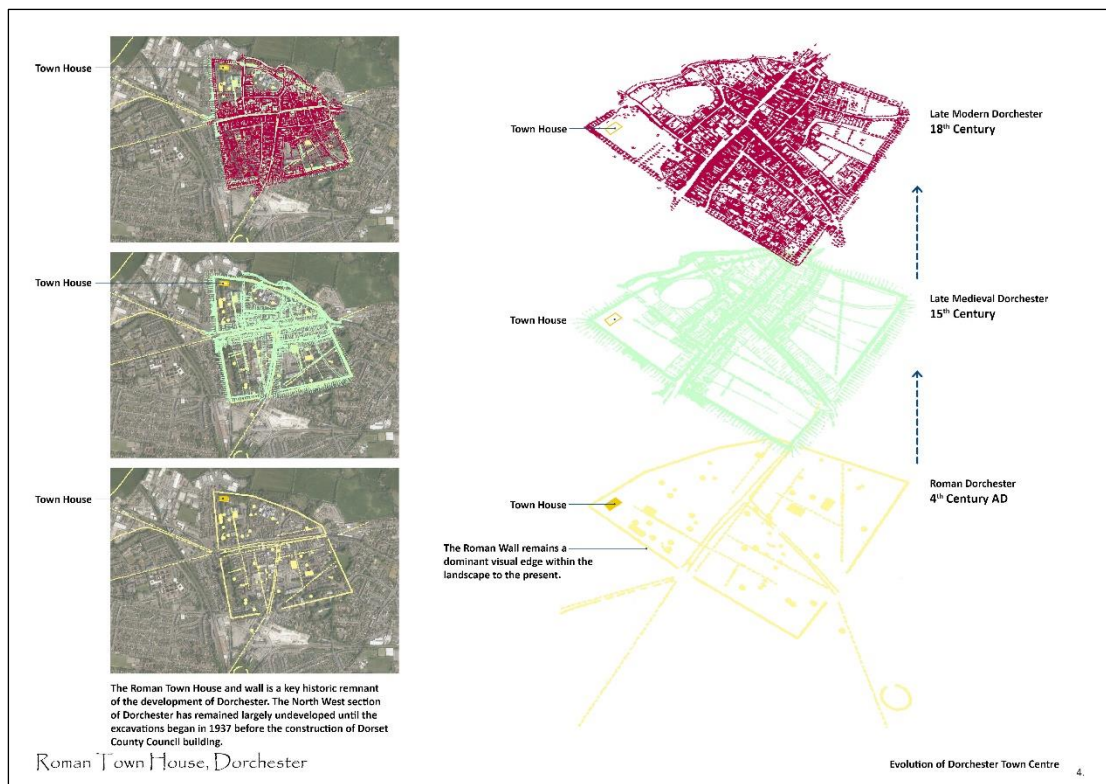


Fig. 3- Evolution of Dorchester Town Centre

The Roman town walls still form the basis for the current layout of Dorchester. Diagram 3. shows how the town developed into the Georgian era still following the structure of the historic Roman town. The north west corner where the Roman Town House is located can be seen in the diagram as being relatively undeveloped until the 1930s when the construction of County Hall began. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century until the 1930s, its site was

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within the grounds of Colliton House (which survives in the south-east corner of the present County Hall complex) – hence the name ‘Colliton Park’ which is still in use.



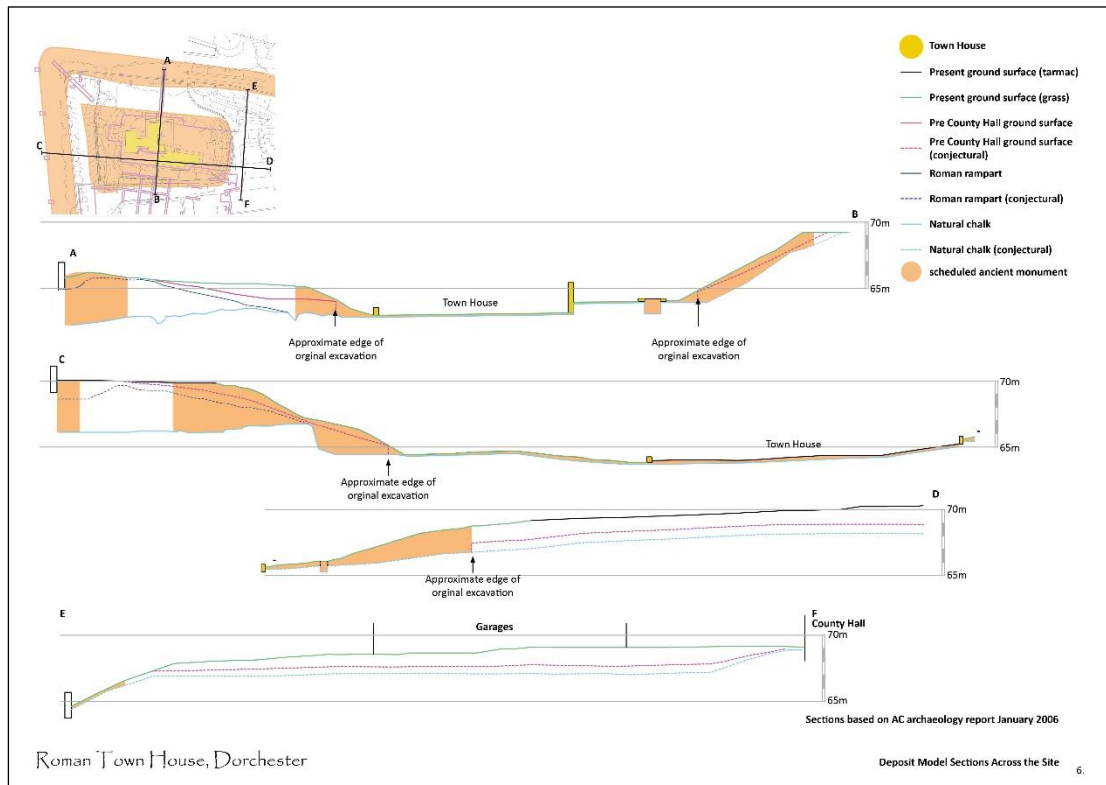
**Fig. 4- Site Heritage Assets**

This illustrative diagram shows the Scheduled Monuments with the locations of the recorded archaeological trenches. The location of the Scheduled Monuments has helped to shape the design interventions in the proposed plan, with the historic records of the trenches also helping to make judgements of what could be beneath the surface of potential landscape works.



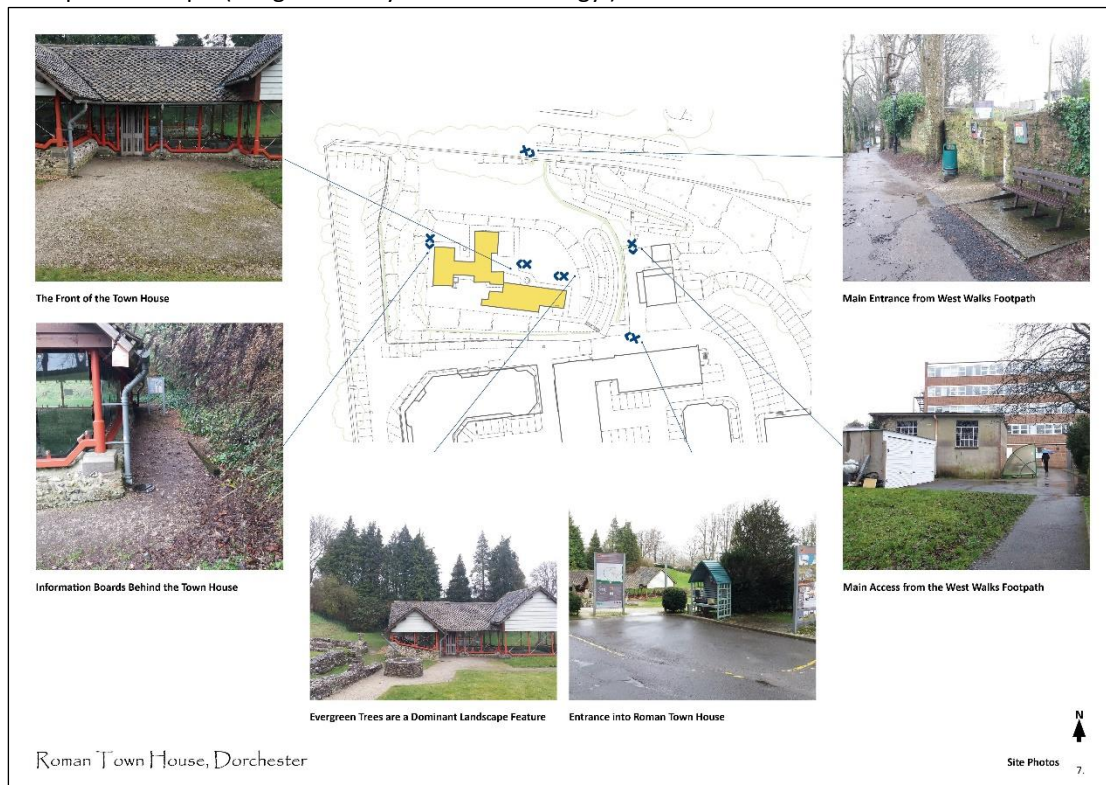
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**Fig. 5-Deposit model sections across the site**

Illustrative diagram based on previous archaeological studies. Using this information, judgements were made on the implications of landscape interventions which will need ground preparation, for instance the installation of steps and ramps. (Image courtesy of AC Archaeology.)



**Fig. 6- Site Photos**

A photo study of the existing site focused on showing the main entrance, access and circulation routes of the site.

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### 3. Planning policy and designations

The most relevant national and local planning policies relating to the conservation, enhancement and protection of Scheduled Monuments, Listed Building, other heritage assets and the overall importance of good design are outlined below.

The **National Planning Policy Framework February 2019** has clear guidance in section 12 on 'Achieving well designed places' stating the 'creation of high-quality buildings and places is fundamental to what the planning and development process should achieve'.

The National Planning Policy Framework section 16, 'Conserving and enhancing the historic environment' reinforces the importance of the conservation and enhancement of such assets and their setting.

The **Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979** (as amended) is the legal framework for the protection of scheduled monuments. The consent process is administered by the Secretary of State for the department of Culture Media & Sport.

In the **2015 West Dorset, Weymouth and Portland Local Plan** the protection of listed building, conservation and other heritage assets is covered in Environment Policy 4. See below.

#### ENV4. HERITAGE ASSETS

- i) The impact of development on a designated or non-designated heritage asset and its setting must be thoroughly assessed against the significance of the asset. Development should conserve and where appropriate enhance the significance.
- ii) Applications affecting the significance of a heritage asset or its setting will be required to provide sufficient information to demonstrate how the proposals would positively contribute to the asset's conservation.
- iii) A thorough understanding of the significance of the asset and other appropriate evidence including conservation area character appraisals and management plans should be used to inform development proposals including potential conservation and enhancement measures.
- iv) Any harm to the significance of a designated or non-designated heritage asset must be justified. Applications will be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal; if it has been demonstrated that all reasonable efforts have been made to sustain the existing use, find new uses, or mitigate the extent of the harm to the significance of the asset, and; if the works proposed are the optimum required to secure the sustainable use of the asset.
- v) The desirability of putting heritage assets to an appropriate and viable use that is consistent with their conservation will be taken into account.
- vi) Where harm can be justified, appropriate provision will be required to capture and record features, followed by analysis and where appropriate making findings publicly available.

In the **2015 West Dorset, Weymouth and Portland Local Plan** the importance of good and sustainable design of new development is covered in Environment Policy 10. See below.

#### ENV10. THE LANDSCAPE AND TOWNSCAPE SETTING

- i) All development proposals should contribute positively to the maintenance and enhancement of local identity and distinctiveness. Development should be informed by the character of the site and its surroundings.
- ii) Development will provide for the future retention and protection of trees and other features that contribute to an area's distinctive character. Such features may not always be designated or otherwise formally recognised.
- iii) Development should only be permitted where it provides sufficient hard and soft landscaping to successfully integrate with the character of the site and its surrounding area.
- iv) Opportunities to incorporate features that would enhance local character, including public art, or that relate to the historical, ecological or geological interest of a site should be taken where appropriate.

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### 4. The Roman Town House structure

In the 1930s, construction of County Hall within Colliton Park, Dorchester was preceded by archaeological investigations led by Dorset County Museum and the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society. Although Roman remains were expected, the well-preserved building complex found within the north-west corner of the site was a surprise, and County Council thus amended the design of the County Hall complex to allow this complex (known from then onwards as the 'Roman Town House') to remain on display.

This complex, which developed during the third and fourth centuries AD (probably as its occupants increased in wealth), consisted of two stone ranges and a series of wooden buildings. Each range of buildings contained a hypocaust, while the western range also had floor mosaics of varying quality that illustrate the different functions of particular rooms. Rare survivals on the western range included a window and evidence for an upper storey on at least part of the range. The complex lay within the north-west corner of the defences of Roman Dorchester, and since other structures found on the Colliton Park site were of an industrial nature, it is considered likely that the Roman Town House was the home of a Roman industrialist/entrepreneur.

An initial plan to build a cover structure over the site was prevented by the Second World War, and the site was left open with the stone walls of the two ranges visible. Only one mosaic was left uncovered, beneath a small wooden structure.

Extensive Roman cemeteries, including a number of burials in stone coffins, have been found during archaeological excavations at the Poundbury industrial estate some 500m west of Colliton Park. At some point, probably in the 1970s, one of these coffins was put on display at the Roman Town House site.

In the 1990s the County Council decided to improve the site and its accessibility and interpretation with a programme of work partly funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The most visible element of this was the redisplay of the mosaics and other features of the western range within a large cover building. Further work took place in the later 2000s, again supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

### 5. Landscape Design proposals

The plan and sections below (Fig 8 & 9) address the objectives set out in the brief in section 1. The key objective being the improved access and circulation of pedestrian users to and around the site. This principally involves reinstating a former access west of the Colliton Park site from the west walks



Fig. 7- Proposed entrance of the ramped access taken from Colliton Park facing west towards Colliton Walk

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A newly installed DDA (Disability Discrimination Act 1995; see section 7) compliant ramp will bring users up into a shared pedestrian access across the existing County Hall car park. This pedestrian access passes through an existing grounds maintenance access point used as the only level point for vehicles into the site on its north west corner. The pedestrian route will then connect to a proposed pathway constructed on made up ground creating a user-friendly gradient of 1:12. This pathway will resemble the form of the Roman town walls profile, providing context and a setting for the Town House and its historic location in the north west corner of the Roman town. This pathway will then connect to the existing main entrance along the north walks and the existing ramped access from the south east corner.

The footprint of an existing storage building due for demolition, is proposed as more parking to help mitigate against the loss of parking around the proposed new ramped access in the west. This parking will be integrated and hidden behind a new hedgerow. This hedgerow will help to form a new improved south entrance, seating and interpretation area overlooking the site.

Moving down to the ground level of the Town House, interpretation of the historic building footprints will be improved with stone markers and hard surfacing. This new hard surfacing will also form a multi-functional public space for events. The existing pathways around the Town House will be redressed and refurbished with minimal intervention to the layout. A small section of the pathway will be extended in the South west corner of the Town House west range, to allow a safe route past the low hanging roof eaves.

The west slope currently covered with evergreen trees, is proposed to be cleared leaving only a single specimen ash tree in the south corner as a key feature in the design. Importantly the removal of these trees will open the views into the site and help reinstate the original context of the Town House inside the setting of the north west corner of the Roman town's walls. The removal of the trees will also help address issues caused with damp and also help deter the occasional antisocial behaviour related to the west part of the site by opening up the whole area. The newly open west slope will be seeded with a low maintenance grass mix and this treatment will follow around along the south slope to create a flowing continuous character reflecting a Roman amphitheatre. This will also help with the interpretation and context of the Town House being set below the build-up of the 1930s County Hall earth works.

Prior to seeding the custom species rich grassland mix on these slopes, appropriate ground preparation will be carried out to create the right growing substrate for this mix. This will have benefits in ensuring a low maintenance, sustainable and pollinator friendly final sward. The rest of the proposed tree and shrub planting aims to be simple, creating a low maintenance visually clear and accessible site and one that reflects the sites context and setting.



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Fig. 8 - Site plan - Proposed arrangement access enhancements.

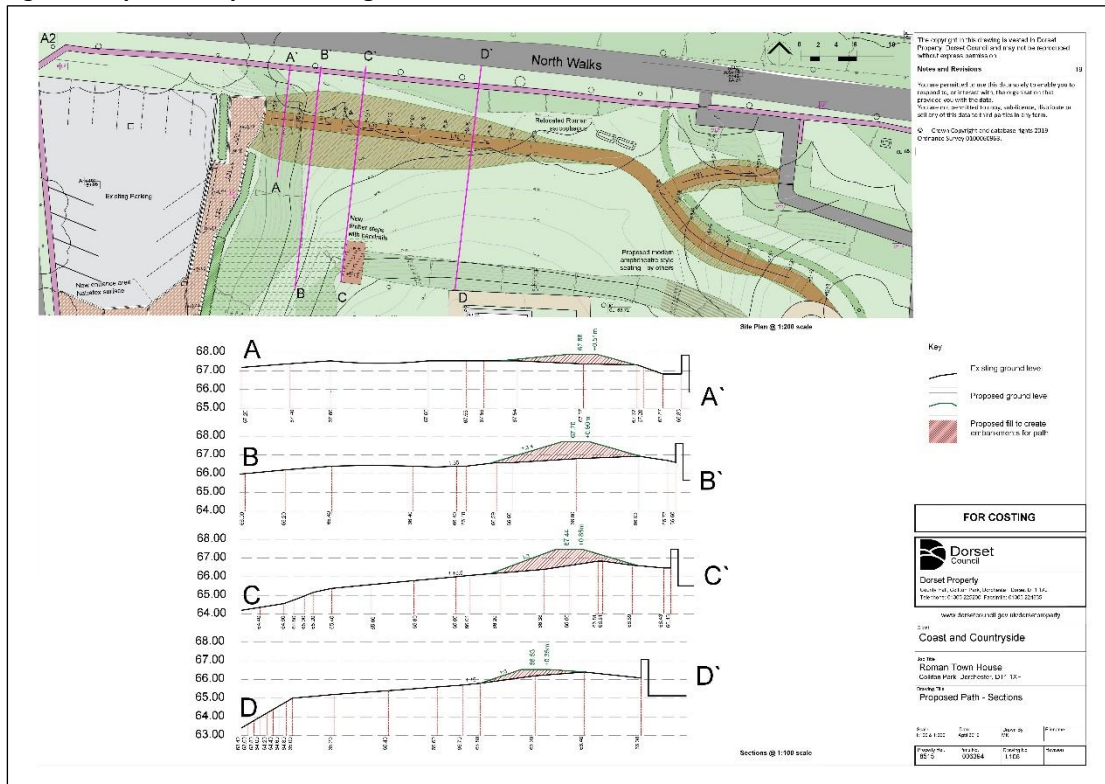


Fig.9 - Proposed path – Sections

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### 6. Stakeholder consultation

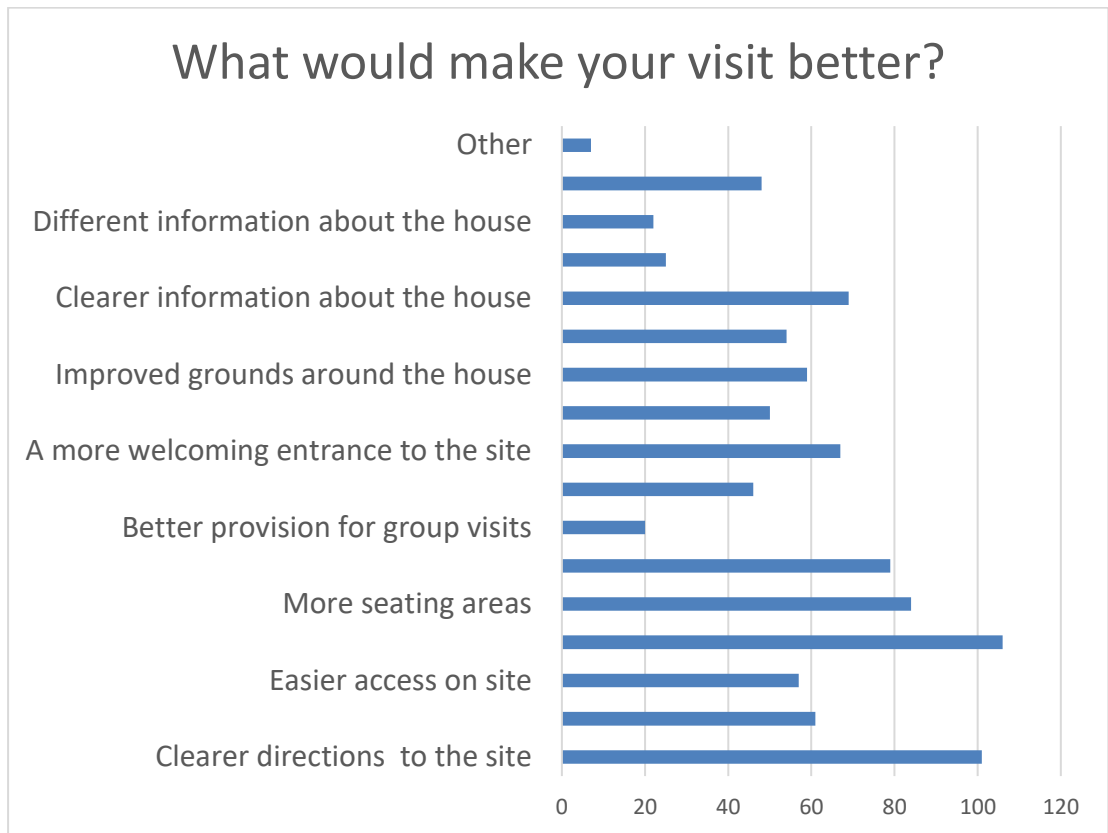
Local community and visitor consultation – a consultation was carried out from November 2017 to the end February 2018. Those taking part were informed of the potential HLF application and were invited to comment on what would make their experience of visiting the Town House better. There were 187 respondents to the consultation, 72% were local residents and 28% were visitors. Key responses included:

- Access into the house – 106 people (57%) wanted to be able to gain access inside the house. The practical difficulties of balancing protection of the house with access were acknowledged, and many appreciated that the covering building allowed views of the interior. A few suggested quite ambitious re-modelling of the site to allow greater access, for example with walkways, combined with elaborate facilities but the majority felt that access to the inside could be on a limited basis e.g. through organised tours.
- Clearer directions to the site -101 respondents (54%) felt that the Roman Town House was difficult to find and current signage around the town and in the immediate area of the site was poor and could be improved. Some felt that signage should be co-ordinated with other historic sites and/or visitor attractions in the town, and perhaps supplemented by other promotional material. Many stated that the site is awkwardly situated at the back of County Hall, and the difficulties inherent in this. Some were concerned about proliferation of signage.
- More seating – 84 respondents (45%) wanted to see more and improved seating. They wanted specified seating at points to enjoy the scenery and atmosphere, or appreciate key aspects of the site, and provision for picnics. . An ‘amphitheatre’ or a large cluster of seating for group teaching sessions were some of the suggestions.
- Outdoor events - 79 respondents (42%) wanted more outdoor events – suggestions included guided tours, activities e.g. provided by the Ancient Wessex Network, plays, small scale music events, guides in Roman costume, re-enactments and events relating to the Roman house itself.
- Clearer information - 69 respondents (37%) felt that the level and content of information currently provided on site were positive although there were some specific suggestions on improvements. Also, many felt that the location of the main display boards overlooking the site was awkward, and that more information around the house itself would be useful.

Figs 10 and 11 sums up the overall comments from the consultation

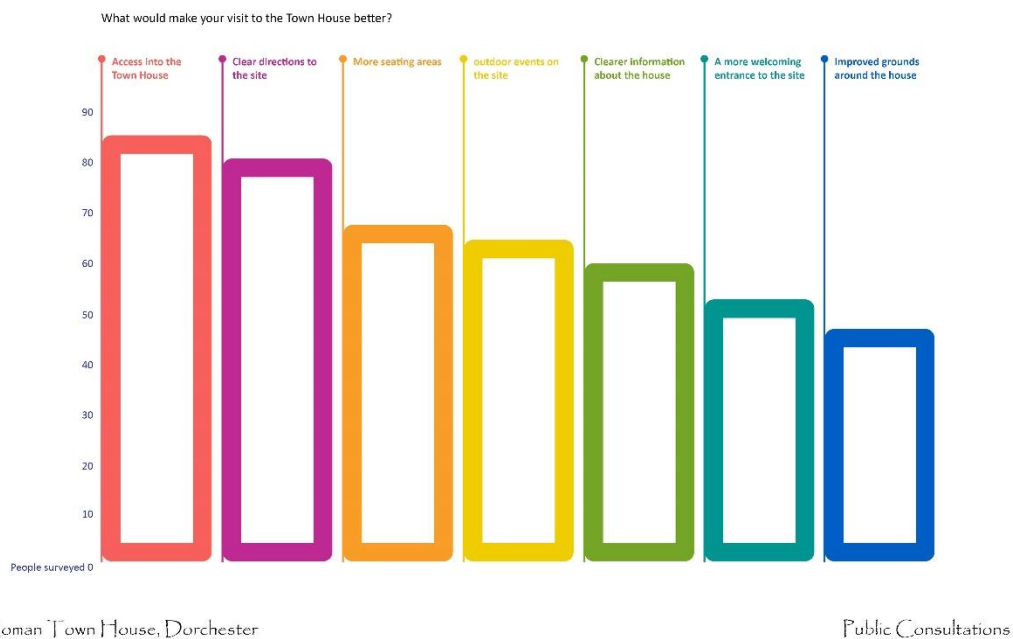
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**Fig 10 consultation response**

*"I like how the town house is tucked away in the dip but it is a bit bleak"*



**Fig. 11- Public consultation feedback**

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### 7. Access statement

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 gives people with disabilities important rights to use and access services without being subjected to disability discrimination. In the design of the Town House scheme we have made adjustments to the scheme from the sketch design stage into detailed design, to improve accessibility to the area for less able people.

Principally this involved designing access ramps and paths to the correct gradients between the recommended maximum gradient of 1:15 and the preferred maximum gradient of 1:20. Also the camber of the new paths will be designed and built to recommended gradients and the path surfaces will use a reasonable firm wearing course suitable for all users.

The overall strategy for circulation is to enable everyone of all abilities to walk around and appreciate most of the site so its setting and context is understood and enjoyed. This circulation and access strategy will be made clear via the signposting and waymarking plans for the site which is outlined in the interpretation statement in Section 9.

The main site access point for all pedestrians will be via the Town Walks along the western side of County Hall and into the campus via the proposed new ramped access created in the former access point which is currently bricked up. In turn this will be sign posted from various key points in the town centre to include from car parks, bus stops/stations and both railway stations. Along with this main access point there are a range of other access points which enhances the overall options for access for all. These include from the northern side of the Town Walks via an existing and new access ramp and from the east down the existing steps/ramp in the sites south east corner.

Disabled car parking spaces and drop off points will be available immediately west of the Town House in remarked spaces. The existing car parking arrangements will carry on as they are now with the site being used in the week for Dorset Council staff and in the weekend and holidays for public use at no charge.

Ongoing management and maintenance of the site will be carried out by in house Council staff to ensure the access points, path surfacing, and other access provision is fit for purpose and enables the safe on going use and enjoyment of the site.

The site is currently accessible at all times and this will remain the case. The cover structure over the western range of the Roman Town House is closed at present because of intermittent falls of torching (mortar) from the ceiling. Once the torching has been addressed, visitors would be allowed inside the structure in connection with particular events and under appropriate supervision.

### 8. Heritage statement

The site contains the Roman Town House, which is protected as Scheduled Monument number 1002721 under the title 'Colliton Park Roman house'. It is also a Grade I Listed Building under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act introduced in 1990 (as number 1210098). It is located within the County Hall complex in Colliton Park, in turn within the north-west corner of the defences of the Roman town at Dorchester. Much of the circuit of these defences, including the parts on the west and north sides of Colliton Park, are protected as Scheduled Monument number 1002449. Also, the 'Wall on West and North Sides of Colliton Park' is listed as a Grade II listed structure (number 1110625) and the whole site lies within the Dorchester Conservation Area.

The Roman Town House is of particular significance as the only Roman urban dwelling in Britain (as opposed to country 'villa') that is fully on display. Individual elements are of intrinsic interest for their quality, such as mosaics and two hypocausts, and in the case of an original window opening and evidence for an upper storey, for their rarity. Evidence of Roman buildings of a more industrial nature were found elsewhere within Colliton Park, indicating that the Roman Town House may have belonged to an industrialist operating in a remote corner of Roman Dorchester.

In line with the policy framework outlined in Section 3, the project aims to improve the overall setting of the Roman Town House, to enhance access to it, to make maintenance of the site and particularly the cover structure on the western range more sustainable, to improve interpretation of the site and to improve its context within the Roman town. Within the design of the scheme, ground disturbance has been minimised to avoid disturbance to below-ground archaeological remains, but where this is unavoidable this will be mitigated by a programme of archaeological works. This programme will consist of archaeological excavation of the route of the access ramp (an area that has been the subject of an archaeological evaluation – the report on



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which is enclosed with this application) and archaeological monitoring of works such as the construction of new paths.

To facilitate easier access to the site, a blocked-up entrance through the west wall of Colliton Park is to be re-opened. This entrance appears to be an original feature of the Colliton Park wall and retains a stone pier on either side. Its purpose was perhaps to allow the movement of livestock that were used to graze the Park to and from a former farm and open countryside in the adjacent Frome valley. A likely date for the blocking of this entrance with stonework was in the 1930s when construction of County Hall began. The archaeological evaluation mentioned above has shown there was an associated trackway on the inside of the entrance, which was infilled in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

These proposed works will involve the removal of the infill of the entrance only (i.e. the piers will be retained). These works will be supervised and recorded by the archaeological contractor undertaking the programme of archaeological works.

Also, the Roman coffin mentioned above is to be relocated. Its current position among the domestic complex of the Roman Town House is incongruous (Roman law forbade human burials within towns!). Moving it to a position next to the new access path will make it a feature of interest along the path and will enable it to be interpreted separately from the former living area of the Roman Town House itself.

### **9. Interpretation strategy statement**

We will set up an interpretation group at the start of the project made up of all key stakeholders to input into the story of the Roman Town House and how it links to the rest of Dorchester. This will ensure that the Roman Town House is included as part of the wider offer for Dorchester rather than a stand-alone site. There will be minutes and actions from these meetings to ensure transparency and inclusivity. From this group a brief will be written and provided to the successful consultant who will put together the interpretation at the site.

In June 2018 Bridget Betts and Steve Wallis attended Dorchester Town Council's 'Pedestrian Wayfinding in Dorchester' drop-in consultation. We discussed the Roman Town House within the wider context of the town and its heritage assets with the Town Council's representatives, and more particularly making the site easier for visitors to locate. This was taken on board and the Town Council intends to incorporate wayfinding to the site within its scheme, including a new sign on the Walks adjacent to Colliton Park (the new access).

15.5.2019