

Vision of Axminster 2030



Community Plan



Planning for the Future

Axminster Community Enterprise

Market & Coastal Towns Initiative

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INTRODUCTION & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This community strategic plan was written and finalised over the first few months of 2008. It's based on work started in summer 2007, following Axminster's acceptance onto the South West's Market & Coastal Towns Initiative (MCTI).

Axminster Community Enterprise (ACE) – working as the Axminster MCTI Steering Group – was set up by Axminster Town Council in 2006 to apply for participation in the Initiative. A part-time community agent was appointed in summer 2007. In autumn 2007, theme groups were established to look at particular topics.

The plan is formally about Axminster only – that is, the area within the Axminster parish boundary. As a market town, however, Axminster serves the needs of a wider area, particularly including the parishes surrounding the Axminster boundary. We've thus strongly borne in mind the wider context and needs of an overall market town area.

We started with an almost clean slate. Apart from the parts of the East Devon Local Plan that affected Axminster, there was no pre-existing descriptive or analytical documentation addressing the generality of the needs, challenges, strengths and opportunities specifically in the parish of Axminster.

We therefore spent some time building up that documentation to help us pin down priorities. With only 12 months to do that and conduct a series of consultations and draw up a plan affecting the whole community, we haven't attempted to produce a blueprint – rather a document indicating 'desired direction of travel', which should be reviewed and updated from time to time.

This document is designed to convey the essential features of the plan. ACE's work has involved extensive consultations, discussions & research, and you will find a longer document on ACE's web site at: www.axminstercommunityenterprise.org.uk

The web site also includes records of the Steering Group's meetings and papers, and links to statistical and other supporting information.

Crucially, the web site contains a detailed account of the consultations we've undertaken, and profiles of the Axminster area produced by relevant authorities.

We've undertaken our programme of work largely through voluntary effort. We've benefited from a budget of £20,000 over 12 months for the community agent, various other running costs & expenses, community involvement events, publicity & consultation, promotion & publications, and organisational development.

This money came from the South West of England Regional Development Agency through the Market & Coastal Towns Association (MCTA). We received advice and assistance from the MCTA and the county, district and town councils, and the South West Observatory. We're grateful to all of them.

We've had particularly close cooperation from The Axe Valley Community College. Without their assistance our work would have been more difficult. So special thanks go to them.

Finally, we acknowledge our debt to all those members of the community who've contributed to our work. We've sought to build thoughtfully and strategically on their contributions, and we look forward to continuing to work with them to shape the future.

CHAIRMAN'S FOREWORD

Axminster sits within a beautiful area of East Devon countryside. It has its own heritage – “Brand Axminster” as we like to call it; and most crucially, the residents of the town have a strong community spirit and commitment to worthy causes.

The Market and Coastal Towns Initiative has enabled the town to produce its first Community Plan with a vision covering the next twenty to thirty years. Recent events, such as the closure of the cattle market, have encouraged the town to consider a possible change in emphasis from a market and agricultural town to an employment and light industrial centre. This has led us to focus on four key priorities: regenerating the town centre, helping people to appreciate and enjoy the parish's natural assets, encouraging Axminster's growth and increasing the use of public and community transport.

This document will help East Devon District Council to develop an “Axminster Action Plan” which will shape the future of Axminster in planning terms. The importance of our Community Plan is that it reflects the social, economic and community needs of the town, and provides expectation for our young people.

This Community Plan and the vision for the town is only the start! The Plan includes a range of project ideas – some of these will be achievable in the short-term and some will take much longer. With the help of our enthusiastic community, Axminster Community Enterprise is determined to turn our dream into reality.

It would be impossible in this “foreword” to thank all the organisations and individuals who have assisted in the production of this plan. However, I would particularly like to thank our Community Agent, Nick Cornwell, for his knowledge and patience; the ACE steering group who attended numerous meetings; and most importantly, the people of Axminster, for supporting our consultation events and providing us with the initiatives and ideas for the plan.

Andrew Moulding
Chairman Axminster Community Enterprise

June 2008

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This plan is about strengthening the framework supporting community living in the Axminster area up to the year 2030. Axminster warrants special effort and investment, because it offers special opportunities.

The town faces **challenges**. For example: ♦ a town centre dominated by heavy traffic, with one or two eyesores ♦ a limited range of work available, especially higher-paid ♦ an ageing population & a projected decrease in the working-age population.

It also has **strengths & opportunities**. For example: ♦ Strategic position – eg, as a Gateway to the Jurassic Coast, with a train station ♦ A reputation for quality ♦ Large area of relatively unconstrained land ♦ High commitment in the community ♦ The town with the greatest long-term development potential in East Devon ♦ A unique opportunity for high quality comprehensive town centre redevelopment ♦ Substantial scope for developing sustainable tourism

Capitalising on strengths & opportunities, a long-term investment in Axminster would benefit a much wider area than the town alone and would unlock **significant potential** ►

► Investment in the **transport infrastructure** would improve economic prospects, including tourism, and the quality of life, help safeguard the environment, and make best use of our Gateway position.

► Investment in **town centre redevelopment** would help regenerate the town visually, socially and economically, and provide a more vibrant, people-friendly environment for residents and visitors alike.

► Investment in **housebuilding** and **jobs** would help:

♦ meet housing needs for local people and attract people of working age

♦ generate more local economic activity through greater resident spending power

♦ bring the town to a size that would make it a more vibrant resident and business community, and better able to fulfil its market town role for the wider area.

► Investment in **public open space and riverside access**, along with footpath/cycle networks, would help not only enhance the health and well-being of residents but also develop sustainable tourism and visitor opportunities, building on our Gateway position.

VISION OF AXMINSTER 2030

- ◆ *a welcoming, vibrant, safe, people-friendly town centre*
- ◆ *fine historic buildings protected and enhanced – and no eyesores*
- ◆ *a strong local economy with thriving businesses & a good variety of jobs*
- ◆ *a quality destination with a reputation for excellence in specific areas*
 - ◆ *a perfect Gateway to the Jurassic Coast*
 - ◆ *excellent community infrastructure and services*
- ◆ *a mix of housing suitable for all household types, ages and incomes, especially to enable younger people to stay in the area*
- ◆ *plenty of usable & enjoyable public open space, good access to countryside & the riverside, & a culture of respect for the environment*
- ◆ *residents keen to keep mentally and physically active and to get involved in community life*
- ◆ *an integrated, well-used public and community transport network*

In short:

- *A good place to live, work and play
- *A welcoming and rewarding place for people to visit, and for businesses to start up and develop
- *A town with character, community spirit and a sense of well-being
- *A community that feels safe and at ease with itself, and is confident in meeting future challenges

The Vision expresses common values and aspirations giving us a shared belief in our future. It's designed to project what our community should look like in 20-25 years if it has developed healthily.

Some of the ideas set out in this plan to realise the vision are ambitious. Land, planning and cost constraints could frustrate some of them in the short and medium terms. But the goals are immensely worthwhile, and achieving them will be worth the effort.

Our vision is intended to be a living picture, not a dry statement of objectives.

It's a picture to keep vividly in our minds over the long term.

As a community, we'll need to revisit the vision and this plan regularly - to measure progress against aspiration, to refresh our ambitions, and to remind ourselves that we can help shape the future rather than have it decided for us.



Discussions groups talking, looking & thinking, at an ACE visioning event, October 2007

COMMUNITY PROFILE



Axminster Arts Café, a popular meeting place

In a more detailed document on our web site there's a more extensive profile of Axminster. There's also a separate series of profiles from various sources. Those documents taken together establish the factual and statistical baseline for our planning. This section briefly sketches some of the principal features of those profiles.

Axminster *parish is semi-rural and the fifth largest in area* of the 68 in East Devon, much larger than the more populous and urbanised towns of Exmouth, Honiton and Seaton.

Of the six towns designated as 'Area Centres' in the Local Plan, Axminster has the *smallest population – 6,600*, even though it has *increased by about half in the last 40 years*. Another *6-7,000 people in the surrounding area* rely to some extent on the market town of Axminster for goods and services.

The *population is older* on average than that of most other East Devon towns, and much older than the national average.

Axminster has a significantly high proportion (42%) of the group characterised as '*independent pensioners*'.

On standard national measures, Axminster suffers from *little overall deprivation*, though there are some isolated pockets.

Axminster is a *low crime area*.

There are about *3,000 households* in Axminster. The *proportion of single-person households is high* - 34%. Many are lone-pensioner households.

The level of *owner occupation in Axminster is relatively low*. Local authority housing takes up a significant proportion of housing in Axminster.

Many *local people are unable to buy a home locally*. This is partly because of high numbers of people moving into the area, and generally because of low levels of income.

The main *health problems* include coronary heart disease, heart failure, stroke, cancer, arthritis, and mental illness.

About *2,400 people work in Axminster* and about 60% of them live in the area. About *500 Axminster residents commute to jobs outside the area*. In Axminster *unemployment levels* are relatively low.

Although *claim rates* for Income Support and Job Seekers Allowance are significantly below the national average, *household incomes* in the town are relatively low.

The highest proportion of people who are employed work in the *manufacturing sector*. The largest number of businesses are in *wholesale and retail*.

Many people feel that the town's facilities, including recreational activities, shops and eating places, don't adequately reflect the needs or interests of *young people*.

Within the overall market town area, *children living in Axminster achieve significantly lower results on average* at Key Stage 2, and slightly lower results at GSCE, than those who live in surrounding parishes.

The proportion of *people in Axminster with no qualification* is higher than the national average. The proportion of *people educated to degree level or above* is much lower than the national average.

Satisfaction with sports and leisure facilities is much higher in Axminster than in East Devon as a whole. Satisfaction with *museums and galleries*, and with *theatres and concert halls*, is much lower.

The East Devon Local Plan says that 'there are acknowledged *shortfalls in terms of open space provision*' in Axminster.

Nearly *a quarter of Axminster households do not have access to a car*. There's strong *local appreciation of train services*, but a wish for greater frequency and later running.

There are deep-felt *concerns about traffic congestion and safety on the roads and pavements* at various points in the town and on its outskirts.

CHALLENGES & NEEDS

CONTEXT - THE LOCAL PLAN

In the *East Devon Local Plan*, the District Council have broadly identified many of the most salient issues:

- There's substantial scope for growth in Axminster, as it isn't subject to the constraints that other towns are under
- Growth could significantly help stimulate local economic regeneration
- There are unique opportunities for high quality redevelopment in the town centre, relating mainly to the Webster's Garage site
- Open space provision is inadequate
- It's important to secure a north-south relief road

In the rest of this section we try to bring home some of the realities behind these planning statements and also other factors in the context of the main needs and challenges we face. These are summarised at the end of this section, and are picked up from another point of view in the next section – Strengths, Opportunities & Core Priorities.

DEMOGRAPHY, HOUSING & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In most other towns in East Devon the number of 20-24 year-olds is greater than the number of 0-4 year-olds. In Axminster the reverse is true. And the five-year age-band in Axminster with the greatest number of people is the 60-64 one. The percentage jump in the number of people between the 54-59 band and the 60-64 band is particularly marked.

Axminster could thus be characterised as a community that loses young adults but more than makes up for that by gaining people around retirement age. Among the reasons for the loss of younger people must be:

- Perceived inadequacy of facilities, services and shops oriented towards the needs and interests of young people and young families
- Limited range of work available, especially higher-paid work

- High cost of housing relative to income

Population projections for the area covering Axminster and surrounding parishes present a scenario of *significant decline in numbers of 0-44 year-olds* against an *even more significant increase in the numbers of 65-74 year-olds*.

These projected trends raise serious issues relating to balance within the community. They also have implications for patterns of consumer demand, and for the sustainability of the local economy and of services for people beyond retirement age.

Put simply, the challenge for Axminster is to seek to 'recruit and retain' as many people as possible of school and working age.

Part of the need is therefore for *more housing* suitable for them.

Unfortunately, relatively little of the housing that has been built in the last 20+ years falls into the 'affordable' category – especially for local people on local wages, which are well below the national or even regional average. So it's crucial for any new housing developments to be subject to the District Council's policy for 40% affordable housing.

More housing clearly means a larger population. Axminster actually *needs a larger population if it's to remain a truly viable Area Centre*. (As noted earlier, it's the least populous Area Centre in East Devon.) Economic benefits accrue from, eg, greater resident spending power and greater pressure for more employment opportunities.

The needs of the surrounding parishes could also be more extensively met if Axminster had a larger population and business sector.

No town, of whatever size, can be expected to offer everything the resident and surrounding communities want. However, there's an imperative to reduce the amount of travel by private car. For many people in the parishes bordering the Axminster boundary find it convenient to travel to other market or coastal towns and Exeter, Yeovil and Taunton for goods and services. Even Axminster residents do this.

We seek to achieve the goal of cutting down on car travel. We also seek to meet the demands generated by recent as well as projected population increases, and to

generate more prosperity. We may therefore need to increase what Axminster offers to residents of the town and surrounding parishes and to make the offer more distinctive, with an emphasis on quality.

The town centre cries out for a high-quality large-scale redevelopment in and around the Webster's Garage Site – to remove an eyesore, to counter a serious waste of space, to inject commercial vibrancy, and to meet more of the area's shopping needs.

We also need to *extend the range of local work available, especially higher-paid work*. The present limited range of work and salaries must be part of what lies behind the outward migration of young adults and the younger middle-aged. There's also a lack of general training opportunities as most further and higher education facilities are far distant, and there's very little adult and community learning provision in the town.

Our industrial estates, as presently configured, don't have room for a great deal of business expansion. However, industrial and commercial floor-space is typically much less expensive in Axminster than in most of East Devon. *We need to attract business start-ups and re-locations*.

INFRASTRUCTURE



A little local difficulty

We now identify the main pressures that the recent expansion of Axminster and other factors have exerted on the infrastructure relating to travel, and to more general services for tourists and other visitors.

Roads

Notwithstanding the provision of the east-west bypass (A35), *road traffic in Axminster is still a substantial problem*. This is partly because of the national trend towards greater car ownership; partly the local population increase over the last 20+ years; and partly

the establishment of a large supermarket in the last 10 years. A significant additional factor is the increased size of HGVs and the effects they have in Axminster's narrow roads and awkward junctions, in particular in the historic town centre.

Lack of a north-south relief road leads to:

Traffic congestion HGVs cause severe congestion and often bring traffic to a halt. Congestion hinders access for normal traffic and commercial deliveries.

Danger and fear The safety of pedestrians and cyclists is adversely affected by the congestion in the town centre where there are narrow pavements. Vehicles often mount the pavement in order to manoeuvre.

Pollution etc Noise, air pollution, carbon emissions and fuel-waste are seriously increased both by the volume and type of traffic and its slow progress through the town because of congestion.

Lost business & tourism

The traffic congestion has an effect on business custom as people will often avoid the town or won't linger long, and tourists may gain a negative impression of the town.

Damage Sub-surface drains, culverts and pipelines are subject to repeated excessive loads which will eventually cause expensive damage. HGVs sometimes clip buildings and damage pavements.

Pedestrians & cyclists

The traffic in Axminster isn't just a problem for motorists. The expansion of Axminster's population and of its shopping facilities has increased the number of pedestrians. Where the roads are narrow, and the pavements narrow or non-existent on one side or the other or both, the traffic is a danger to pedestrians, many of them elderly or children. At the very least it's perceived as a danger.

Fear of crime can be almost as debilitating as crime itself; in the same way, fear of traffic is keenly felt and affects behaviour and well-being. Walking and cycling experiences are unsatisfactory or nerve-racking at various places.

There are no pedestrian-only or pedestrian-priority streets, and few non-road footpaths or cycleways linking residential areas to the town centre. So pedestrians and cyclists can do very little to avoid the negative experiences. It wouldn't be surprising if some people living within easy walking distance of the town centre actually drove instead, to

avoid the less than satisfactory pedestrian experience. Few people seem to cycle in or near the town centre. There are, in any case, no cycle lanes or cycle racks.

Rail

Axminster station is a great asset, and the coming passing loop, due to be finished towards the end of 2009, will allow hourly services to London and Exeter. However, the station doesn't have the sort of facilities and access, particularly for buses and coaches, that encourage people to choose rail, bus and coach travel over the private car, or foster integrated travel planning.

Tourists & visitors

The designation of the nearby coastline as a World Heritage Site has increased the tourist and visitor count in the area. Axminster is *par excellence* the Gateway to the Jurassic Coast. A town with a street market and interesting independent shops and eating-places can attract people to stay for a few hours or more. However, that inducement is more effective when there are, amongst other things, sufficient public toilets, TIC opening hours, focal centres, public benches and open space away from traffic. Axminster isn't well provided with these.

SUSTAINABILITY

This is the overarching challenge for us all. For many, 'Sustainability' presents some difficulty. A widely-used accepted international definition of sustainable development is: *Development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*

Globally we're hardly meeting the needs of

the present, let alone addressing the needs of future generations. We're losing biodiversity and our patterns of consumption are having negative effects on the environment and climate. We can't take our lifestyles for granted any more. And we can't leave all action to the 'international community'. *Local* communities must engage with the issues, and turn threats into opportunities. Market towns need to adapt to new circumstances and priorities if they're to provide relevantly for their overall areas. In our area the issues include:

- Renewable energy
- Sustainable recreation and tourism
- Sustainable land & waste management
- Sustainable transport
- Sustainable building techniques

THE WIDER GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

The planned new community of Cranbrook, just east of Exeter, and another one recently mooted also east of Exeter, pose a threat to Axminster's development if local authority and other resources and allocations, particularly housing, are concentrated there rather than spread across the sub-region.

In the shorter term, the greater threat might come at the building stage. Heavy materials might come westward along the A35, significantly increasing the pressure on the already problematic Hunter's Lodge junction. At the same time, we face the prospect of even more increased HGV traffic using the A35 because of the creation of Exeter Gateway (the proposed 'intermodal' transport facility – essentially a lorry-train freight distribution centre, near Rockbeare) and Skypark (a new science/business park on the edge of Exeter airport).

MAIN CHALLENGES & NEEDS – SUMMARY

Challenges ♦Town centre dominated by heavy traffic ♦Eyesores in town centre & on parish outskirts ♦Competition from other towns, affecting businesses ♦Limited range of work available, especially higher-paid ♦Perceived inadequacy of facilities, services & shops oriented towards young people & young families ♦High house prices & low incomes ♦Ageing population & projected decrease in the working-age population from an already low base ♦Pockets of deprivation ♦Climate change & other environmental issues

Needs ♦A larger housing allocation & local population, especially of working age: to keep existing businesses viable & to help create new ones; to help keep services economic; & to help provide services for the elderly ♦More lower-cost housing ♦A high quality town centre redevelopment ♦A more substantial & distinctive offer & 'brand' as a destination with a reputation for excellence ♦Reducing traffic congestion, pollution & carbon emissions in the town & on its outskirts ♦Rail & bus service improvements ♦Reduction in private car travel ♦Larger employment-land allocation ♦Increasing the number & variety of jobs, particularly higher-skilled, higher-paid ones ♦Raising the level of skills in the workforce ♦Increasing the spread & level of educational achievement ♦Sustainability initiatives on, eg, energy, building techniques, land & waste management

STRENGTHS, OPPORTUNITIES & CORE PRIORITIES



The original home of Axminster Carpets, near the centre of town, earmarked for the Heritage Centre

The previous section dwelt largely on problems, and on perceived threats to the quality of life and to general progress. In this section we explore inherent strengths and potential opportunities. Founding our efforts on these will help Axminster develop and thrive. We want to look forward. Where we argue for remedying problems and deficiencies, we also seek to show how the remedy can strengthen the social and economic fabric and open up opportunities for the future.

MAIN STRENGTHS AT A GLANCE

- ◆ Strategic position and transport links
 - ◆ A reputation for quality
 - ◆ Large area of land not subject to severe constraints
 - ◆ Community spirit & commitment

Strategic position

This can best be appreciated by seeing Axminster **as a Gateway to ...**

- ◆ The south-west peninsula and south coast resorts, ports and conurbations
- ◆ The World Heritage Jurassic Coast and the South West Coast Path
- ◆ Three designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty
- ◆ The resorts of Lyme Regis and Charmouth, and Seaton, Beer and Branscombe

And **as a Town with...**

- ◆ A mainline London-Exeter rail station centrally placed
- ◆ A-roads running through and on its edge; and Exeter, Taunton and M5 nearby, giving access to Bristol, Midlands, and - with M4 link - Swindon, Heathrow, Cardiff, Swansea
- ◆ Exeter International Airport 30 minutes drive away, and Bristol airport 75 minutes
- ◆ The important new Sustrans coast-to-coast cycleroute running through it

Reputation for quality

Axminster's reputation for quality and excellence in specific fields is another main strength. Axminster Carpets have put the town on the industrial and heritage map indefinitely and internationally, and made it a household name; and Axminster Power Tools have also established an international reputation over the last few years. Other businesses, including new ones, can also take advantage of, and contribute to, the **Quality Brand Axminster**.

Large area of land

Axminster is the smallest Area Centre in population terms but one of the largest parishes in physical terms in the whole of East Devon. There is **substantial scope for development**. Other Area Centres in East Devon are much more constrained either by being heavily built-up already or by restrictive landscape designations

Community spirit & commitment

Axminster boasts a wide range of active voluntary and community organisations operating in and around the town. This **superb volunteer base and community spirit** is a considerable strength and can do much to underpin progress on behalf of the community.

OPPORTUNITIES

The strengths outlined above give Axminster a superb platform for taking opportunities to bring social and economic benefit to the market town and its surrounding area. To take full advantage of all this we must ensure that the infrastructure – particularly that relating to transport – isn't under too much

stress, and that networks and systems are sufficiently integrated.

Elements of the infrastructure are certainly under stress. To plan improvements only as a way of relieving stresses would, however, be backward-looking. Any investment should also build on opportunities that already exist, and open up more.

MAIN OPPORTUNITIES AT A GLANCE

- ◆ **District Local Plan identifies Axminster as the town with greatest long-term development potential**
- ◆ **Parish can accommodate substantial increase in housing development without encroaching on public open space or employment land**
- ◆ **Planning gain from such development could fund north-south relief road**
- ◆ **Local Plan identifies Webster's Garage site as unique opportunity for high quality comprehensive town centre redevelopment**
- ◆ **Large areas of open space and riverside could be made publicly usable**
- ◆ **Forthcoming improvements to train services - prospects for increasing bus/coach/train coordination, etc**
- ◆ **High-profile Sustrans cyclistroute to come through Axminster**
- ◆ **Axminster's strategic position on east-west and north-south road routes, as a railway-town close to the Jurassic Coast, and as a Sustrans staging post – all these elements & more open up opportunities to develop sustainable tourism**

Axminster's inherent strengths offer significant potential as well as strong justification for long-term investment in the following developments that would offer environmental, economic and social benefits over a wide area. They would be part of an integrated approach to the needs and aspirations of the market town, of the wider area it serves, and of visitors to the area.

North-south relief road

Contrast an indefinitely continuing situation **without** a relief road ...

A moribund town centre, dedicated to cars, not people – as most people will have long been used to going elsewhere for better conditions in which to do their shopping and to take their leisure.

...with what life could be like **with** one...

***No HGVs in town centre except for deliveries at restricted times
*Little through-traffic in town centre
*A speedy Axminster-only bus service
*Some pedestrianised & sitting-out areas both commercial & public
*A more expansive & exciting market
*Clean air
*Little traffic noise
*Safe, unthreatening ambience
*Relaxed pedestrians happy to stay & shop
*Thriving businesses
*Buildings, pavements & underground services safeguarded**

Substantial increase in house building

As we've noted, Axminster is the smallest Area Centre in East Devon in terms of population, but one of the largest parishes in physical area. Local people have witnessed gradual but substantial housing expansion over the last 20 or 30 years. They have been aware for several years that Axminster has been identified as an area with long-term growth potential. In various ways over the years, and again recently in our consultations, local people have shown and expressed a general will for that to happen. In short, in Axminster there's a lot of enthusiasm for, and little resistance to, the idea of further significant housing growth. That is, as long as it includes 'affordable' homes, appropriate community facilities and local amenities.

More housing brings two main local benefits:

► **more scope for local young people and others of working age to make a home of their own here if they wish**

► **economic regeneration stemming from greater resident spending power and pressure for attracting more employment opportunities**

More generally, at a larger population size and with the consequent increase in business the town becomes more self-sustaining. It also gains in vitality and confidence.

Town centre redevelopment



A fire at the disused Webster's Garage, April 2008

As the Local Plan says, 'the Webster Garage site and adjoining land offer the scope to accommodate a very high quality scheme that will contribute in a positive manner to the commercial growth and vitality of Axminster... The site... affords a unique opportunity in the town for a commercially vibrant development.'

Improving the town centre is overdue and will bring substantial social and economic benefits. In addition, Axminster's strategic position as a significant road and rail Gateway and its proximity to beautiful countryside and the coast make it a good touring base, and an important resource for people holidaying in the wider area. There are already well-advanced plans for a Heritage Centre based in the original eighteenth-century Axminster Carpets factory.

Investing in town centre improvements can help sustain and build on Axminster's attractiveness, especially by encouraging visitors, including tourists, to stay longer, and to come back often. Such improvements would serve well, not only visitors and tourists, but also the local economy and the community more generally.

Road-rail passenger interchange

Using the strength of our Gateway position to open up opportunities doesn't mean attracting more cars into the centre of Axminster. We want our strategic position to benefit the town and the surrounding area, not to overwhelm them.

There will be increasing pressures across the whole country to reduce car use. Axminster's position on a London-Exeter main line is a significant asset. It must be used to the full. The firm imminent prospects of more frequent services in both directions will intensify pressure for a passenger interchange and more bus services and better integration between bus, coach and rail.

Although the interchange would be mainly between bus, coach and train, greater use of rail might tend to increase the number of car journeys to the station. The effect on the town centre could be alleviated by, e.g., establishing a town-only bus service and perhaps, in due course, small-scale park-and-ride facilities, and secure cycle storage. In parallel with developing an interchange, there could be scope for improving both access to the nearby industrial estate and car and coach parking arrangements. Town centre redevelopment could, in any case, encroach on some existing car parking space, so replacement capacity may be needed.

Once a passenger interchange is established, it may be timely to re-examine the feasibility of reopening a rail line to Lyme Regis, perhaps as a narrow-gauge / light railway. Seen by many as unrealistic now, but championed enthusiastically by others, such options are likely to become progressively more attractive over the timeframe of this strategic plan.

Public open space. Footpath & cycle networks. Riverside access.

Even though there has been substantial house building over the last 20 or so years, there are still views of open countryside from most residential areas and parts of the town centre – and you don't have to go very far to be in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

By redevelopment, we can make the town centre more people-friendly, more conducive to relaxing and socialising. For the whole community, tourists and other visitors, we can also make better use of the natural assets we have within the parish as a whole, including the riverside.

Axminster parish has a much larger area than most other East Devon parishes. So it should be possible – indeed it should be an essential requirement – at the same time as planning additional house building and the much-needed north-south relief road, to plan

dedicated public open space provision and better walking and cycling opportunities.



Pillbox by the River Axe south west of the town, on the proposed Sustrans cycle route

CORE PRIORITIES

We arrived at our choice of priorities by exploring broad themes designed to focus our minds on important aims and outcomes:

- ◆ **Enhancing health & well-being**
- ◆ **Getting around**
- ◆ **Creating wealth & opportunity**
- ◆ **Safeguarding, enjoying & improving the environment**

We believe that by approaching the issues thematically in this way, rather than through single subjects, we have arrived at a robust, coherent and holistic set of core priorities. These are identified in the panel to the right.

Historically, Axminster has been a small country town with agriculture dominant. Following the closure of the cattle market a few years ago, agriculture, though still influential, is now less dominant. A broader role for the town is evolving. We're clear that our four principal priorities would deliver the most significant benefits to the town and surrounding area. We are also clear that the community are strongly in favour of them.

The main task for this plan is not to offer a long list of desirable add-ons, but to seek to extend and strengthen the structures that support the community and business. In this way future developments can be soundly based and made as secure as possible.

It's clear that these priorities cannot be delivered by community organisations alone. In the following section, on next steps and project ideas, we address the general question of how these – and other schemes we identify there – might be progressed.

CORE PRIORITIES

1. Regenerating the town centre *through sensitively-planned schemes for:*

1.1 A north-south relief road – making the town centre more people-friendly & enabling businesses to thrive; & offering environmental & economic benefits both locally & over a larger area

1.2 Redevelopment of parts of the town centre – taking social & economic advantage of the unique opportunity provided by the Webster's Garage site & of the effects of the relief road when it comes

2. Helping people appreciate & enjoy the parish's natural assets *through:*

2.1 The improvement of existing public open space & the creation of more of them

2.2 The improvement of footpath & cycle networks & riverside access

– both measures making better & more sensitive use of the assets; encouraging fitness, mental & physical activity & general well-being; & developing tourism-related opportunities

3. Encouraging Axminster's growth *through sensitively-planned schemes for:*

3.1 A substantial increase in house building – carefully planned with affordable housing a priority and open space provision safeguarded, will encourage the development of a balanced community both socially & geographically, regular trade for businesses, & a self-sufficient, vital community

3.2 Securing a wider range of wealth-creation & employment opportunities, e.g. through attracting business startups & relocations

4. Increasing the use of public & community transport *mainly by:*

4.1 Establishing a road-rail passenger interchange – responding to the increasing population & the forthcoming improvements to train services; encouraging use of bus/coach/train, & greater integration & co-ordination between services

4.2 Facilitating, for example, a town-bus service & more flexible & responsive transport for the elderly & disabled & for young people

NEXT STEPS & PROJECT IDEAS

The core priorities set out in the panel to the left must remain at the heart of our community planning. **Priorities 1.1 (relief road) and 3.1 (increase in house building) are particularly crucial to the future of Axminster.** They also have far-reaching infrastructure implications, as does priority 4.1 (establishing a transport interchange). The main role for the community in these proposals is to seek to ensure by watchfulness, and by cogent argument to the relevant authorities, that the outcomes will be as socially, economically and environmentally beneficial as possible. In conjunction with other organisations, **ACE will work hard to fulfil this role and articulate the community's interests.**

In the table below (continued overleaf), we summarise proposals where the role for the community is likely to go beyond watchfulness and argument. We're drawing up an **Implementation Plan**, which will need to be frequently reviewed and updated. As proposals are worked up into projects, ACE

(and other local organisations) must consider which of the following main strategic options are appropriate to each project: ♦research & planning ♦taking a stake (investing in land etc) ♦influencing others ♦developing human resources (skills, experience) ♦inward investment ♦loan funding (developing community enterprises) ♦technical assistance

The strategic options should be selected on the basis of answering the following questions: ♦How would this help us achieve our goal? ♦What strengths and opportunities would this build on? ♦What are the problems and threats this would overcome? ♦What are the long-term implications of this approach?

Finally, again: **Sustainability** – a large challenge, but also a great opportunity. We have a responsibility to ensure that in planning our projects we learn from the latest developments in relation to issues such as renewable energy and energy-efficient building techniques; sustainable transport, recreation and tourism; and good practice in land & waste management.

PROJECT IDEAS

PROPOSAL

JUSTIFICATION

Themes and/or MAIN BENEFITS

1. Community assets review

– with a view to making best long-term use of provision in the college/primary schools/ swimming pool /sports hall/ youth centre/magistrates court area – taking account also of possible relocation of ATFC, & of other recreation needs etc

•continued population expansion & other demographic change bringing new demands
•perceived issues over whether sports hall & Pippens buildings are fit for purpose
•present waste of magistrates court
•need to identify targets for S106 planning gain funding

•Enhancing health & well-being
•Creating opportunity
•facilitates long-term planning so that predicted needs can be met coherently, flexibly & economically
•resources can be used to the full
•the community's preferences are reflected
•holistic rather than piecemeal

2. Local health services –

Review the demands and constraints on Axminster Medical Practice & Community Hospital, and scope for more flexible modes of delivery

•continued population expansion & other demographic change, especially ageing, bringing new demands
•building too small for predicted needs
•changing lifestyles
•young people's issues
•rural isolation

•Enhancing health & well-being
•Creating opportunity
•anticipating future demands, & reflecting latest good practice & needs as they evolve
•an assessment of whether relocation to the hospital site might provide benefits of scale

3. Public Open Space – e.g.,

rehabilitate The Spiral, improve Valley Path, as two obvious options. Examine other options throughout parish.

See Core Priority 2 on page 11
•lack of readily usable public open space.
•concerns about levels of physical & mental activity and general health/well-being

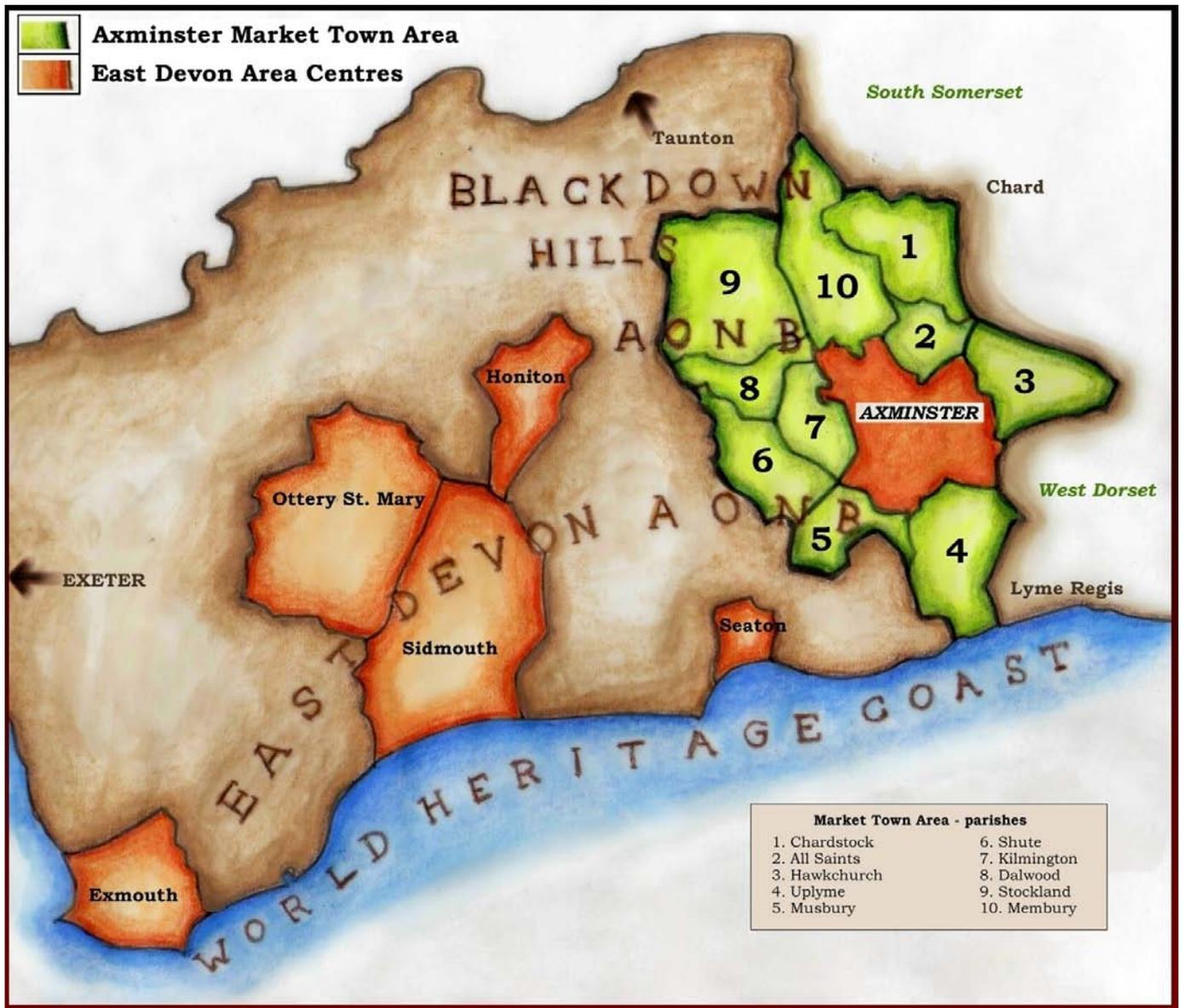
•Enhancing health & well-being
•Creating opportunity
•Safeguarding, enjoying & improving environment
•making existing spaces more welcoming
•bringing inaccessible or unused spaces into use
•embedding a culture of physical activity by increasing opportunities and making them more attractive
•increasing tourism attractiveness

[Table continued on next page]]

PROJECT IDEAS

[Continued from previous page]

PROPOSAL	JUSTIFICATION	<i>Themes</i> and/or MAIN BENEFITS
<p>4. Safe walking & cycling – Increase opportunities, including routes to school. Explore and exploit links with Sustrans</p>	<p>See <i>Core Priority 2 on page 11</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ response to increased traffic, pollution, dangers and climate change. ▪ need to prevent & combat obesity, heart disease, stroke, mental illness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Enhancing health & well-being</i> ▪ <i>Getting around</i> ▪ <i>Creating opportunity</i> ▪ <i>Safeguarding, enjoying & improving environment</i> ▪ a substantial increase in walking & cycling both for pleasure and access ▪ improvements in fitness amongst all sections of the community ▪ a substantial decrease in short car journeys ▪ tourism attractiveness
<p>5. Local signage etc – Review and improve signage, including providing interpretation boards etc</p>	<p>See <i>Core Priority 2 on page 11</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ local and visitor dissatisfaction with coverage 	<p>See 3 & 4 above</p>
<p>6. Interim improvements in town centre - review scope <i>pending</i> relief road and Webster's redevelopment. E.g., some pedestrianisation, parking rearrangement, traffic calming, options for one-way system, floral displays, public toilets, loyalty cards, etc</p>	<p>See <i>Core Priority 1.2 on p11</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ traffic congestion ▪ road safety concerns ▪ HGVs intimidating ▪ only one block of public toilets ▪ some drabness ▪ low levels of obvious economic vibrancy & tourism attractiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Enhancing health & well-being</i> ▪ <i>Getting around</i> ▪ <i>Creating wealth & opportunity</i> ▪ <i>Safeguarding, enjoying & improving environment</i> ▪ safer, more sociable, people-friendly environment ▪ more welcoming to visitors/tourists
<p>7. Tourism & visitor strategy – raise profile; promote 'brand Axminster', quality destination; Axminster as Gateway to Jurassic Coast</p>	<p>Complementing Chamber of Commerce initiatives on promoting Axminster; plans for Heritage Centre, etc</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Enhancing health & well-being</i> ▪ <i>Getting around</i> ▪ <i>Creating wealth & opportunity</i> ▪ promoting & enhancing Axminster's reputation for quality ▪ a targeted approach
<p>8. Securing a wider range of wealth-creation and employment opportunities, eg through attracting business startups and relocations</p>	<p>See <i>Core Priority 3.2 on page 11</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ low pay area ▪ restricted range of jobs ▪ younger people leaving area 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Enhancing well-being</i> ▪ <i>Creating wealth & opportunity</i> ▪ <i>Safeguarding the environment</i> ▪ better choice of jobs/pay for local people ▪ 'recruitment & retention' of people of working age ▪ reducing commuting
<p>9. Transport co-ordination & improvement – Complementary to Road-Rail Interchange. E.g., Town Bus, mobility for disabled, improved car and coach parking, young people's needs etc</p>	<p>See <i>Core Priority 4.2 on page 11</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ environmental considerations ▪ relatively low level of car ownership ▪ ageing population 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Enhancing health & well-being</i> ▪ <i>Getting around</i> ▪ <i>Creating wealth & opportunity</i> ▪ <i>Safeguarding, enjoying & improving environment</i>
<p>10. Rail loop follow-up – Seek further rail improve-ments, if warranted, once the effect of the loop has been evaluated</p>	<p>A <i>reminder</i> for the medium-long term</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Enhancing health & well-being</i> ▪ <i>Getting around</i> ▪ <i>Creating wealth & opportunity</i> ▪ <i>Safeguarding, enjoying & improving environment</i>
<p>11. Longer-term transport and visitor-attraction ideas: E.g., Axminster to Lyme Regis Railway; tramway; horse drawn transport, etc</p>	<p>A <i>reminder</i> for the medium-long term</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Enhancing health & well-being</i> ▪ <i>Getting around</i> ▪ <i>Creating wealth & opportunity</i> ▪ <i>Safeguarding, enjoying & improving environment</i>



This document is designed to convey the essential features of the plan. It doesn't stand alone. You will find more detailed documents on ACE's web site, including a full record of ACE's consultations and profiles of Axminster produced by relevant authorities.

Go to ►

www.axminstercommunityenterprise.org.uk



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