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## STREETS AND PARKING IMPROVEMENT PLAN FOR AXBRIDGE

### FINAL REPORT



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Mh/351

October 2008



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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 Haire Landscape Consultants were appointed by the Axbridge Action Group in February 2008 to undertake an appraisal of the streetscape and parking arrangements in Axbridge. This followed the award of a grant from Somerset Community Council.
- 1.2 The objectives of the study were to appraise the current situation and suggest how the quality of the environment can be improved , together with the quality of life for the residents.
- 1.3 The scope of the study is general. looking at the layout, use and urban fabric of the town, it is not a detailed traffic analysis. There was consultation with the Highway Authority, Somerset County Council (SCC) and the views expressed included in the proposals herein. SCC would be supportive of proposals that comply with DfT guidance document 'Design for Streets'. This consultation was not detailed or exhaustive and it is recommended that further consultation is undertaken to progress the scheme.
- 1.4 Part of the intention of the group in commissioning the study is to explore how the attractiveness of Axbridge to visitors might be increased and how a more sustainable economic future for the town might be developed.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

- 2.1 The Axbridge 2005 'Parish Household Survey' and Parish Plan were consulted. This was coupled with field observations at various times of the day, meetings with the Action Group and Chamber of Trade, public meeting/exhibition, feedback from public meeting. Consultations with SCC and visits to other towns where similar issues exist (Langport, Magor).
- 2.2 The results of these consultations were used to influence an outline design process undertaken by a Landscape Architect and a chartered Civil Engineer. This led to the proposals included in this report.

## **3. EVALUATION OF THE ISSUES AFFECTING THE STUDY AREA**

### **3.1 Description and context**

- 3.1.1 Axbridge is located south of the Mendips, east of the M5 motorway and west of Cheddar. It is a very old settlement, dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century and there is a well-established east/west transport corridor here on the dry, relatively level ground between the hills to the north and the levels to the south.
- 3.1.2 Following the removal of its district administrative centre function, Axbridge has become predominantly a dormitory town, with residents commuting to Bristol and to Weston. It is also close to obvious tourist 'draws' such as Weston super Mare, Cheddar, Wells and Glastonbury. The obvious attractions at Axbridge (principally the square) are not particularly well visited within this context.
- 3.1.3 The historic town centre has notable buildings such as the Parish Church of St. John the Baptist, King John's Hunting Lodge and other features

recognised by the Conservation Area status. The Conservation Area extends along High Street/West Street on the established east – west route, and south of the Square to the area around the school.

- 3.1.4 The modern by-pass road constructed to the north of the town follows the former line of the railway (Strawberry Line). Part of the residential area of the town is 'cut off' by the bypass, being situated on the steeply sloping land to the north of this route.

## **3.2 Public spaces**

- 3.2.1 The town is centred on the striking public space that is the Square and on the established east – west transport route. Historic buildings with few front gardens enclose the spaces of the town centre; there is very little vegetation through much of this area. There are also some large houses in substantial gardens that are contained by walls and several civic buildings, including the Town Hall, former Court house, the school and the churches.
- 3.2.2 These historic buildings define the 'established' character of the town, although modern usage and in particular the issues associated with traffic and parking have a strong influence on its character.
- 3.2.3 The surface of the public areas tends to be modern, bitumen macadam, with the delineation between footway and carriageway generally by modern concrete kerbs. Notable exceptions to this are the distinctive cast iron kerbs in St Mary's Street and much of High Street/West Street, and the paving of the Square itself.
- 3.2.4 Almost the entire surface of the Square was replaced in the early 1980s with concrete block paving. These have been laid to follow the physical form defined by the previous highway layout and so there are obvious drainage gutters and falls, with 'linear' drains in the low areas often in front of the shops. The layout of parking within the square is defined by white lining over the block paving. This medium is also used to define vehicular and pedestrian areas around the square.
- 3.2.5 There are remnants of the traditional stone flag paving in the north east corner of the Square, close to the town wells and the Church.

## **3.3 Traffic issues**

- 3.3.1 The construction of the bypass has undoubtedly removed a considerable amount of through traffic from the town centre. An unfortunate consequence of this is the separation of the part of the town to the north of the by-pass from the rest of Axbridge in a way that the railway that originally followed this route could not have done. The speed limit on the by-pass is 60mph, reducing to 40mph towards its eastern end. However, being a former railway line, it is very straight and there is anecdotal evidence that it is used as an informal racetrack, with the 'return' being through the town centre, via the square.
- 3.3.2 Although the by-pass must have reduced traffic volumes, the continuing growth in car ownership and usage means that the town square is still a very busy area. Much of this is generated by the shops and other businesses in the square, together with the school, the church and some tourist traffic.

There is also a significant residential area to the south of the town centre which is accessed either via the Square or via Old Church Road, which becomes very narrow close to the school. Any traffic accessing this area to or from the east, would pass through the Square.

- 3.3.3 The Square is a large open, roughly rectangular paved space with a dominant route diagonally across it from St Mary's Street (south east corner) to High Street (north west corner). The north east corner provides access to the Church (via steps) and Meadow Street and Moorland Street both join the Square at its south western corner. The Square is contained by buildings that range in age from Medieval to late Georgian or early Victorian. There are no street trees or other significant vegetation.
- 3.3.4 There is a legal covenant preventing development in the square, which ensures that an area is kept free for markets.
- 3.3.5 Traffic leaving the square towards the east travels along the historic St Mary's Street before entering Jubilee Road. Although this is an extension of the historic east/west route, Jubilee road is lined with modern housing. The speed limit here is 30mph, reducing to 20mph approaching the Square, at the junction with Orchard Road.
- 3.3.6 Traffic accessing the Square from the west can travel either along the medieval West Street/High Street or the modern Houlgate Way/Old Church Road. The speed limit is 20mph (zone) but anecdotal evidence is that this is rarely observed on either route. Priority has recently been altered on Old Church Road, making the route to Meadow Street car park and the Square dominant over the 'straight on' route to the residential area to the south of the Square.

#### **3.4 Public Transport**

- 3.4.1 There is an east – west bus route through the Square (St. Mary's Street – Meadow Street). Any proposals would need to consider this and the need to have raised bus stop structures so that access can be gained at floor level into the bus. There is a potential conflict here with the need to keep the square free from obstructions and an innovative solution will be required.
- 3.4.2 **Cycling.** There is an official route along Jubilee Road, St Mary's Street, through the square and along High Street/West Street
- 3.5 **Parking:** existing arrangements, sites, charges, limitations
  - 3.5.1 **Moorland Street** car park is well used by locals. As well as being close to the Square, it also provides access to a children's nursery. However, access, visibility, circulation and room to manoeuvre are all either poor or less than ideal. This car park is also used to gain delivery access to the pharmacy.
  - 3.5.2 Public toilets are located close to the entrance of this car park although these face the street and are not obvious to users of the car park. This site is owned by Sedgemoor DC which charges for the use of the car park.

- 3.5.3 **Meadow Street** car park is larger than Moorland Street and is laid out in a more conventional way. There is a central dividing strip that is planted with trees, providing shade. A new housing development is under construction along its northern edge. This car park is owned by Sedgemoor DC, which charges a fee for parking, although negotiations are underway in autumn 2008 for the Town Council to purchase this site.
- 3.5.4 **The Square** currently provides parking for approximately 26 cars. Although part of it is subject to restrictions by legal covenant, it is adopted highway and as such it is under the jurisdiction of the Highway Authority, Somerset County Council. Parking is limited (waiting) but there is a history of this not having been enforced and there is an established culture of parking here for long periods for no charge.
- 3.5.5 **Private parking** is in limited supply in much of Axbridge, particularly in the Conservation Area, where the layout is medieval in origin. It is acknowledged that where private access to the rear of individual properties is feasible, this has been done. The lack of parking in the more 'historic' parts of the town means that residents of these areas are forced to find alternative places to park. This inevitably puts pressure on the more 'modern' parts of the town, particularly where there is good pedestrian access to the older areas. Particularly badly affected in this way is the upper part of Houlgate Way and Starrs Close, which runs along the rear of West Street (south side).
- 3.5.6 The parking in these areas appears to cause considerable friction between groups of residents. Parking is available in Meadow Street, the Square and Moorland Street, but it appears that many residents that could park in these areas are put off by the cost.

#### **4. OVERALL PHILOSOPHY**

- 4.1 Having undertaken this study and carried out the public consultation it is clear that it will not be possible to solve all of the problems experienced by the residents of Axbridge by the implementation of a single construction project.
- 4.2 Far more likely to succeed is the adoption of a strategy based on a clear vision for the town. This is not yet established, and could not be derived from a study as limited in its detail as this inevitably is, given the funding available. The overall aim however, is to improve the quality of the environment for people who live in and visit Axbridge, thereby encouraging visitors, improving business and helping the regeneration of Axbridge as a vibrant local and economic community.
- 4.3 The parking and traffic calming issues can be improved and in time, with continuous effort and cooperation between the various interested parties, improved significantly, in tandem with real improvements to the town as a whole.
- 4.4 The enjoyment of the town by its residents is limited by the behaviour or actions of some of the residents. Inconsiderate parking is often cited, use of the car to travel very short distances to the shop or school, parking on the street when the car parks are empty (and in some cases nearer to the person's house) for the sake of a small cost or season ticket. These issues can only be addressed by proactive education together with the removal of

disincentives. This would require a concerted, targeted publicity campaign by Sedgemoor District and Somerset County Council and may require experimental arrangements as regards parking charges/strategies to see what measures are effective.

- 4.5 The extent to which the parking behaviour of the residents can be influenced will in turn determine the amount/nature of any traffic calming that is appropriate or required. This can only be established following more detailed study and in consideration of the 'whole picture' of Axbridge (such action in one location affects other locations).

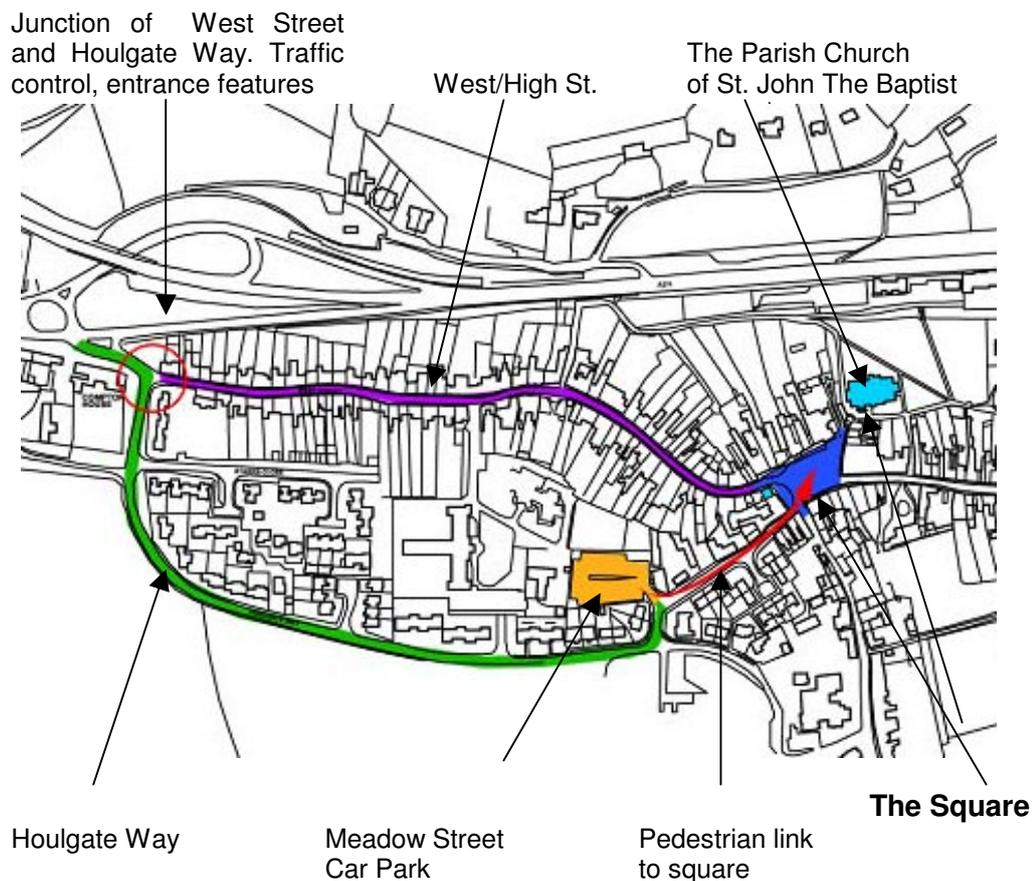
## 5. PROPOSALS

5.1 In the absence of detailed figures on traffic flows and volumes and because the traffic calming issue is one that is almost certainly best approached gradually, these proposals concentrate on practical, physical measures that will change the way the town is used, and will improve its image for visitors and residents alike. This process has to consider the way the town functions on a day-to-day basis.

### 5.2 West of the square

5.2.1 There are two alternative routes into the square from the west. These are: along Houlgate Way/Old Church Road or along West Street/High Street. As far as visitors to the town go, it makes sense to encourage them to follow the most direct route to the largest car park (Meadow Street) and to encourage them to walk into the square from there. To this end, it is proposed that the design of the junction of West Street and Houlgate Way is reconsidered to incorporate the following:

- Mark the entrance to 'historic' Axbridge by narrowing the end of West street and the incorporation of appropriate features or signage
- Ensure through a clear signing strategy that visitors use the Meadow Street car park and that this is reached via the most direct route, Houlgate Way
- Include measures to control the speed of traffic approaching the West Street/Houlgate Way junction from either direction



- 5.2.2 It is anticipated that this would alter the traffic volumes along Houlgate Way, particularly of visitors. It may be appropriate to introduce traffic calming measures on Houlgate Way either in the form of conventional measures or by a combination of 'chicanes' formed by defined parking areas on opposite sides of the road and bus stops (service and school).
- 5.2.3 The introduction of traffic calming measures on one of either Houlgate Way/Old Church Road or High Street West Street is likely to lead to greater use of the other by local traffic (wishing to avoid the measures). It is therefore important that any changes are made in a considered and balanced way.
- 5.2.4 Traffic calming measures on the historic High Street/West Street should consider the distinctive physical appearance of this environment. This may involve narrowing the carriageway in particular locations, possibly combined with suitable speed 'humps', but it would be better if this were done in a subtle manner that appeared to emphasise some of the existing 'informal' variations in carriageway width. Given that the iron kerbs in this street are very low, measures would be needed to prevent vehicles from simply mounting the kerb to avoid being slowed. These measures would also have to allow the passage of large vehicles such as refuse, removal and emergency vehicles.

### 5.3 Meadow Street Car Park

- 5.3.1 This car park would become the principal arrival point for visitors and could be enhanced by the addition of tourist information and directions. This would also potentially be a better location for public toilets (currently located at Moorland Street).
- 5.3.2 Once at the car park, it is proposed that the route to the square is made more attractive by physical improvements to Meadow Street that form a clear linkage in terms of treatment/materials used. This would include a dedicated footway into the square along the northern side of the road (refer 'square' proposals).

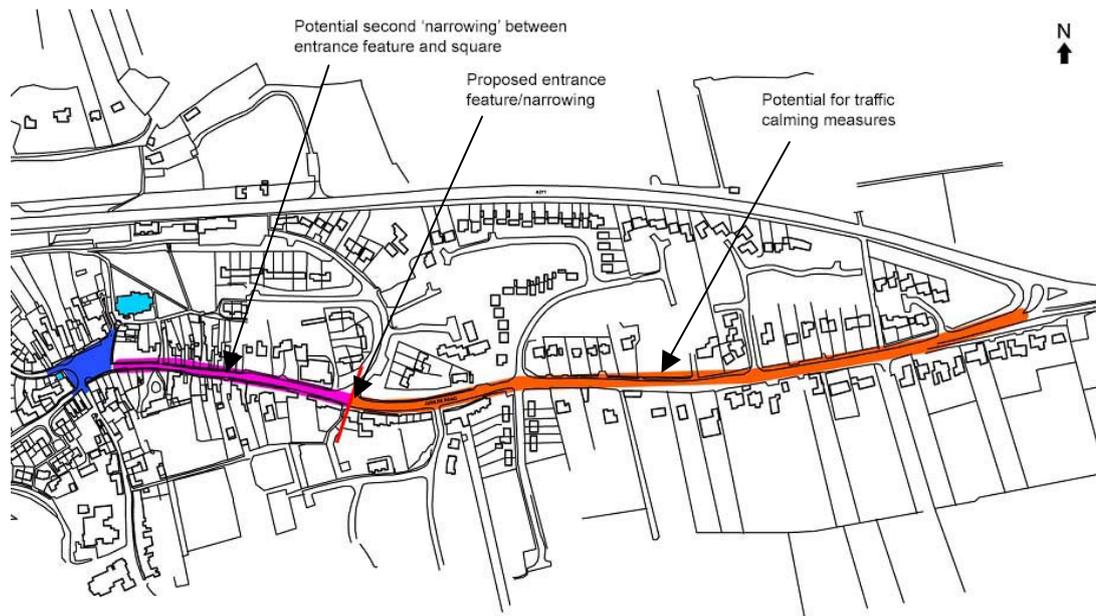


View towards the Square from Meadow Street, showing potential improvement to footway link

- 5.3.3 There is the potential for the commercial centre of the town to be extended towards this car park in time (and with the support of the Planning Authority) if economic conditions transpired that would facilitate the redevelopment of the area of garages currently accessed off Old Church Road. This would be a significant factor in the regeneration of Axbridge although it is accepted that the removal of these garages would worsen the parking situation.

## 5.4 East of the Square

5.4.1 The approach to the town is a 20mph zone (as is Houlgate Way). However, the physical form of the street does not reinforce this, the often very wide street encourages, rather than discourages speed. In time, traffic calming measures could be introduced in places along this route (Jubilee Road). In the short term, it is proposed that a significant narrowing is formed immediately to the west of Chestnut Avenue that marks the entrance to the town and serves as a reminder of the need to control speed. This could be reinforced by a second narrowing part way between here and the square itself.



5.4.2 As with High Street/West Street, such measures should respect the particular physical characteristics of the iron kerbs in the historic street.

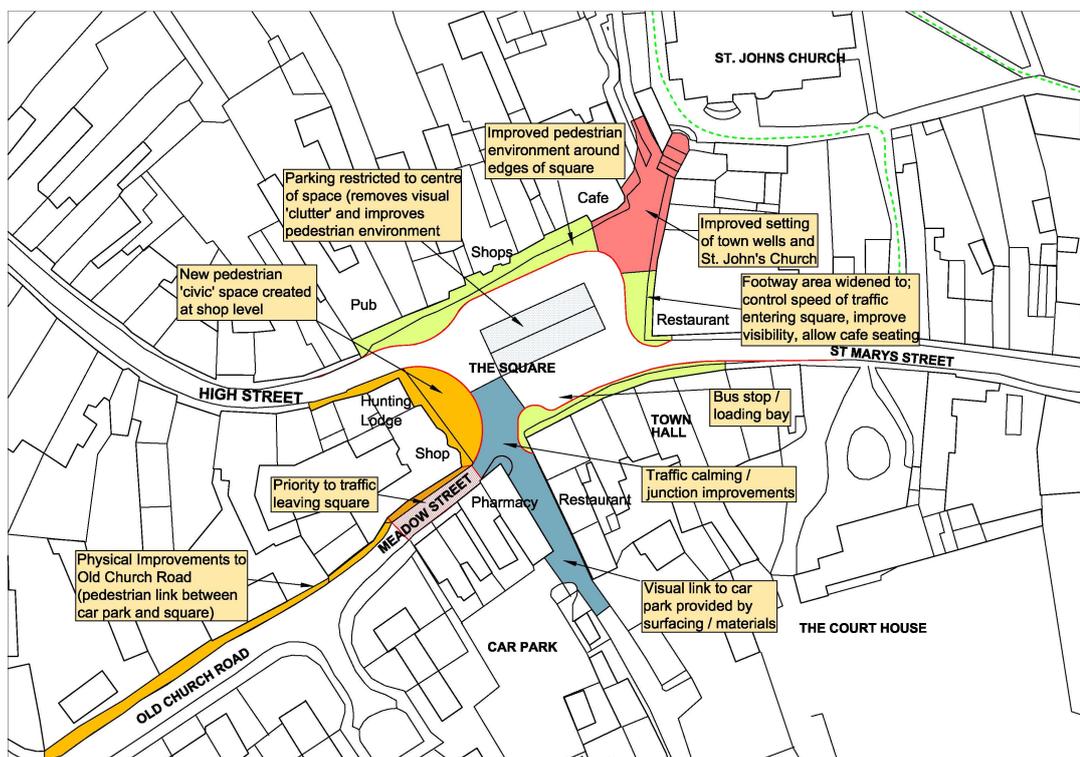
## 5.5 The Square.

5.5.1 The square is a large urban space that is used by many parties for many disparate purposes at different times. The conflicting demands of travel, parking, cycling, buses, loading and other functions are currently accommodated reasonably well but the physical environment is seriously compromised as a result.

5.5.2 The present configuration of circulation and parking around the square means that the buildings that form the square are often obscured parked vehicles.

5.5.3 The retention of the broad and well-established east west route means that traffic can enter and pass through the square at relatively high speed (because there are no obstructions). The entrance from the Square into the High Street is very narrow and bends sharply, an obvious hazard for speeding traffic.

5.5.4 It is proposed that the parking is moved to the centre of the space. This measure should reduce the speed of traffic through the square. It will also 'free up' the edges of the space for pedestrian traffic and allow the buildings (and the businesses in them) to be seen and to use the space outside their doors. The space will also then be 'read' as a square, rather than as a car park. The conditions of the legal covenant on this area would have to be met by any scheme.



5.5.5 The approach to the church is currently obscured by the mass of the parked vehicles but this area would be opened up to views along from the newly created dedicated pedestrian areas on two sides of the square.

5.5.6 The widening of the footways will also allow new opportunities for café and restaurant tables on the northern and eastern sides.

5.5.7 There is the potential for a bus stop/loading bay to be constructed on the southern side of the Square, which would allow deliveries to the businesses on this side. Such a feature should be designed in a way that prevents traffic from travelling at high speed along the southern edge of the Square.

5.5.8 A significant 'arrival' space at the western end of the square is proposed at 'shop level'.



This is where visitors will arrive in the square from the Meadow Street car park and allows them to orientate themselves with their surroundings. Also allows level access to King John's Hunting Lodge and to High Street (minor improvements to footway on this side)



5.5.9 Junction improvements to the area outside the pharmacy to calm traffic and ensure pedestrian safety

5.5.10 Improvement of the footway link between the Square and Meadow Street car park, including the introduction of a short length of single carriageway width in Meadow Street, with priority to traffic leaving the square. This arrangement should reduce the chances of creating congestion in the Square.

## **5.6 The By-pass**

- 5.6.1 The speed of traffic on the by-pass presents a problem for residents of Hillside wishing to access the town centre and for users of the public footpaths that cross this road.
- 5.6.2 It would be desirable for the speed of traffic to be reduced to 40mph along its entire length to reduce this problem.

## **5.7 Parking Strategy**

- 5.7.1 It is proposed that the use of the three principal parking areas is reviewed as a concerted strategy. This would require the cooperation of the District and County Councils, particularly with a view to enforcement/encouragement. This strategy would be aimed at maximising usage and reducing traffic movements in the square.
- 5.7.2 **The Square.** Eighteen parking spaces in the centre of the Square with waiting limited to 30 minutes. This area would be 'aimed' at shoppers and visitors. The parking limit here would need to be actively controlled.
- 5.7.3 **Moorland Street car park.** This relatively 'hidden' car park would be provided at low cost, being 'aimed' at shopkeepers and town centre workers, but with no long-term parking allowed.
- 5.7.4 **Meadow Street car park.** This would be the principal visitors' car park and would be charged for at 'market' rates comparable with similar locations in the District.
- 5.7.5 As well as being the principal car park for visitors, Meadow Street car park is an essential facility for local people requiring frequent longer stay or overnight parking. Better use of this site by residents will reduce pressure on the streets of the town and on the parking spaces in the Square. Achieving this shift will require a concerted, targeted publicity campaign and possibly, experimental arrangements as regards season ticket charges.
- 5.7.6 **On-street parking.** There is potential for on-street parking on Houlgate Way, Jubilee Road and possibly High Street/West Street. These approaches should be reviewed in association with Somerset CC to establish how on-street parking can be accommodated safely and potentially double as traffic calming.

## 6 THE WAY FORWARD AND PRIORITIES

- 6.1 The various proposals and recommendations within this report will require further design development and consideration by the relevant authorities, all of which will have different agendas, budgets and timescales. The following are potential further actions that could be taken to progress the recommended improvements.
- Liaison between car park authorities (Police and SDC)
  - Consideration of the issues relating to the bypass (by SCC)
  - Consideration of traffic calming measures, particularly along Houlgate Way; possible introduction of trial scheme (SCC)
  - Consideration of feasibility of modifications to Moorland Street and Meadow Street Car Parks (SDC)
  - Consideration of feasibility of improvements to the Square and link to Meadow Street Car Park, including bus movements through the square and loading
- 6.2 Given the piecemeal nature of many of the proposals, and the need for time to develop effective strategies, particularly as regards traffic calming for example, the most effective way of starting the improvement/regeneration of the town centre may be to concentrate on relatively modest yet achievable improvements to the centre of the town.
- 6.3 Although the reconfiguration of the whole square, together with the resurfacing would take time and significant resources, the proposed improvement at the western end, outside the shop, chemist and King John's hunting lodge could be implemented with minimal disruption of the workings of the town.
- 6.4 The other relatively easily achievable proposals are the entrances to 'historic' Axbridge by narrowing the end of West Street and immediately to the West of Chestnut Avenue, together with appropriate signage and features.
- 6.5 These would be high profile improvements that could be used to inspire the other, less visible, but no less important improvements to parking and traffic management.

## **7 SUMMARY**

- 7.1 The study has identified the principle issue affecting the streets of Axbridge and the way they are used.
- 7.2 A series of proposals have been put forward, which can be summarised as follows:
- Revise the overall parking strategy that controls the existing car parks, giving each a distinct 'role' with recommendations for physical modifications to reinforce this strategy
  - Mark the entrances to the 'historic' core of the town, with appropriate traffic calming measures on these and any routes affected by these works.
  - Reconfigure the square, create a pedestrian area at the western end and restrict parking to the centre of the space.
- 7.3 The implementation of the scheme should start with what is achievable, but that this is likely to be the creation of a strong, high quality pedestrian space at the western end of the square.

## Appendix 1 - MEASURES CONSIDERED (BUT DISCOUNTED)

1. Remove parking from the square altogether. Although attractive as a means of visual enhancement of the square, this proposal would reduce the parking the town by a significant amount
2. One way systems West Street/High Street Houlgate Way or Moorland Street Old Church Road. These are very difficult to justify because they could increase traffic volumes and speed or have limited impact on the problem when weighed against the inconvenience involved.
3. Pedestrianisation of part of Moorland Street. This would limit access to the area to the south and would be likely to increase traffic along Old Church Road and into the square via Meadow Street.
4. Alternative parking provision, in a car park off Houlgate Way was opposed by numerous residents of that area.
5. During the public consultation exercise, the suggestion was made that a visitor car park could be constructed on land to the north of the by-pass. This has not been considered in detail because the distance involved and the hazard presented by the by-pass to pedestrians accessing the town from such a car park are considered to be prohibitive.