Axminster Neighbourhood Plan
2023 to 2040

Report on First Public Consultation Exercise, covering a Survey carried out during August / September 2021, and analysed during October / December 2021.

Status:

A draft version of this Report, dated 2022-01-08, was discussed by the Steering Group at its meeting on 3 February 2022, together with (1) a set of written comments submitted by one member unable to attend in person; and (2) a discussion between those members present.

Subject to the changes which were agreed at that meeting being made, the Report was approved for inclusion as part of the formal Evidence Base for the Axminster Neighbourhood Plan, and for release to any interested party via the Axminster Town Council website.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The purpose of public consultation

1.1.1.   The purpose of Public Consultation within the context of Neighbourhood Plan development is both to discover the public's priorities for the future development of the town, and to gain a clearer understanding of how broad and how deep whatever support is detected runs.

1.2. The format of this consultation exercise

1.2.1.   This particular public consultation exercise took place over the period August to September 2021. The survey form was made accessible both as a paper-based form and as an on-line form using 'Google forms' technology. The on-line form could either be accessed via a link on the Town Council's own website, or via a QR code which could be scanned using any smart-phone.

1.3. This consultation in context

1.3.1.   Work on a previous iteration of a Neighbourhood Plan took place over the period 2014 to 2018, including a public consultation survey with very similar objectives to our 2021 survey. That survey was launched in 2014 and analysed over the autumn of that year.

1.3.2.   The 2014 survey form was paper-based, and gained wide local circulation as a consequence of being created as a 'pull-out' form within the local newspaper. Unfortunately Axminster no longer has a locally-focussed newspaper (or Axminster-specific edition) of its own.

1.3.3.   In 2016 a separate 'Axminster Housing Survey' was run by Devon Communities Together. This did not form part of the Neighbourhood Plan process, though it did influence the draft Plan which by then was in the process of development.

1.3.4.   A draft Axminster Neighbourhood Plan was produced in June 2018, but after extensive internal review and discussion it was not progressed further. When East Devon District Council amended the Local Plan in such a way as to signal support in principle for a new relief road with a substantial associated allocation of new housing, much of the impetus of the Neighbourhood Plan fell away.

1.3.5.   This consultation had to be planned and implemented taking this history into account, and recognising that the wider public will often fail to distinguish between the role of Neighbourhood Plan development and the active planning of public services.

2. The Process of Selecting Topics and Questions

2.1. The initial discussions

2.1.1. The initial discussions on public engagement and consultation took place at Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group meetings in March, April and May 2021. These early discussions covered what might be achieved both through remote surveys and via much more tightly structured face-to-face discussions (broadly comparable to 'citizen jury' exercises).

2.1.2. Early drafts of a survey form attempted to bridge the gap between the two approaches, but it soon became clear that many of the techniques which might work well in face-to-face discussions required too much explanation on a paper- or screen-based survey form. It was agreed that this would be likely to prove off-putting, and therefore to depress (and to skew) the response rates from different population segments to any remote survey. The trade-off between complexity and potential response rate therefore had to be addressed.

2.1.3. By June 2021 it was agreed that to achieve a good response rate, particularly from younger people and groups who historically had been harder to engage through paper-based survey forms, whatever survey form was designed needed to work on a smart-phone app, with as little need as possible for explanation and guidance. Questions therefore had to be very clear and direct, and the range of answers on offer had to be equally clear.

2.2. Our approach to sampling vs whole population surveys

2.2.1. Based on Steering Group members' previous professional experience of surveys, it was agreed early on that whatever survey was run, it would be open to all potential respondents, rather than being targeted at a structured, statistically-representative sample of residents.

2.2.2. Any survey in which respondents are self-selecting is limited as to the analysis which can be carried out. On the other hand, structuring a more statistically robust sample requires access to a level of personal information about individuals throughout the survey population which is not available to us as a Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group.

2.2.3. We therefore agreed that as well as asking respondents' opinions about possible options, approaches and priorities, we would ask them for enough basic information about exactly where they live and their age group to be able to compare the characteristics of whatever group of respondents we were able to obtain to the actual physical and demographic character of the town, parish and district as established by (for example), the 2011 census and more recent population projections. This would enable us to determine whether whatever results we were able to collect needed to be re-weighted to give a better representation of the actual local population.

2.3. Testing of potential questions

2.3.1. During July, by which time we were well advanced on agreeing internally on the questions that we wanted to ask and on the options for answering them, a late draft version was loaded into Google-forms, and members of the Steering Group were asked to test its clarity and ease of use.

2.3.2. Limited testing was also carried out by personal contacts of some Steering Group members who had not been involved in, or specially briefed about, the development process.

2.3.3.   This testing process reinforced the importance of simplicity, which was then reflected in the final on-line and paper versions of the survey form.

3. The Survey Form that we used, and its Distribution

3.1. The paper form

3.1.1.   A copy of the 2-page survey form can be found in Annex 1 to this report.

3.2. Distribution and publicity

3.2.1.   A Press Release was prepared, and issued to the local media by Axminster Town Council. A copy of that Press Release can be found in Annex 2 to this report.

3.2.2.   At the same time, the following statement and information were placed on the Axminster Town Council website.

Axminster Neighbourhood Plan

As an integral part of Axminster Town Council's overall responsibilities, it is required to develop a robust plan containing its consideration of all aspects of land use and impacts of such across the whole Parish of Axminster. To this end it is embarking on a new phase of developing this Neighbourhood Plan with stage 1 very much being to understand the needs and views of all our residents and others that use the Town. This web page will continue to contain information regarding the development of the Neighbourhood Plan and any relevant issues, results, comments and news. To embark on this first stage we are asking as many people as possible to complete a survey of overall needs to help steer the council to make the most strategically suitable recommendation.

Thank you for your support and keep an eye on the Plan development.
The Axminster Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group

The Plan

In the Spring Axminster Town Council began the process of producing a Neighbourhood Plan, enabling local people to set out a positive vision to guide how our community develops over the next 10 - 15 years, in ways that meet identified local needs. The words "identified local needs" are important, since to be sustainable, the Plan must take the views of the community fully into consideration.

An important early step is an initial consultation, to ensure that objectives set by the Plan reflect community needs, wants and desires. We are therefore asking residents of both the town and surrounding areas, as well as non-residents who work in Axminster - and even visitors and those just passing through, if they wish - to fill in a short questionnaire. This should only take about five minutes to complete, and from this initial feedback, the group will be able to focus on the key issues, and to develop a robust Plan which responds to them.

The final Plan will take around two years to produce, and to ensure that this is achieved, Axminster Town Council has established a steering group, made up of councillors and residents. Once adopted, the Plan will form an important element of the Town & Country Planning process (which governs all changes which require planning permission).

(continued on next page)

There may be follow-on surveys, and there will certainly be consultation events and conversations, that will focus on specific topics.

You can access the survey in a number of ways:

Consultation Survey - Options

To complete the Consultation and submit it online, click on the link below:

Online Neighbourhood Plan survey

We urge everyone to have their say. That is everyone, not just one person per household, the whole household. The deadline for completing the survey is September 30th, 2021.

Paper format:

- To download the form in MS Word format, click on the document link below then save and complete the form and then print it. Return as below.

- Collect from one of the outlets around town listed below.

- Alternatively, contact Axminster Town Council on the telephone number or email at the top of this page and ask for a copy to be posted to you. Complete and return using one of the options below.

Neighbourhood Plan survey - MS Word format

OR

Collect a paper copy from one of the following places:

- Axminster Guildhall

- The Cornerhouse Bakery

- The Waffle House

- Central Convenience Store, Millwey

- Raymond's Hill Post Office

You may return the survey into a collection box at one of the above locations or by post to:

Neighbourhood Plan Survey Team,
Axminster Town Council,
5 West St, Axminster
EX13 5NX.

We urge everyone to have their say. That is everyone, not just one person per household, the whole household. The deadline for completing the survey is September 30th, 2021.

4.   The Responses Received, and their Analysis

4.1.   The response rate

4.1.1.   A total of 343 responses were received, 287 of which (83.7%) were completed on-line, with 56 (16.3%) submitted as paper copies.

4.1.2.   This compares to 364 replies received to the previous Neighbourhood Plan consultation carried out in September 2014.

4.1.3.   Throughout the analysis it is important to remember at all times that our respondents were self-selected (as opposed to a randomly chosen group based on a statistically robust sampling procedure, as would be found in, for example, a properly-conducted political opinion poll). This does not diminish the value of the views and opinions which have been collected, but it does affect how they should be analysed and interpreted.

4.2.   How respondents described themselves

The categories

4.2.1.   Respondents were asked to describe themselves by choosing one of six age bands; by giving their home postcode, and by selecting one or more from a list of descriptions of their relationship to Axminster parish.

Age bands

4.2.2.   Respondents' self-classification by suggested age bands were as set out below in Table 4.1. What this tells us about our self-selected sample can then be compared to the actual age structure of the parish, which is done in Table 4.2. Although this is a not a precise comparison, it can be regarded as robust and helpful, because it then allows us to check how representative our sample is of the parish as a whole.

4.2.3.   This is important, to ensure (for example) that when the answers and opinions that have been gathered are interpreted, our conclusions are not unduly skewed, by (for example) a relative over-representation of older residents, and a relative under-representation of working adults.

Table 4.1: Actual survey respondents broken down by age band			
Age bands	*Number of respondents*	*% of all respondents*	*% of respondents over 18 who answered*
Under 18	2	0.6%	n/a
18 to 30	24	7.0%	7.1%
31 to 45	75	21.9%	22.1%
46 to 60	110	32.1%	32.4%
61 to 75	105	30.6%	30.9%
Over 75	26	7.6%	7.6%
No answer given	1	0.3%	n/a
Total	343	100.0%	100.0%

4.2.4.   It is very clear, and not particularly surprising, that under-18s were severely under-represented by the responses which were received. Nevertheless, it is possible to compare the balance of the other responses against the actual population structure (in terms of age distribution) of the parish, using 2011 census data as the baseline against which such comparisons are made.
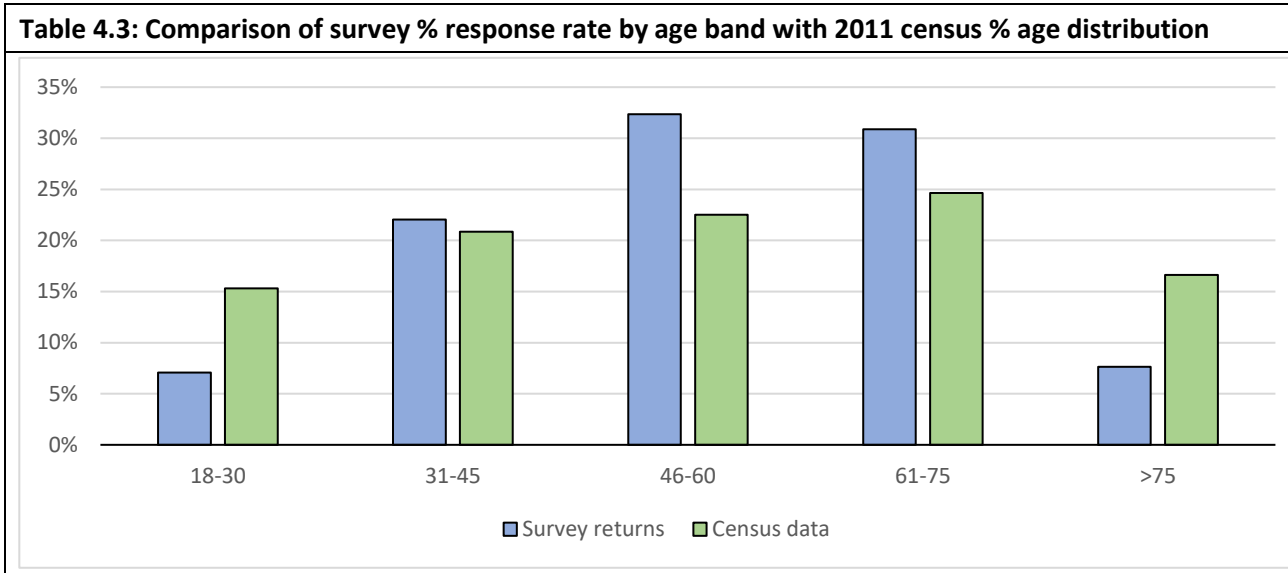
4.2.5.   The fact that the 2011 census is a decade old is not particularly important, because what we are interested in is the age balance of the over-18 segment of the parish as a whole. So long as we believe that the growth in the total population of the parish over the past decade has not altered the broad population structure of the parish (in terms of age distribution), then such a comparison will be useful. It is for this reason that the under-18s have been excluded from the final column of Table 4.1 before carrying that information over into Table 4.2.

4.2.6.   To make the comparison in Table 4.2 as accurate as possible, some small adjustments to the 2011 census data were made. For the record, these are summarised below in a footnote[1].

Table 4.2: Population structure of over-18 survey respondents compared to expected structure			
Age bands	*% of respondents over 18 who answered (from Table 4.1)*	*2011 census % share, Axminster parish*	*'Weighting factor' to make survey returns reflect the parish*
18 to 30	7.1%	15.3%	2.17
31 to 45	22.1%	20.9%	0.95
46 to 60	32.4%	22.5%	0.70
61 to 75	30.9%	24.7%	0.80
Over 75	7.6%	16.6%	2.18
Total	100.0%	100.0%	n/a

4.2.7.   By comparing the first two data columns of Table 4.2 it can be seen that the survey response rates from the 18 to 30 age group and the over 75 age group were both much lower than those for the three groups covering ages 31 to 75, with the highest response rate in all respects being from those aged 46 to 60. These differences are also represented graphically in Table 4.3, while the final column of Table 4.2 shows the 'weighting factors' which would be needed to correct these age-related imbalances if that is thought appropriate.

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[1] The census used slightly different age bands: 18 to 29, 30 to 44, 45 to 59, 60 to 74 and over 75. To match our survey bands it was necessary to take 1/15 of the census 30 to 44 band population and add it to the 18 to 29 band, and then to repeat this process across all further bands. In the final adjustment (re-balancing the 60 to 74 band and the over 75 band) it was assumed that 1/15 of the over-75s in 2011 were aged 75. In all of this process of adjustment, the biggest impact arises from the addition of one additional year group to change the census 18 to 29 band so that it matches the survey's 18 to 30 band.

Table 4.3: Comparison of survey % response rate by age band with 2011 census % age distribution

4.2.8.   On balance, we received sufficient numbers of responses from each age band to have reasonable confidence that what we have been told is sufficiently representative of the overall population to be useful for the purpose of influencing the Neighbourhood Plan-making process.

Postcodes

4.2.9.   This section of commentary and analysis is restricted to the 254 respondents who included their full postcode, and where that postcode matched one of the 292 postcodes which, wholly or largely, cover households in Axminster parish. Quite a few respondents simply put EX13 as their postcode, so although they can generally be considered to be local, they cannot be linked to one of the 292 Axminster-specific postcodes under consideration here.

4.2.10.   Those 292 postcodes were identified using information which is available from the doogal.co.uk website. The 292 postcodes (some of which are business-only codes) have then been linked to one of 12 parts of the parish (10 of which are within the town itself). Further detail on these 12 areas can be found in Table 4.4, which is followed by the main findings in Table 4.5.

Table 4.4: Descriptions of the locations	
Location	*Description*
Town centre	From Shand Park and Widepost Lane in the south to Castle Hill, Victoria Place and the bottom end of Chard Street in the north. The eastern edge is South Street and Musbury Road.
North of town centre	All housing accessible via and from North Street.
Cloakham Lawns	Cloakham Lawns.
Millwey Rise	Millwey Rise plus those older Chard Road properties which face it.
Millbrook and adjacent	Properties on Beavor Lane, Cherry Tree Drive, Flaxmeadow Lane and adjacent properties, plus Jeff's Way etc to the north of the Primary School.
Lyme Road	Properties on Lyme Road plus those accessible from Sector Lane.
East of town centre	From Lyme Close to Dukes Way, including Lea Combe, Foxhill, Boxfield Road etc.
Woodbury Park and adjacent	Woodbury Park, Brunenburgh and Woodbury Ways, Athelstan Close.
South of town centre	From Abbey Close to the Tesco roundabout, including Horslears, Dragons Mead, Gamberlake, King Edward Road, Alexandra Road and Hillhead Terrace.
Raymonds Hill (Axminster section)	The majority of Raymonds Hill (but excluding the Uplyme properties) plus Cook's Lane.
Rural parts of Axminster parish	The rest of the parish.

Table 4.5: Response rates by location			
Location	*No of postcodes*	*No of respondents*	*Ratio*
Town centre	60	32	0.53
North of town centre	24	24	1.00
Cloakham Lawns	11	24	2.18
Millwey Rise	37	24	0.65
Millbrook and adjacent	21	24	1.14
Lyme Road	25	23	0.92
East of town centre	30	29	0.97
Woodbury Park and adjacent	10	16	1.60
South of town centre	23	23	1.00
Raymonds Hill (Axminster section)	13	19	1.46
Rural parts of Axminster parish	38	16	0.42
Total / average	292	254	0.87

4.2.11.   The primary purpose of the information in Table 4.5 is not to facilitate further and more detailed analysis, but to demonstrate that the responses which were received were evenly spread across the whole parish, and that whilst recognising that the response rate from the rural sections of the parish were lower than those from the town itself, there are no obvious 'hot' or 'cold' spots which might tend to skew the outcome.

Respondents' relationships to the parish

4.2.12.   As well as their postcodes, respondents were asked about their relationship to the parish. The suggested options were: resident, business owner, resident and business owner, resident of neighbouring parish, and visitor. Only two respondents left all of the options blank.

4.2.13.   Of the 341 responses which were received, 268 came from people who simply described themselves as residents, with a further 21 coming from persons who are both residents and owners of local businesses. There were four responses from non-resident owners of local businesses. These 293 responses represent 85.9% of the respondents who specified their relationship to Axminster.

4.2.14.   Of the remaining 48 respondents (14.1%), 39 described themselves as residents of a neighbouring parish (some, but by no means all, also described themselves as visitors), while two were residents of neighbouring parishes and business owners. Seven responses (just 2.1% of the total) came from visitors from further afield.

4.2.15.   As with respondents' postcodes, the main conclusion to be drawn from this is that the survey sample, while self-selecting, was well balanced.

4.3.   Priorities expressed by respondents

4.3.1.   As can be seen from Annex 1, Questions 2 and 3 asked respondents for their views on 16 possible outcomes which might be influenced by the Neighbourhood Plan process. In the preamble to the survey we sought to make it clear that the Neighbourhood Plan alone would not deliver these outcomes, though it could smooth the path to their delivery by third parties.

4.3.2.   Specifically, they were asked "How important do you feel the following outcomes are for the town over the next 10 years?", with four options from which they could choose for each possible outcome, namely 'Not at all', 'Not very', 'Quite' or 'Very'. Some respondents did not express an opinion on some topics, and this has been interpreted as meaning that they were at best neutral, and possibly opposed to, the outcome as described.

4.3.3.   Without claiming any very scientific basis for doing so, to assist in understanding the information which we have collected we have awarded points to each response, as set out in Table 4.6.

Table 4.6: Priority scoring system	
Degree of support	***Points allocated***
Very supportive	3
Quite supportive	2
Not very supportive	1
Not at all supportive	0
No opinion given	0

4.3.4.   The 16 possible outcomes on which respondents' opinions were sought are listed in Table 4.7, in the order in which they were asked. Question 2 dealt with housing, general facilities around the town, leisure and the natural environment, while Question 3 covered transport and access issues.

Table 4.7: The 16 possible outcomes on which opinions were sought	
Description of outcome, as given in the survey form	*Abbreviated description*
Increasing the local supply of affordable housing	Affordable housing
Increasing the local supply of other housing	General housing
Expanding the range of shops in Axminster	Shops
Expanding the range of pubs and restaurants in Axminster	Food & drink
Expanding the range of local employment opportunities	Employment
Matching health and social care provision to the changing needs of residents	Health & social care
Expanding the range of local education provision	Education
Adding new facilities to the town (see below for further information)	New facilities
Making it easier to get into the countryside for exercise and relaxation	Countryside access
Increasing the leisure and sports facilities	Sports
Expanding the facilities for arts and culture	Arts & culture
Protecting the most valuable and attractive elements of our natural and historic environment	Conservation
Reducing traffic congestion in the town centre	Town centre traffic
Reducing traffic congestion more generally	General traffic
Improving parking provision around town	Parking
Improving facilities for cyclists and pedestrians within the town	Cycling & walking

4.3.5.   Having allocated scores (from 0 to 3) to every answer provided, we are also able to compare the strength of support given by different age groups and different parts of the parish. Table 4.8 provides the key results of this process, with the 16 potential outcomes re-arranged in declining order of overall support as revealed by respondents' answers.

Rank	Potential outcomes	Average score, all respondents	Range of scores, different age groups	Range of scores, different areas within parish
	Table 4.8: Relative strength of support for 16 potential outcomes			
1	Health & social care	2.69	2.46 to 2.85 (0.39)	2.48 to 2.96 (0.48)
2	Conservation	2.61	2.42 to 2.81 (0.39)	2.42 to 2.79 (0.37)
3	Employment	2.58	2.42 to 2.74 (0.32)	2.44 to 2.88 (0.44)
4	Shops	2.57	2.46 to 2.64 (0.18)	2.13 to 2.83 (0.70)
5	Town centre traffic	2.42	2.17 to 2.58 (0.41)	2.22 to 2.62 (0.40)
6	Education	2.26	2.19 to 2.50 (0.31)	1.70 to 2.61 (0.91)
7	New facilities	2.17	1.38 to 2.47 (0.09)	1.63 to 2.71 (1.08)
8	General traffic	2.15	1.88 to 2.46 (0.58)	1.87 to 2.35 (0.48)
9	Countryside access	2.02	1.88 to 2.19 (0.31)	1.69 to 2.42 (0.73)
10	Cycling & walking	1.97	1.71 to 2.10 (0.39)	1.71 to 2.28 (0.57)
11	Arts & culture	1.89	1.54 to 2.12 (0.58)	1.58 to 2.17 (0.59)
12	Sports	1.86	1.73 to 2.08 (0.35)	1.57 to 2.38 (0.81)
13	Affordable housing	1.84	1.72 to 2.04 (0.32)	1.46 to 2.33 (0.87)
14	Food & drink	1.74	1.42 to 1.99 (0.57)	1.19 to 2.19 (1.00)
15	Parking	1.68	1.58 to 1.88 (0.30)	1.33 to 2.00 (0.67)
16	General housing	0.95	0.85 to 1.33 (0.48)	0.52 to 1.28 (0.76)

4.3.6.   At this point it is worth referring back to Table 4.3, which shows the different response rates by age band, because later in this report the impact of these differences will be considered, as will the impact which these would be expected to have on the priority ranking shown in Table 4.8.

4.3.7.   What is worth looking at here, though, is the scale of the ranges around the average scores recorded. Where age groups are concerned, the wider the range the less agreement can be expected between the generations as far as priority setting is concerned. Having said that, even the widest band (No.11, Arts and culture, from 1.54 to 2.12, averaging 1.89) is not a strikingly wide range, and in general the narrowness of the bands gives a good degree of comfort that the sample that we have is sufficiently large to provide helpful guidance on community-wide priorities. Further detail on this point will be found in Section 4.4 below.
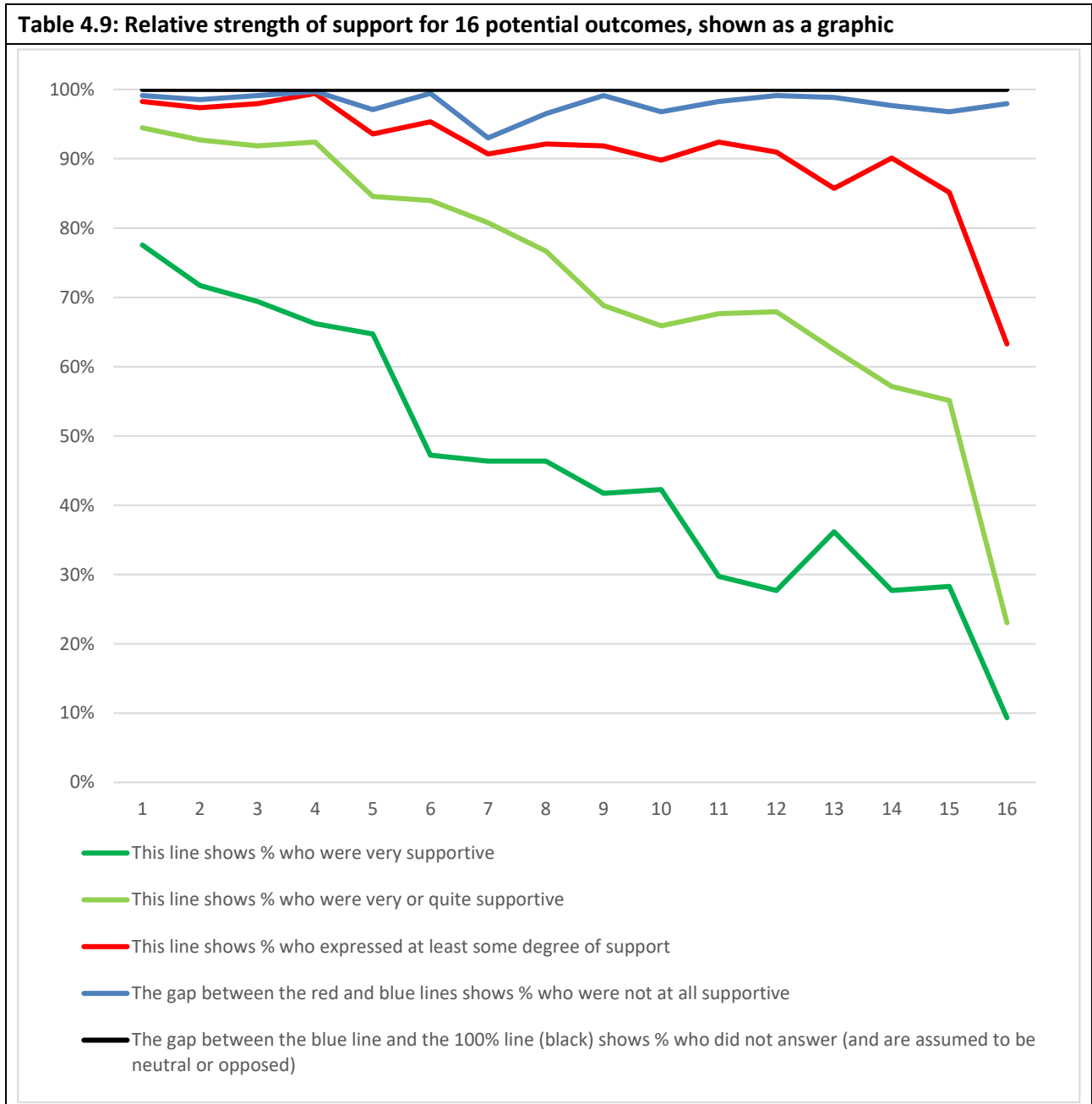
4.3.8.   The bands in the final column (showing differences between different parts of the parish) are wider, but this is not surprising, because there are many more areas (14) than there are age bands (five covering all but three respondents), and the greater the number of groups that are being considered, the greater the variation between group averages would be expected to be, because the influence of statistical outliers is magnified. Even so, not many of the bands are particularly wide.

4.3.9.   Table 4.9 re-presents the answers to Questions 2 and 3 in graphical form. It shows how, for the topics on the left-hand side of the chart (i.e. those that received the greatest overall levels of support) this support is primarily driven by the highest level of support (the darker green line). Within the right-hand half of the chart, the influence of a more qualified level of support (the distance between the darker and lighter green line) becomes much more important.

4.3.10.   The numbers along the bottom of the graph correspond to the 16 potential outcomes in the same order as they are listed in Table 4.8 above (i.e. No.1 is 'Health & social care'; No.2 is 'Conservation' etc).

4.3.11.   The red line represents the boundary between some degree of support, and an absence of support. It is very noticeable that for all but four possible outcomes the proportion of respondents who expressed some degree of support exceeded 90%, and only one outcome (an expansion in general housing) saw a very marked drop-off in support.

Table 4.9: Relative strength of support for 16 potential outcomes, shown as a graphic

This line shows % who were very supportive

This line shows % who were very or quite supportive

This line shows % who expressed at least some degree of support

The gap between the red and blue lines shows % who were not at all supportive

The gap between the blue line and the 100% line (black) shows % who did not answer (and are assumed to be neutral or opposed)
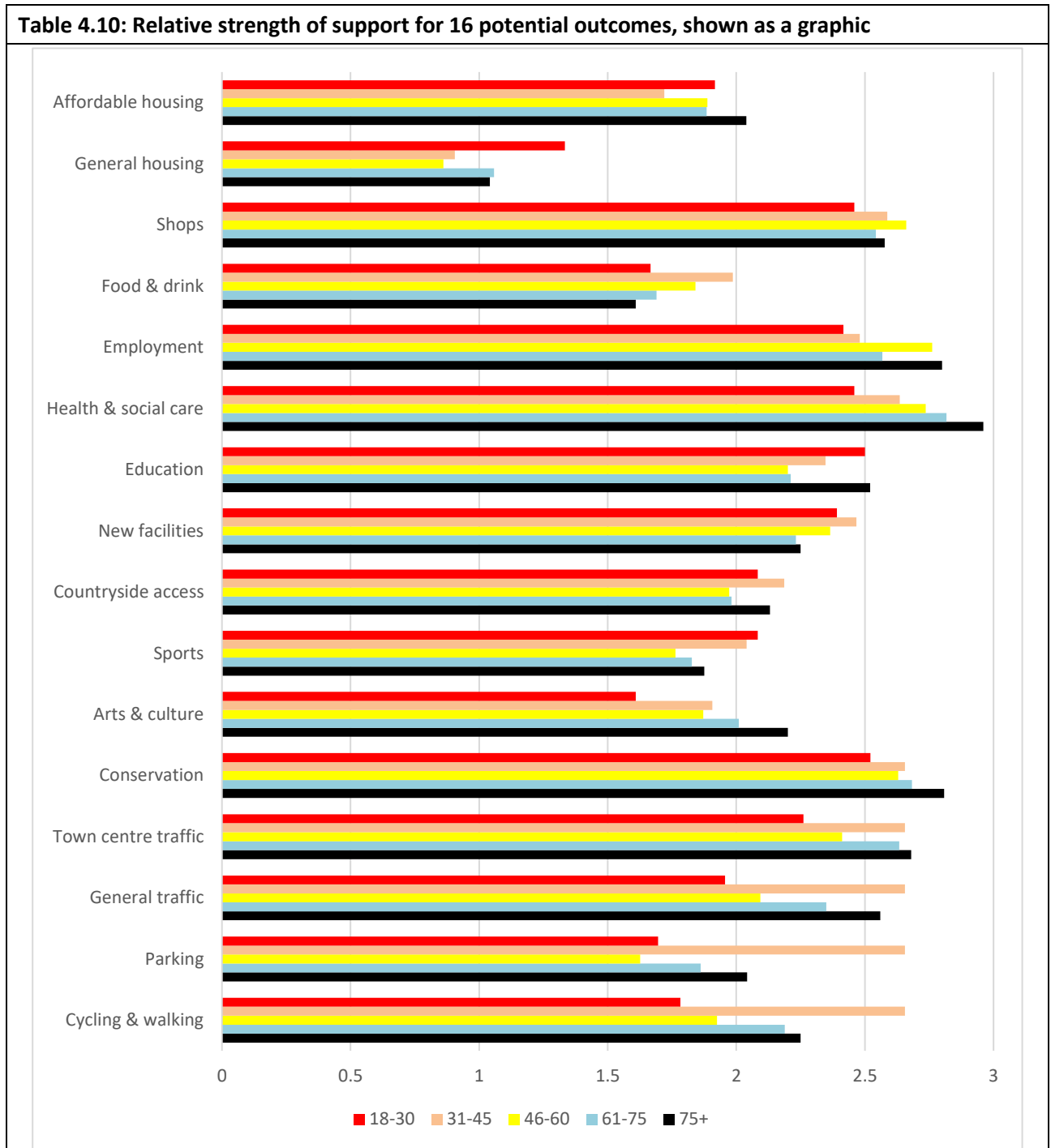
4.4.   The priorities of different age groups

4.4.1.   One important finding already mentioned above (see paragraph 4.3.7) concerns the degree of consistency of opinion between different age groups. We anticipated that older respondents would give a high priority to issues such as health and social care issues, while

younger ones would focus their priorities more overtly on issues such as pubs and restaurants, sports and leisure. What we found was that older respondents' responses appear to reflect how they had felt when younger, just as younger respondents' responses appear to be mindful of the needs of their parents and grandparents.

4.4.2.   In general, topics which received strong support from the over-75 age group also tended to be well supported by the 18 to 30 age group, and by all groups in between. This point is illustrated graphically in Table 4.10. The abbreviations for the 16 potential outcomes are the same as those used in Tables 4.7 to 4.9 above, with the 16 topics listed here in the same order as they appeared on the survey form.

Table 4.10: Relative strength of support for 16 potential outcomes, shown as a graphic

4.4.3. As Table 4.10 shows, the consistency between different age groups is least evident in their responses to the last three topics (general traffic, parking, and cycling and walking).

4.5. New facilities

Preamble

4.5.1. One of the potential outcomes (No.7 in Tables 4.8 and 4.9) involves the desirability of using the Neighbourhood Plan to signal to third parties that a proposal to bring certain categories of new facilities to the town would be both welcomed and encouraged. Those respondents who commented on this topic were invited to add some text to clarify what sort of facilities they would like to see, and 135 (just under 40% of the total) did so. A high proportion of those 135 identified multiple outcomes that they wished to encourage, and as a consequence the total number of comments totalled around 250.

4.5.2. It is always likely that in a consultation of this kind, some respondents will take the opportunity to raise issues which fall outside the scope of the Neighbourhood Plan, and this did indeed happen. Indeed quite a lot of the suggestions covered issues on which the Town Council is as much a third party observer as the residents of Axminster.

4.5.3. However, there were several themes which emerged which should be taken forward as the Neighbourhood Plan is drafted.

4.5.4. Over 100 of the comments concerned facilities which were themselves already covered in general terms by specific questions on the survey form, such as housing, shops, health and social care facilities, town centre traffic, countryside access etc. In these cases the presence or absence of comments should not be seen as in any way qualifying the rankings ('very supportive', 'quite supportive' etc) already provided by respondents.

4.5.5. The discussion which follows takes the topics largely in the same order as they appeared on the survey form, whilst trying to recognise the links between topics.

Housing

4.5.6. As well as encouraging greater provision of affordable housing[2], several of the 10 respondents who commented on the type of housing that they would like to see asked specifically for more council houses for rent. One respondent advocated larger eco-friendly houses, and would like to see greater support for local builders in delivering them. Only two respondents mentioned second homes and holiday homes as a particular issue (and they would like to see the trend towards having more of them halted).

4.5.7. Only three of those who commented on the type of housing that they wanted to see also commented on greenfield development. Two were against it, while the third was in favour. Another seven respondents commented more broadly on greenfield development, with all of them being against it.

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[2] It is recognised that the term 'affordable housing' means different things to different people (e.g. social housing, council housing, shared ownership properties, flats and smaller properties in general, help-to-buy properties, properties where the price is capped in perpetuity at 80% of the market rent etc). It is inevitable that a general survey of this kind will fail to capture opinions at this level of detail. However, such issues could be addressed via specific surveys or via focus groups or 'citizen jury' exercises.

4.5.8.   Six respondents (three of whom also identified themselves as against greenfield development) also emphasised the importance of matching non-residential facilities to the provision of more housing. This is something which has regularly been flagged up in recent years as many new homes have been built around Axminster, whilst the health facilities and schools have remained largely as they were.

Shops, banking, the market, pubs and restaurants

4.5.9.   Sixteen respondents advocated greater retail provision and competition. Several specifically mentioned the need for greater competition between supermarkets, and others mentioned clothes shops (particularly for mens' clothing, and for school uniforms). One respondent particularly wanted shop rents to be reduced, which is not the sort of thing over which a Neighbourhood Plan can expect to wield any influence.

4.5.10.   Three respondents also specifically mentioned the loss of competition in banking services (with Axminster down from five banks to one over the past seven years). Five respondents, three of whom did not otherwise comment on retail provision, advocated either protecting or expanding the Thursday market.

4.5.11.   Only four respondents advocated expanding the range of pubs and restaurants in Axminster, reflecting the relatively low level of support which this option received from respondents as a whole.

Employment

4.5.12.   Only six respondents mentioned employment in their comments, one of them emphasising the need for more jobs for young people. All were in favour of more employment. It is likely that the others who did not proffer a supplementary comment may well have felt that awarding it a high score was sufficient to keep it high on the Neighbourhood Plan agenda.

Health (including dentistry), social care and education

4.5.13.   There were 15 respondents who commented on the need to match health and social care provision to the changing needs of residents. Most respondents focussed their comments on the desirability of expanding the range of services to be provided through Axminster Hospital (including the restoration of in-patient beds) rather than on the GP Practice, though there were a few comments encouraging greater provision of primary care. Six comments also stressed the need for more dentists to practise in the town.

4.5.14.   Of seven comments in favour of expanding educational provision, two were specific to adult education.

Countryside access, exercise, sport and leisure

4.5.15.   The comments which were received on making it easier to get out into the countryside for exercise and relaxation are dealt with below in combination with facilities for cycling and walking.

4.5.16.   Seven correspondents referred to the desirability of reinstating the skate park (six to one in favour). Many more (17, five of whom also mentioned the skate park) highlighted the need for a range of child-friendly facilities, including better play areas (including 'soft play' facilities), specific provision for disabled children, a vote in favour of allowing dogs and children to share play areas.

4.5.17.   Comments about adult sports facilities tended to focus on the need to preserve what we already have rather than adding new sports or clubs. There were a few comments on how the existing facilities are managed, which is not relevant to the Neighbourhood Plan process.

4.5.18.   There were 15 comments about entertainment facilities in general, of which 14 advocated the desirability of having a local cinema, possibly in combination with a bowling alley or other facilities. This was probably the single most striking proposal which was neither mentioned nor even hinted at on the survey form. It is possible that an element of campaigning may have occurred, encouraging respondents to mention this, but whatever the case it is a striking finding. For the record, this public consultation predated the initiative by the new management team at the Guildhall to start showing films from time to time.

4.5.19.   Several of the film fans also indicated broader support for arts and culture facilities within the town, and were joined by a further three respondents who specified more precisely that this was what they would like to see.

The natural and historic environment

4.5.20.   These are rather broader topic areas than (for example) employment and public transport. Possibly as a consequence there were only a handful of comments which touched on the natural and historic environment in what was primarily intended as a 'facilities-related' comments box. Those which were provided were directly supportive of prioritising the protection of the most valuable and attractive elements of our natural and historic environment without proposing specific mechanisms or facilities to achieve that.

Public transport

4.5.21.   Thirteen respondents identified public transport as an important feature of local life, and one which they felt was in need of improvement. There were more adverse comments about bus services than trains, and some support (from four respondents) for the idea of an Axminster-specific bus to link housing areas to the town's shops. Others mentioned the sparse links to neighbouring villages.

Traffic issues, including its impacts on the town centre

4.5.22.   As might be expected, there was considerable overlap between the substantial numbers of comments received on managing traffic in the town centre and how this might be achieved, managing traffic more generally, providing facilities for cyclists and pedestrians both in the town and outside, the topic of pedestrianisation, and some very specific proposals for change.

4.5.23.   Fourteen respondents commented on ways in which the town centre could be made more pleasant, though without (in most cases) addressing how this might be achieved without a relief road of some sort. Nobody commented in favour of the previously-proposed relief road linking Millwey to the Lyme Road.

4.5.24.   There was support (four respondents) for traffic calming measures in the town centre (without specifying which roads might be managed in this way, which is significant with the A358 being part of the trunk road network), and for banning HGVs, and for full pedestrianisation (five respondents, but again without specifying quite where this might apply). There was also one comment strongly against the notion of pedestrianisation.

4.5.25.   Ten other respondents also specifically identified the importance of preventing buildings in the town centre from becoming dilapidated, and then falling out of use. This is

mentioned here because it is the influence of heavy traffic which in several instances is driving that dilapidation.

4.5.26.   Four specific transport-related proposals were: an extension to the pavement along Lyme Road to link Axminster to Cook's Lane and Woodbury Lane; better enforcement of speed limits through Raymonds Hill; a change to the turns allowed around The George (and in particular an ending to two-way traffic along the front face of The George, by requiring traffic from Castle Hill to use The George as a roundabout when heading for Trinity Square; and (more speculatively) a plea for some designated 'engine-free' lanes to allow Axminster to be better connected to surrounding villages by walkers, cyclists and horse riders.

4.5.27.   One respondent proposed a one-way system round the town centre (extending as far out as Stoney Lane, passing close to three of the town's schools) as a way to improve town centre amenity, but also acknowledged the engineering which would be required if this were to be progressed, not least in order to deliver a link suitable for HGV traffic from Lyme Road to Musbury Road via Combe Lane.

Public open space

4.5.28.   Ten other respondents asked for more public open space. By a margin of two-to-one they asked for a 'proper' green park with seating and space for multiple users, over space in the town centre (though this is clearly also something that would be supported if it could be delivered). There was support for the concept of seating provision alongside the river, but no clear recognition that this would be hard to reconcile with the presence of grazing animals, the realities of forage management, and the steady erosion of the riverbank over extensive stretches.

Other topics

4.5.29.   Finally, 42 respondents proposed changes which do not fit easily under the main themes discussed above. Five, which broadly referred to services which are provided to the town as well as to the buildings and locations from which they are provided, could be grouped under the general category of 'appreciate what we have a bit more, make sure we maintain it, and ensure that anything new that we get is of sufficient quality to last'. Where buildings themselves are concerned, two identified the need for a more flexible application of Listed Building controls to help to keep buildings in use (which overlaps with the topic of 'The natural and historic environment: see above).

4.5.30.   Three highlighted the need for better appreciation of the needs of disabled residents. Three cited the need for better digital connectivity, and another three for electric vehicle charging points. Three more involved the need for a more visible police presence.

4.5.31.   There were two positive mentions each for the library, the Arts Café (which at the time of the consultation had been closed for several months following a break-in and fire) and the bowls club, and one plea each for a better taxi service, better town centre signage, and for additional public conveniences right in the centre of the town (i.e. closer to most shops that the West Street carpark.

4.6.   Respondents' changing shopping habits

4.6.1.   The questions about how respondents buy food and regular household supplies, and the answers derived from them, were intended to yield indicative rather than precise information, so it is important not to over-interpret the very helpful responses which were received.

4.6.2.   The 164 respondents who stated that they do use home delivery services reported buying just under half (by value) of their requirements in that way. They were almost exactly matched by 163 who reported that they do not use home delivery services. Only 16 respondents left this question blank. Taken as a whole, this means that by summer 2021 about a quarter of Axminster's food and household supplies were being delivered by road rather than collected in person from shops. The area with the highest home delivery share was Raymonds Hill (just over 30% for those who do use home delivery services). Those with the lowest shares (20% or less) were the town centre, Cloakham and the area to the south of the town centre. Everywhere else averaged between 20% and 30%.

4.6.3.   Buying in person was most important to residents of the town centre (almost 75% by value), and least important to those from Cloakham and the area centred on Woodbury Park (under half). Residents of all other parts of the parish reported buying an average of between 50% and 60% of their regular needs in Axminster.

4.6.4.   These averages have been calculated from the raw data, which show that in terms of food and regular household supplies, 16 of 334 respondents buy nothing in Axminster; 85 buy 20% of their needs by value, 48 buy 40%, 53 buy 60%, 78 buy 80% and 54 buy everything they need here.

4.6.5.   In answer to the question about where else respondents shop in person, the town most frequently mentioned was Seaton (which has a larger Tesco than Axminster's, with a wider range of products). Fifty seven respondents stated that Seaton is the only other place to which they regularly go for household shopping, while a further 127 mentioned other towns as well as Seaton.

4.6.6.   The second-most mentioned town was Honiton (29 sole responses, and a further 104 in combination with other towns). The third was Chard (15 and 80 mentions respectively), followed by Bridport (nine and 63 respectively. The other towns mentioned occasionally in combination with these four included Sidmouth, Exeter and Taunton.

4.6.7.   There was no obvious geographical pattern to the responses: plenty of those who live on the northern side of Axminster travel to Seaton, and others who go to Chard will have been driving through the town to get there. It seems likely that where people work is an important determinant of where they do their shopping.

4.7.   The vision for Axminster

4.7.1.   The 'Vision for Axminster' which was put to respondents was as follows.

> Our Vision is of a prosperous and flexible parish, focused on a historic local market town which will continue to serve all of the neighbouring parishes as well as residents and visitors from further afield. We will strive to build on everything that is best about the parish, while encouraging and supporting sustainable development and infrastructure improvements appropriate to the needs of our diverse communities, while also supporting and encouraging farming, manufacturing industry, professional and business services, retail, leisure and tourism.

4.7.2.   A large majority of respondents (301 of 343, or 87.8%) gave general support to the proposed 'Vision for Axminster'. Thirty two (9.3%) did not support it, and 10 (2.9%) did not answer that question.

4.7.3.   Twenty five of the 32 who were unhappy provided a comment, as did 92 of those who supported it, and four of those who did not answer the question.

4.7.4.   Many of the comments covered very similar ground to those provided in relation to potential outcomes (see above), and the discussion here focuses on those comments which were about the wording and thrust of the vision statement itself.

4.7.5.   Because these comments are both central to a core element of the Neighbourhood Plan, and in several cases very specific, they are reproduced in full below to ensure that they can inform the review of the 'Vision of Axminster' which will follow this consultation exercise.

4.7.6.   There were ten comments which focused on the general philosophy of vision statements, and on elements of the style of the one being proposed. Four came from those respondents who were broadly supportive of the proposed statement, five from those who were not, and one from a respondent who declined to declare (but who, on the basis of the comment, can probably be taken as a critic). All of these are set out below in Table 4.11.

Table 4.11: Philosophical and stylistic comments	
General opinion of Vision Statement	*Comments*
Pro	Your vision statement seems to just be an exercise in predictable words and sentiments without any specifics or mandates.
Pro	Your wording "… while encouraging and supporting sustainable development and infrastructure improvements" is so ambiguous it can be turned to mean anything.
Pro	The vision is great, but I do feel it is not achievable and should be more specific. Whichever route is deemed the most important, there should be a focus to ensure it is achieved. In its current format, I feel it would never be achieved and would complicate any changes being made.
Pro	The vision is very generic and does not seem to specify how Axminster will be different to all other towns. What is the Town Council's vision for Axminster to make it stand out and be a destination for all?
Anti	Too broad an ambition to achieve by 2030[3]. I would prefer a focus on the infrastructure improvements to accommodate the growing town.
Anti	Too vague. Needs to be more specific and therefore more achievable.
Anti	More achievable individual goals which need to be more specific.
Anti	Meaningless PC waffle. Too long.
Anti	So woolly. Worth including specifics, even in as few words as this.
No opinion	I do not believe in vision statements they really are wishy washy.

4.7.7.   There were four other comments (all from respondents who declared themselves to be broadly supportive) which were more general in tone ("Sounds positive", "If it actually happens …", "All very well, but it has to be followed through" and "Our vision can aspire to be as stated, but we have a long way to go to get to that point").

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[3] When this consultation started, the period to be covered by the Neighbourhood Plan was subject to review, and an end-date of 2030 had been mooted. Now that it is clear that the East Devon Replacement Local Plan will run until 2040, that will be mirrored by the Axminster Neighbourhood Plan.

4.7.8.   There were also twelve comments (ten from those who were broadly supportive of the statement and two from critics) which proposed more specific changes to the topics mentioned and/or the wording used. These are set out in Table 4.12.

Table 4.12: Proposals for re-wording	
General opinion of Vision Statement	*Comments*
Pro	Farming should come foremost.
Pro	I'd like to see it read "... retail, leisure, tourism and the arts".
Pro	It should also include culture and arts facilities.
Pro	Potentially something about growth - it's a buzzword that will catch people's attention if wanting to pull new demographic groups into the town.
Pro	A focus or sentence referencing young people may be good.
Pro	It should include environmental issues, and being a zero-carbon town.
Pro	It would be nice to include something about the environment, and giving nature a home within our parish.
Pro	Perhaps add something about doing it sustainably, and something about climate change and nature conservation locally.
Pro	I think the phrase "open to change" or "adaptable" would be better than flexible, and would add in "forward looking".
Pro	The town has certain events throughout the year, which is only possible through the community spirit. Should the vision include something about togetherness / community spirit? The Waffle House is a great asset that promotes this already.
Anti	Leisure should include both culture and sports.
Anti	I'd like it to somehow incorporate something about engaging, inspiring, creating opportunities for a sustainable and successful town for all generations, which helps in turn to retain young talent. The current statement is very 'oldy worldy', and just uninspiring.

4.8.   Refining the conclusions on how to interpret respondents' priorities

4.8.1.   Section 4.3 discusses the priorities which respondents identified, bearing in mind that they constituted a self-selected sample. However, Table 4.2 (see paragraph 4.2.6) had already raised the issue that an alternative (and hopefully better) set of estimates could be made by taking the mean (i.e. average) priority values awarded by each separate age group, and applying them to a closer approximation to the actual age structure of the parish, as opposed to the age structure of our actual respondents.

4.8.2.   This has been done, and it is discussed here, quite separately from the earlier parts of this chapter, partly to avoid integrating into that earlier discussion what would inevitably be a challenging coda with the scope to confuse readers, but also because it is only really in connection with the slightly different priorities which are revealed that this approach is relevant.

4.8.3.   Table 4.13 Sets out the 16 potential outcomes on which respondents' views and priorities were sought, and shows how the process of age-weighted adjustment affects the overall average score that each one receives, and how that in turn changes the ranking of the various topics.

4.8.4.　　It is important to understand that by in effect discarding the evidence from the under-18 age group (just two respondents), and from one respondent who did not give his / her age group, more than half of the original average scores in Table 4.13 differ slightly from those in Table 4.8. The ranking order, however, remains unchanged.

Table 4.13: The effects of age-weighted adjustment on outcome scores and ranking				
Potential outcomes	*Original ranking*	*Original average score*	*Age-adjusted average score*	*Age-adjusted ranking*
Health and social care	1	2.71	2.47 ↓	3 ↓↓
Conservation	2	2.63	2.26 ↓	6 ↓↓↓↓
Employment	3	2.59	2.62 ↑	1 ↑↑
Shops	4	2.58	2.55 ↓	2 ↑↑
Town centre traffic	5	2.44	2.01 ↓	7= ↓↓
Education	6	2.27	2.34 ↑	4 ↑↑
New facilities	7	2.18	2.32 ↑	5 ↑↑
General traffic	8	2.16	1.84 ↓	11 ↓↓↓
Countryside access	9	2.02	1.97 ↓	9 -
Cycling and walking	10	1.98	1.85 ↓	10 -
Arts and culture	11	1.90	1.77 ↓	12= ↓
Sports	12	1.86	2.01 ↑	7= ↑↑↑↑↑
Affordable housing	13	1.84	1.77 ↓	12= ↑
Food and drink	14	1.76	1.67 ↓	14 -
Parking	15	1.69	1.41 ↓	15 -
General housing	16	0.96	0.94 ↓	16 -

4.8.5.　　Giving greater weight to the views of both younger (18 to 30) and older (over 75) residents results in an appreciably higher ranking for sports and leisure, and an appreciably lower ranking for giving protection to the natural and historic environment (abbreviated here to conservation).

4.8.6.　　Table 4.14 gives the adjusted scores and ranking associated with all of the above, and allocates these against the slightly fuller descriptions of the 16 potential outcomes as worded in the survey forms.

Table 4.14: The adjusted age-related priorities		
Description of outcome, as given in the survey form	*Adjusted score*	*Adjusted ranking*
Expanding the range of local employment opportunities	2.62	1
Expanding the range of shops in Axminster	2.55	2
Matching health and social care provision to the changing needs of residents	2.47	3
Expanding the range of local education provision	2.34	4
Adding new facilities to the town	2.32	5
Protecting the most valuable and attractive elements of our natural and historic environment	2.26	6
Reducing traffic congestion in the town centre	2.01	7=
Increasing the leisure and sports facilities	2.01	7=
Making it easier to get into the countryside for exercise and relaxation	1.97	9
Improving facilities for cyclists and pedestrians within the town	1.85	10
Reducing traffic congestion more generally	1.84	11
Expanding the facilities for arts and culture	1.77	12=
Increasing the local supply of affordable housing	1.77	12=
Expanding the range of pubs and restaurants in Axminster	1.67	14
Improving parking provision around town	1.41	15
Increasing the local supply of other housing	0.94	16

5.   Next Steps

5.1.1.   The next steps are: (1) to review and possibly amend the vision statement in the light of respondents' comments; (2) to consider at what stage and in what form further consultation should be organised; and (3) to take into proper account respondents' answers and comments as we start to draft the Neighbourhood Plan.

Annex 1

Paper Version of the 2021 Consultation Survey Form

Annex 2

Press Release issued by Axminster Town Council prior to the Survey