

Report to: **Strategic Planning Committee**

Date of Meeting: 29th January 2019

Public Document: Yes

Exemption: None

Review date for release None

Agenda item: 06

Subject: **Axminster North Eastern Urban Extension Masterplan**

Purpose of report: This report seeks Member endorsement of a masterplan for the development of an eastern urban extension to the town of Axminster incorporating the delivery of a relief road. The masterplan has been produced by a team of consultants who were commissioned by the Council in partnership with Persimmon Homes and The Crown Estate who are the main land owners/developers with interests in the site. The masterplan has been the subject of consultation and engagement with the community which is summarised in the attached report.

Recommendation: **Members are asked to**

- 1. Note the resolution of Cabinet on 31st October 2018 to agree in principle the borrowing of the shortfall in funding for the relief road on the basis that this would be repaid through developer contributions subject to a detailed proposal being agreed by Council and how this resolution has informed the masterplan and would enable the early delivery of the relief road.**
- 2. Endorse the Axminster North Eastern Urban Extension Masterplan for the purposes of informing decision making on future planning applications for the urban extension area and to support the Councils bid for monies under the Housing Infrastructure Fund.**

Reason for recommendation: The masterplan is required to steer the forthcoming applications for the development of the site and to demonstrate to Homes England how the proposed relief road will be delivered. Its endorsement by Strategic Planning Committee will give it a status that enables some weight to be attached to it in future decision making.

Officer: Ed Freeman – Service Lead – Planning Strategy and Development Management

Financial implications: There are no direct financial implications and it should be noted that the Council at this stage has only agreed to the principle of borrowing for the shortfall in funding for the delivery of the relief road and a report is required to Council to ensure the cost of borrowing will be met in a legal agreement with developers. This report does not cover this aspect and will subject to a future report.

Legal implications: As the masterplan is not to be adopted as a Development Plan Document (DPD) or Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) it cannot allocate the additional land proposed for development.. The Local Plan remains the primary policy for this area however, by



endorsing the masterplan this would accept in principle the development of this area. Applications for the development of such areas would be treated as departures from the Local Plan and the developers would have to demonstrate that the form of development proposed is appropriate and acceptable in planning terms for permission to be granted. Once the Masterplan has been endorsed it would not be appropriate to raise issues of the appropriateness in principle of developing these areas identified for development. There are no other legal implications other than those within the report and document.

Equalities impact: Low Impact

Risk: Low Risk

Links to background information:

- Link to consultation materials: <http://eastdevon.gov.uk/planning/planning-policy/axminster-masterplan/>
- East Devon Local Plan Proposals Map – Axminster - <http://eastdevon.gov.uk/media/1462340/new-local-plan-axminster-jan-2016-final.pdf>
- East Devon Local Plan text - <http://eastdevon.gov.uk/media/1772841/local-plan-final-adopted-plan-2016.pdf>

Link to Council Plan: Encouraging communities to be outstanding, Developing an outstanding local economy, Delivering and promoting our outstanding environment, Continuously improving to be an outstanding council.

Background

The adopted East Devon Local Plan establishes a vision for the future of Axminster which states that:

Our vision for Axminster is one of:

Larger scale housing growth to promote and be a catalyst for further commercial activity. A focus will be placed on town centre regeneration with recognition of need for measures to address adverse traffic impacts and also to conserve and enhance the fine built heritage of the town and surrounding countryside. We already have plans in place for provision of residential, commercial and recreational provision to the North of Cloakham Lawns.

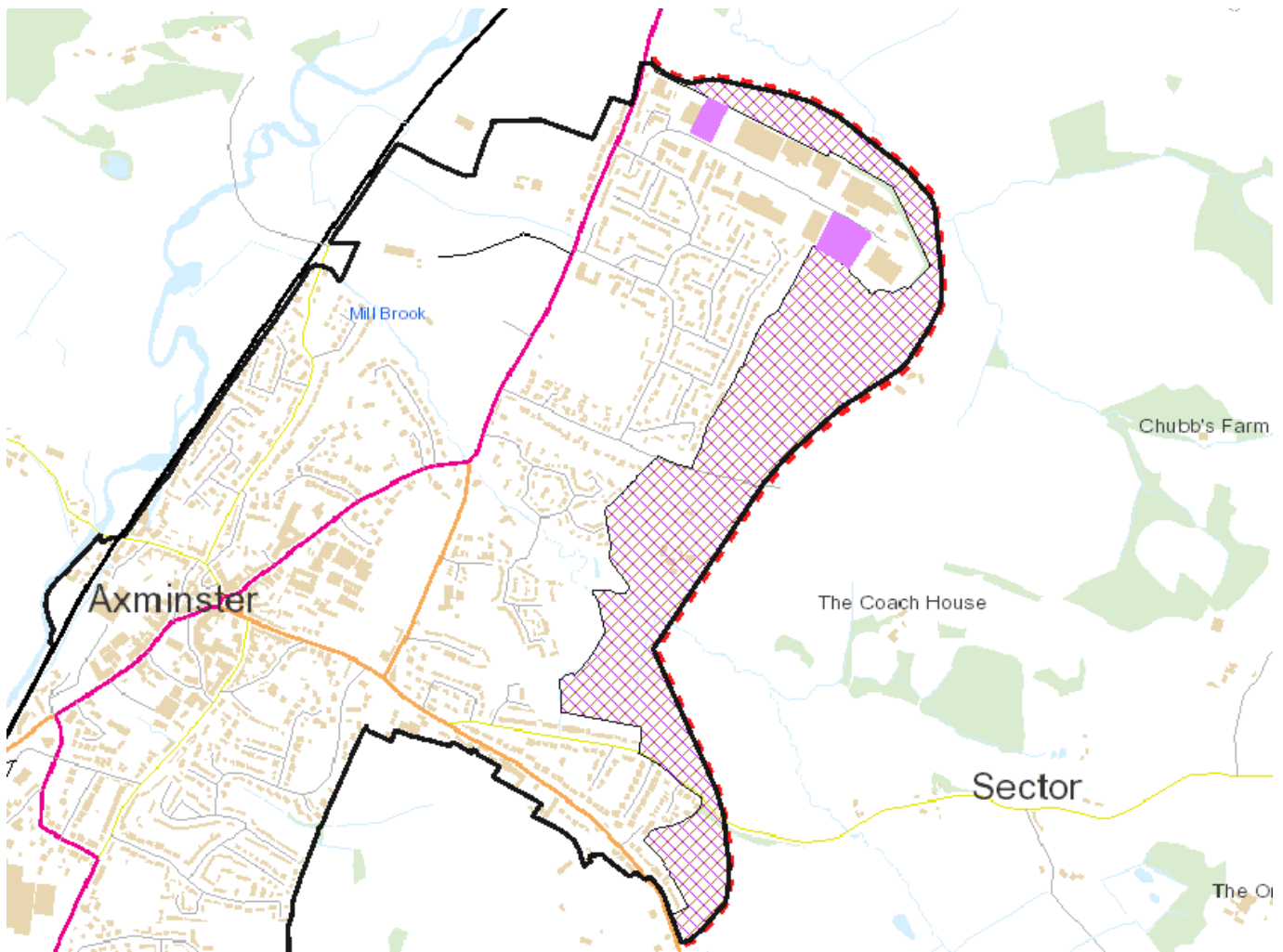
We will also plan for major mixed use strategic development to the East of the town for up to and in the longer term potential for more than 650 new homes and a North-South relief road, a key item of infrastructure for the town, and to also increase the critical mass of residents in the town to support the future vitality of Axminster.

To achieve the latter part of the strategy a large urban extension was allocated in the local plan for a mixed use development comprising:

i) Around 650 new homes;

ii) 8 Hectares of land for mixed job generating commercial and employment uses;
iii) a range of social, community and open space facilities to support development;
iv) a 210 pupil primary school (1.5ha site – which forms part of the overall 8 hectare employment allocation), including a nursery and accommodation to support children's centre services; and
v) a North South relief road for the town will be delivered as part of this development linking Chard Road (A358) to Lyme Road (B261).

The allocated site is shown hatched on the plan at the top of the following page with the originally envisaged alignment of the relief road shown dashed on the north and eastern edge of the allocation.

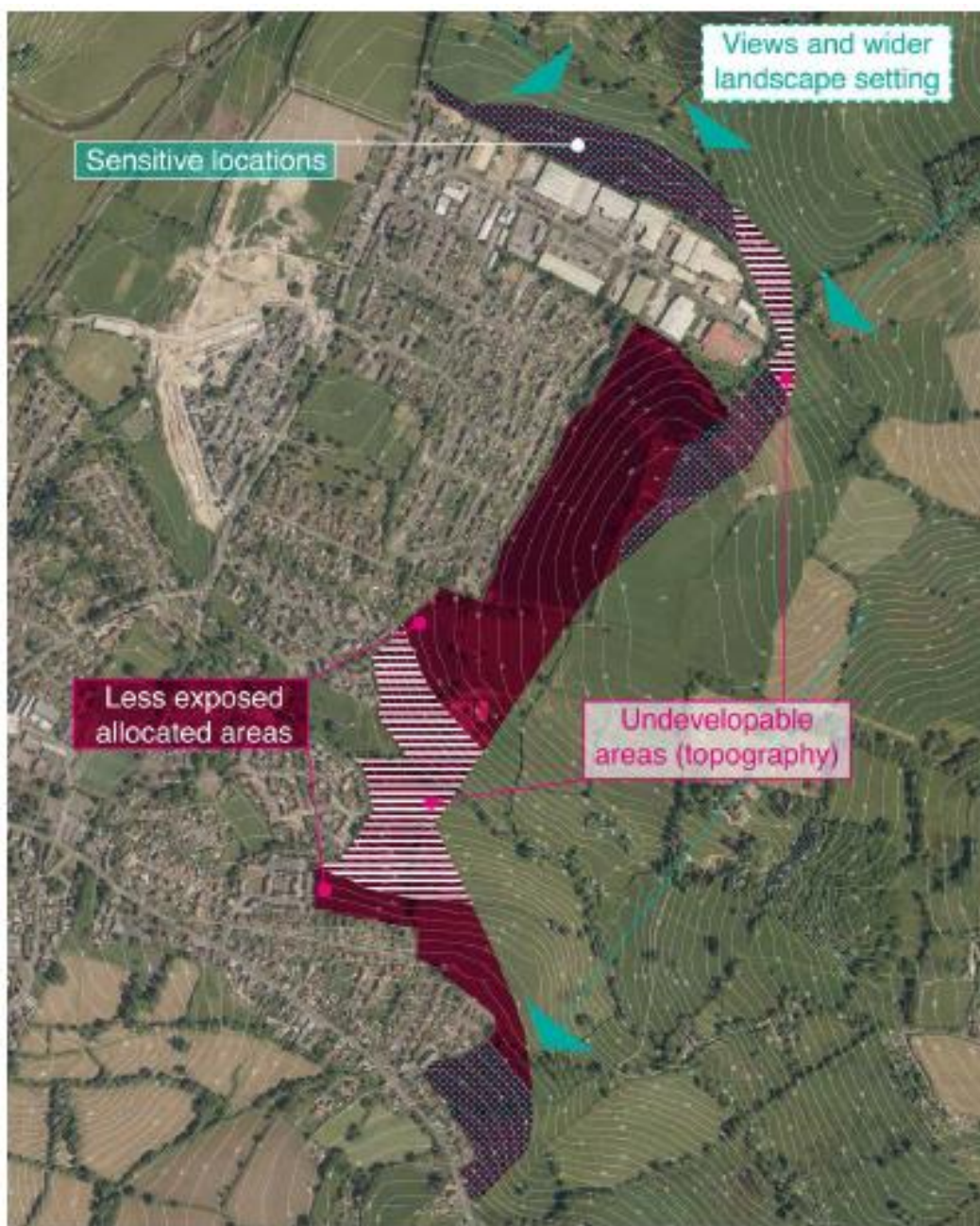


Control of the allocation is split mostly between Persimmon Homes and The Crown Estate, with Persimmon Homes controlling the northern and southern most portions of the allocation and The Crown Estate controlling the central part. Third parties control two smaller centrally positioned parcels.

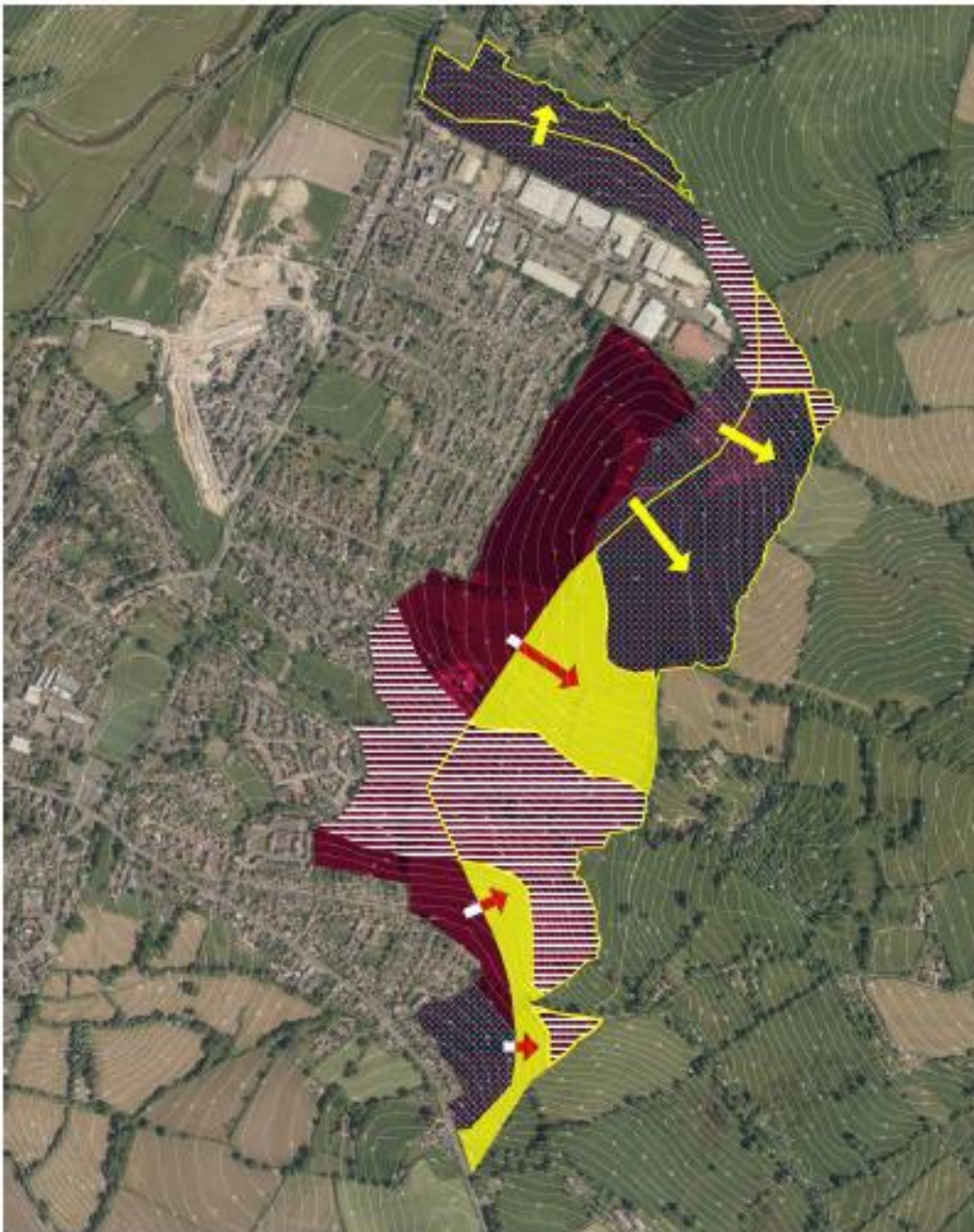
Persimmon Homes submitted planning applications in outline for 3 portions of land that form part of the allocated land in 2015. Between them these proposed 430 homes and were considered by the local planning authority under application references 15/0435/MOUT, 15/0436/MOUT and 15/0442/MOUT. These applications were each refused for a number of reasons including the lack of a masterplan approach to the development of the whole of the allocation which is a requirement of the Local plan and the expansion of the allocation beyond that identified in the local plan.

The Council considered that these applications illustrated the need for a masterplan that distributes the different uses appropriately across the site and how key infrastructure, such as the relief road, can be delivered alongside the development. The remaining reasons for refusal relating to specific issues with the submitted scheme or a lack of information on various issues and can all be addressed. Lengthy discussions followed the refusals with Persimmon Homes and The Crown Estate over master planning of the allocation and both parties agreed to engage in this process. The two developers and the Council jointly commissioned HYAS Consultants to produce a masterplan for the development of the site which sets a template for planning applications from each of the developers.

Initial work carried out by the consultants identified a number of issues with delivering the allocation in the Local Plan as parts of the allocation site are sensitive in the wider landscape or undevelopable due to topographical constraints as illustrated on the plan below:

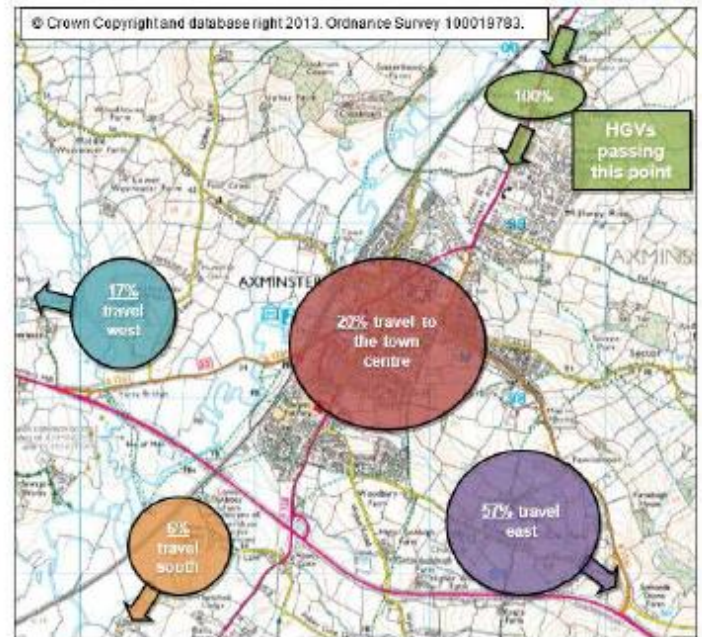
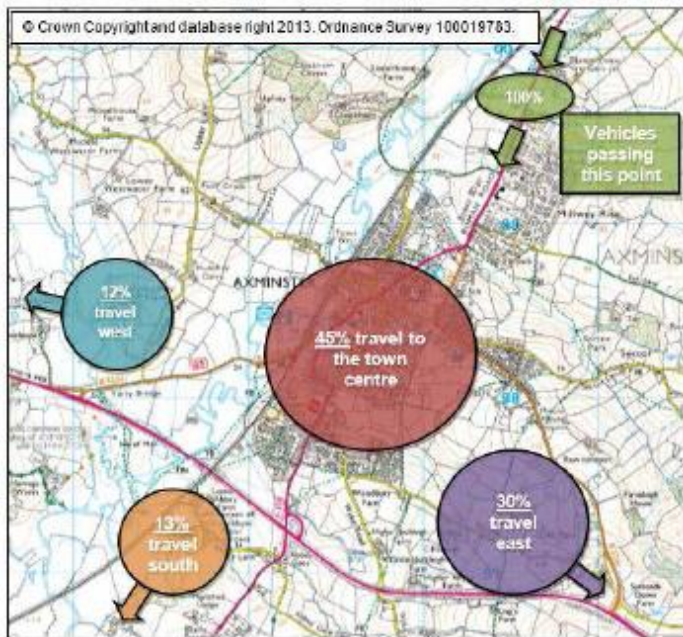


These constraints mean that it will not be possible to accommodate the originally envisaged 650 homes and employment and community spaces on the allocated site without developing the site at densities more appropriate to a town or city centre which would not be appropriate for this area on the edge of the town and close to an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. In order to accommodate the envisaged levels of growth in an appropriate manner the site would need to be expanded into the adjoining land to the east. This further land is also controlled by Persimmon Homes and The Crown Estate and is no more sensitive in the landscape than the allocated areas. The allocation was largely defined by a proposal put forward in response for a call for sites early in the preparation of the local plan. The site was put forward by Westbury Homes who were subsequently taken over by Persimmon Homes. It should also be noted that The Crown Estate appeared at the examination and argued that the land area and numbers should be increased albeit this approach was not subsequently adopted. The opportunities to expand the site are shown on the plan below:



In addition to the levels of development envisaged the urban extension is also envisaged to deliver the north/south relief road. Devon County Council have estimated the cost of the road at £16.7 million although these costs will vary depending on the final alignment. The relief road is therefore a massive cost on the development but is vital to the future growth of the town given the impact that HGV's and other traffic passing through the town has on congestion, air quality, the attractiveness of the town centre and the damage that has been caused to historic buildings as large vehicles try and navigate its narrow streets. Traffic studies in the past have made a clear and compelling case for the relief road showing how it could divert 57% of the HGV's that currently go through the town centre away and to the east of the town.

A summary of the traffic studies findings is shown below:



A relief road around the north east of Axminster has the potential to divert the 30% of all traffic which travels east after passing through the town centre.

A relief road around the north east of Axminster has the potential to divert the 57% of HGVs which travel east after passing through the town centre.

It was clear from the time of the allocation of this site and the relief road in the Local Plan that the development would not in itself be able to fund the relief road and so the opportunity was taken to bid for funding last year when the government announced the Housing Infrastructure Fund. The fund was established to help to fund large pieces of infrastructure that are required to unlock sites where significant numbers of new homes could be delivered. The Council successfully bid for £10 million of funding for the relief road in Axminster. The injection of this funding has provided the impetus to progress with the masterplan and detailed design of the road.

An initial consultation exercise was held in July 2017 where the issues with developing the site and the potential need for expanding the site were raised with consultees and residents in the town. Largely the delivery of the relief road was welcomed and there was general support for development in the town with the benefits of these developments being widely recognised. There were some reservations about the scale of development and its impact and concerns were raised about other issues in the town in particular problems with traffic flows over Weycroft Bridge.

At Cabinet on the 31st October 2018 Members agreed in principle to borrowing the shortfall in funding for the relief road on the basis that this would be repaid through developer contributions subject to a detailed proposal being agreed by Council at a future date. The principle of bringing forward the

road in this way would enable the road to be delivered in the early stages of development and this has been included in the proposed phasing strategy in the masterplan.

The Masterplan

Following the July 2017 consultation event detailed work was undertaken on designing a final route for the relief road that worked from the point of view of the design requirements for the road but also the need to provide access to the adjoining parcels of land and enable their development. The varied contours across the site made this quite complicated and needed to have regard to an appropriate distribution of uses across the site acknowledging that the Local Plan allocation is not simply about delivering new homes but also requires the delivery of community facilities, infrastructure and jobs to support those new homes. In December 2017 a further consultation event was held and a preferred masterplan for the site was presented to the community. A summary plan of the masterplan is shown below:



The main masterplan document proposed for endorsement is attached as Appendix 1 to this report.

The masterplan has a number of key features that require further explanation:

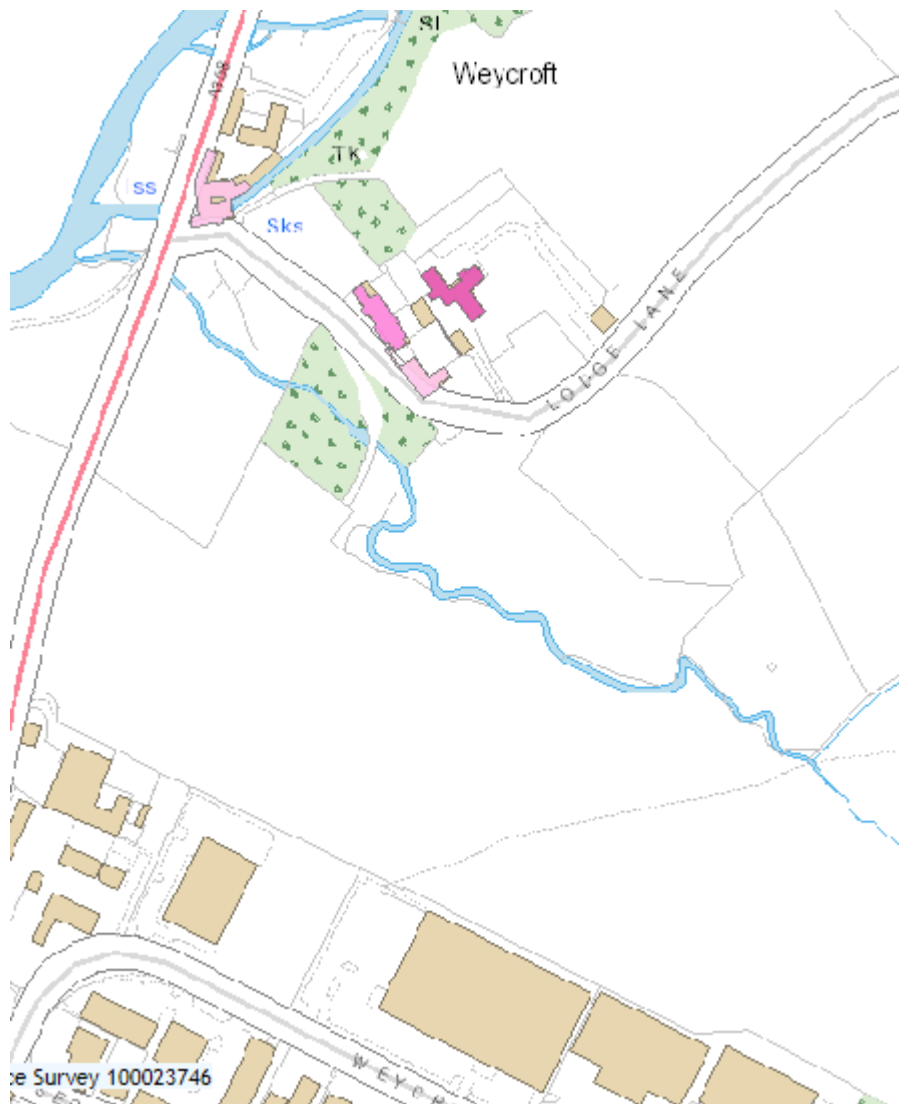
Employment Land

The masterplan proposes the provision of employment land on the northern most part of the site between the proposed relief road and the existing Millwey Industrial Estate. It is envisaged that this employment space would be similar to that currently accommodated on the existing industrial estate with a variety of workshops and industrial units. It is understood that there is a local need for spaces such as this primarily from the existing businesses on the industrial estate who have been surveyed and have identified significant requirements for expansion in the near future. There has also been an expressed desire to try to access the existing industrial estate from the relief road and bypass the existing access which it is understood gets very congested at peak times.

The proposed employment areas are shown on the plan below:



The primary issue with located employment space in the locality is the impact on the landscape and in particular on the setting of the listed buildings to the north of the site which includes the grade I listed Weycroft Hall. The following plan shows the relationship between the listed buildings shown in shades of pink and the site.



The employment land will need careful mitigation of its potential impacts through the design and location of buildings, cutting buildings into the land form to reduce height/visual impact as well as careful tree and landscape planting.

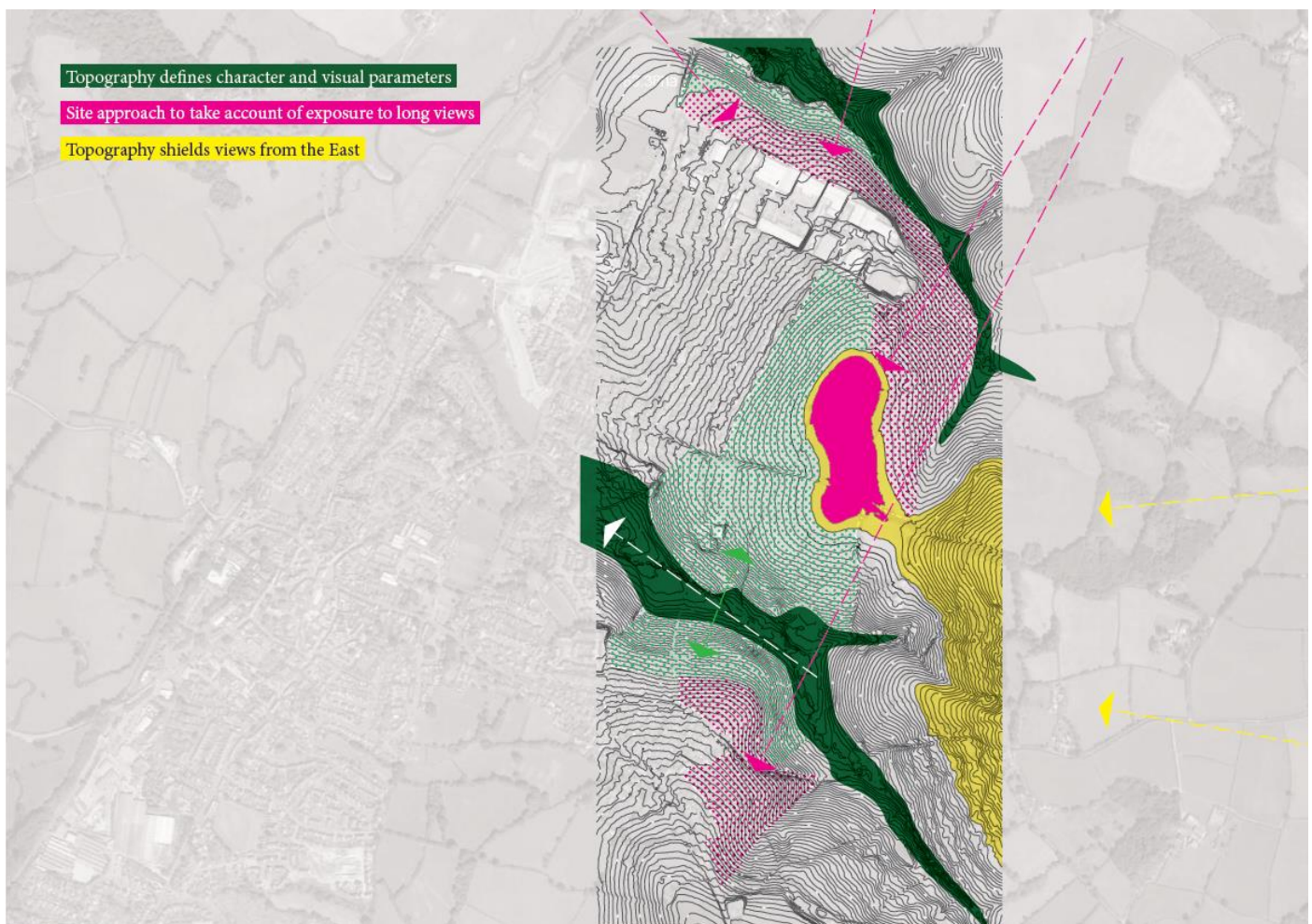
The Route of the Relief Road

The route of the relief road has been carefully considered so that it follows wherever possible the topography of the site to minimise cut and fill while enabling the efficient access to and development of the adjacent development parcels. It has been necessary to divert the route of the road to the west in order to cross the Mill Brook at the lowest possible point in order to minimise the span of the bridge and keep costs down. The road would pass through the residential development within the central part of the site and so careful design of both the road and the housing in this area will be needed to ensure an acceptable relationship between these uses, however it is considered that this can be achieved and is preferable to separating the road from

the development entirely. Key secondary routes are also shown in the masterplan and will help to move pedestrians and cyclists around the space without conflict with HGV's.

Expansion of the site

The proposed masterplan expands the site quite substantially over the area that was originally allocated in the Local Plan. The primary reason for this is to accommodate a sufficient scale of development to generate sufficient return to fund the delivery of the relief road. It is however considered that the area of land being expanded into is no more sensitive in the landscape than the areas previously allocated. It is therefore considered that the additional areas would be acceptable for the proposed development. The following plan illustrates the landscape impact of the additional development showing how it is screened from wider views to the east by the topography.



Aside from the issues of scaling the development to enable the delivery of the relief road a further issue to note is that the masterplan work has shown that the 650 homes previously envisaged for the site cannot be accommodated on the allocated site to an appropriate design and density due to the sites constraints. Therefore accommodating the scale of development envisaged by the local plan already requires expansion of the site.

It is important to note that it is not intended for the masterplan to be adopted as a Development Plan Document (DPD) or Supplementary Planning Document (SPD). The masterplan document will not therefore allocate the additional land proposed for development in the masterplan.

Members should however be aware that by endorsing the masterplan they would be accepting in principle the development of this area. Subsequent planning applications for the development of these areas would be treated as departures from the Local Plan and the developers would have to demonstrate that the form of development proposed is appropriate and acceptable in planning terms for permission to be granted. It would not however be appropriate at that stage to raise issues of the appropriateness in principle of developing these areas once identified as such in an endorsed masterplan.

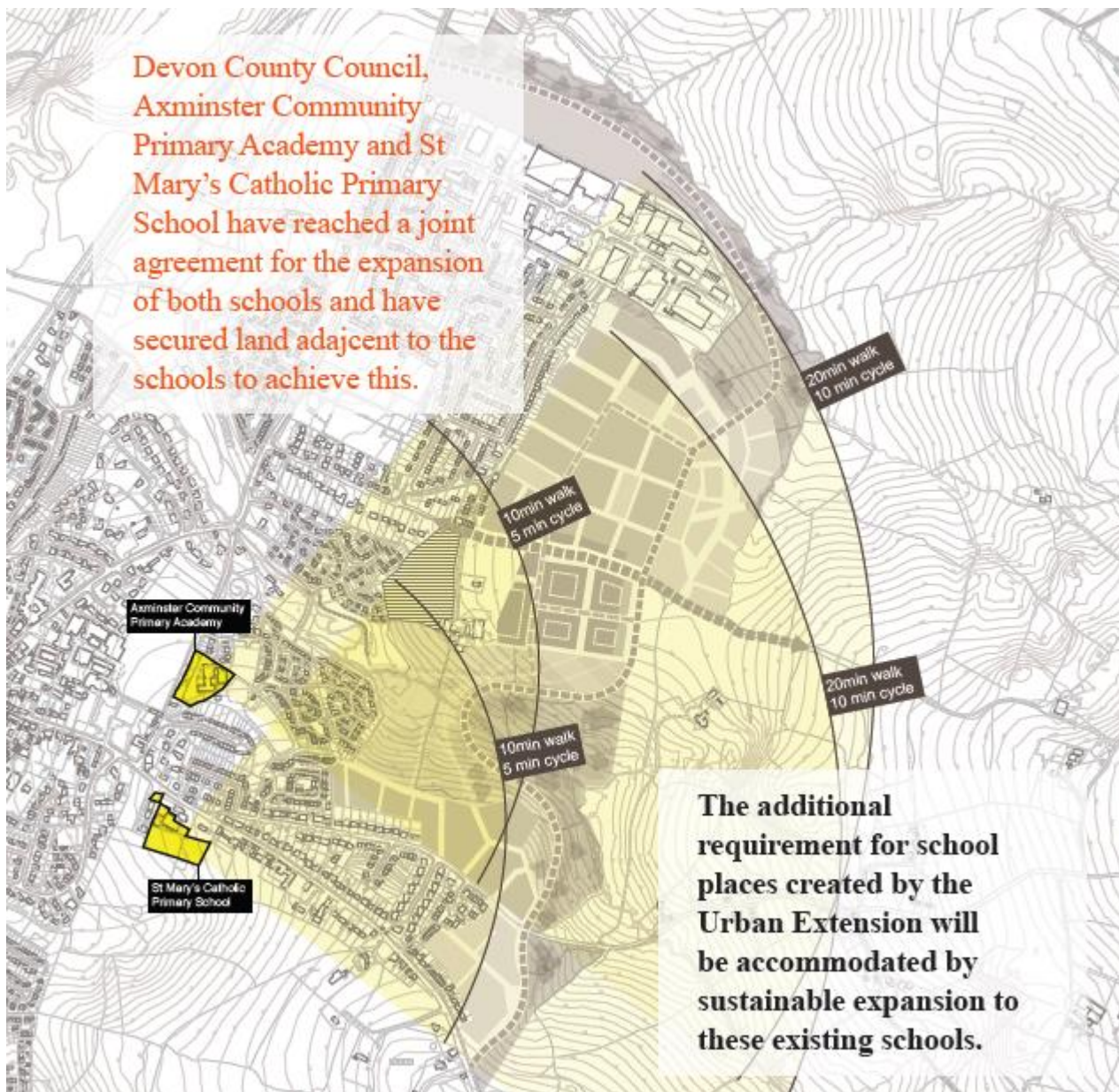
Local Centre

The masterplan incorporates a neighbourhood centre which is intended to accommodate a mixture of retail, community and employment spaces to meet the needs of the development. It is considered important that a development of this scale has such facilities within easy walking distances of the development to ensure that it is a genuinely sustainable community.

Concern has been expressed through the consultation that the neighbourhood centre would compete with the town centre and risk damaging the viability of uses within the town centre. This is not the intention and it is important to remember that the scale of the neighbourhood centre is very small when compared with the town centre. Clearly the nature of the uses coming forward in the neighbourhood centre will largely be dictated by market forces but it is considered important that services and facilities are provided within easy walking distances of the houses.

Schools

The allocation of the site in the Local Plan included a requirement for a primary school to be built on the site to meet the needs of children from the development. This requirement was based on there not being capacity in the existing primary schools in the town and no opportunity to expand the schools to accommodate the additional children. Expansion of the existing schools was always Devon County Council's preference as education authority, as construction of a new school would lead to a number of problems given that it would not be viable to construct it until late in the build programme generating issues of how to accommodate children in the meantime. The existing schools – Axminster Community Primary and St Mary's Catholic Primary School now have the space and are willing to expand to accommodate the children from this development. As a result the requirement for a new primary school has not been included within the masterplan proposals. The plan at the top of the next page shows the relationship between the site and the two existing schools and shows that the majority of the development is within easy walking and cycling distance of the existing schools.



Green Infrastructure

The masterplan has been designed to incorporate a variety of green spaces that help to provide meaningful amenity space for residents of both the development and the wider community. The green spaces to the edge of the development area also help to mitigate the landscape impact of the development while more formal areas are proposed within the residential development for recreational purposes.

The proposed green spaces are all shown on the plan at the top of the next page with a brief description of the spaces proposed and their purpose.



Character Areas

Although high level in terms of design guidance the masterplan has also sought to identify a number of character areas across the masterplan area to ensure variety and interest between different spaces that reflect their landscape form and relationship with the surrounding areas. The key character areas are the neighbourhood centre itself, suburban character which is focused more around the boundaries with the existing town and the neighbourhood centre and an edge character area which is more informal and lower density to the edges of the development with the adjacent countryside. These areas are characterised by differing densities, heights and forms of development.

Consultation

The proposed masterplan was the subject of a consultation event held in the Guild Hall in Axminster on 6th December 2018. The event was attended by hundreds of residents and interested people of which 96 completed a feedback form responding to a number of key

questions about the proposal and allowing them an opportunity to raise wider issues. A summary of the responses is included as Appendix 2 to this report. Following the consultation the materials used were available on our web-site and there was an opportunity to submit any further comments and an additional 25 comments were received. These are summarised in Appendix 3 along with a response to the issues raised. Comments were also received from the Town Council and these are included below:

That this Town Council will not support any expansion of the number of houses beyond the 650 specified in the Local Plan without detailed financial evidence to justify the need for such expansion and any such change must be the subject of further public consultation nor will it support any adverse change in the density of housing proposed.

That this Town Council requires firm evidence to support the contention that £17.9 million will be sufficient to deliver the relief road in the form proposed.

That this Town Council requires that a comprehensive traffic modelling exercise be undertaken to demonstrate that the relief road as shown (in conjunction with measures previously requested such as a ban on non-essential heavy goods vehicles from the town centre) will work for users such as heavy goods vehicle drivers and will not have an adverse impact on other parts of the town.

The masterplan has been the subject of viability testing through each stage of its production to demonstrate the scale of development needed to support the delivery of the relief road. This information has not however been published being commercially sensitive and not required to be published given the status of the document and it not being linked to a planning application at this stage. Clearly the expansion of the site beyond 650 homes was part of the consultation in December and views on this have been received. The responses to the question relating to this were very mixed with a roughly 50/50 split between those that were positive about this change and those that were not. Traffic modelling of the effect of the relief road has all been previously done and the results published as part of work on formulating the proposals for the road in the local plan.

Current applications

Persimmon Homes have submitted two planning applications for their parts of the site these being for upto 305 homes and employment spaces on the northern part of the site and 104 homes on the southern part of the site. The application for the northern part of the site is made as a hybrid application with the housing and employment elements in outline and full consent sought for the relief road. For the southern parcel full consent is sought with this application also including a further section of the relief road and its junction with Lyme Road.

Persimmon Homes are very concerned that the masterplan Members are asked to endorse does not align with their application for the southern parcel. The masterplan indicates approximately 70 homes on this part of the site within an area defined in the masterplan as “edge residential” where a lower density and more rural form of development is envisaged as it lies in a prominent location on the edge of the town. The Persimmon application proposes 104 homes on this part of the site. Whether or not the Persimmon application satisfies the design parameters of the masterplan will be a key consideration of this application which is currently being assessed but until that work has been completed it is not possible to say for certain if that is an appropriate scale of development for the southern parcel. In your officer’s opinion it would not therefore be appropriate to amend the masterplan to reflect the Persimmon Homes application by including either the 104 figure a range

of housing numbers that encompasses that figure. Nor would it be appropriate to remove all references in the Masterplan to housing numbers. Some reference to numbers is necessary to inform and understand (i) the overall development (ii) the phasing of the development and (iii) for third parties to gauge the scale of development relative to the defined character envisaged for each parcel. Instead wording has been included in the masterplan to make it clear that the numbers stated are for the purposes of informing a phasing strategy and viability appraisal and that the numbers stated are indicative and not intended to be definitive or prescriptive. The masterplan is a high level document and it is acceptable for developers to test assumptions made in the masterplan through their applications, however it is not considered appropriate to assume that those assumptions are correct at this point in time and amend the masterplan in advance of the Persimmon Homes application being determined.

Conclusion

Overall the masterplan is considered to provide a good template for the development of the site and provides a clear pathway to the delivery of the relief road. Unusually the masterplan also extends beyond the bounds of the allocated site in the Local Plan but it is considered that this is justified and while it cannot be allocated through the masterplan it is appropriate to include it given the clear intent by the developers to pursue this area through applications, the need to do so in order to fund the delivery of the relief road and the lack of significant harm in planning terms arising from it.