

Village Character Statement

1. Introduction

Abbots Leigh is a special village. Set in the green belt and decidedly rural, yet only ten minutes drive from the centre of Bristol, it has always been a tranquil, much treasured, and green haven from the busy city centre. Late in 1999 local people from the parish decided to work together to create a Village Character Statement.

The village has changed considerably over the centuries. Whilst realising that change will continue, the residents want the existing character to be respected and to follow the traditions that have shaped the present community. This document identifies the special character of Abbots Leigh and explains some of the steps that should be taken to ensure that any new development will harmonise with what already exists.



What is a Village Character Statement (VCS) and who is it for?

A Village Character Statement describes the qualities and characteristics of our village which are appreciated and valued by local people and visitors. In doing so it provides guidance for:

- The Local Planning Authority

- The Parish Council
- Developers; and
- Residents

People choose to live in villages for a wide range of reasons including the location and amenities, but most particularly the style and character. In doing so, they inevitably change and mould the village character themselves. Although a VCS draws on the past in order to explain how it has shaped the present character of the village, the focus of a VCS is in looking forward to the future and the probable character of the village then.



A certain amount of development is both necessary and desirable if we want to keep villages as part of a living countryside. Our VCS provides a context for that development by trying to define what it is that makes Abbots Leigh so special to those who live here and to those who visit us for recreation. It describes the character of the village as perceived by the residents; the threats to that character and the opportunities for enhancing it in the future. It sets out what we would like to see protected and preserved, what needs to be improved and the kind of developments which would be appropriate – or inappropriate!

What effect does a VCS have? The planning context:

Few local planning authorities have comprehensive and detailed policies for design. There are design guides for some designated areas such as Conservation Areas and National Parks, but for the majority of rural settlements, including Abbots Leigh, there is little design guidance for the planners based on local character.

Planning in Abbots Leigh is influenced by a variety of factors.

- **Government policy**
- **The South West Regional Planning Framework**
- **The Draft Joint Replacement Structure Plan**
- **The North Somerset Local Plan**
 - It is at this level where the planners get to the village level of detail in defining which parts of North Somerset are Green Belt and also marking out our village envelope/boundary for development.

Each of these has to fit consistently within the larger guidelines. For example, the regional plan can't include anything that contradicts a national policy, and so on.

To have any real influence, our VCS needs to be adopted by the planning authority as **Supplementary Planning Guidance**. This means that it has to complement, and not conflict with, the policies and guidelines set out in the Local Plan. It cannot change those policies – there are other mechanisms for doing that – but it can elaborate on them and relate them to our own community.

Our VCS is written in the context of the North Somerset Local Plan. Of particular relevance is Policy CON/1, which states that:

"Development will not be permitted unless it is compatible with its surroundings or general locality in terms of height, scale, density, massing, landscaping, layout and materials used."



Why is it important?

There would be less opposition to development if it respected the character of the village. Our character statement helps to build better understanding between our community, the local planners, designers and developers.

For local people, the planning process and rules are often complex and can take a significant amount of time and effort to review if we wish to question or challenge a particular development. A Village Character Statement helps us with this by taking our views and representing them in a document, which can be used by the planning department to evaluate applications.

To ensure that this VCS accurately reflects the views of the community, in July 2000 we conducted an in depth, Parish-wide survey from which we received 197 responses. Wherever appropriate the key results from this survey and relevant data from the 1991 census have been incorporated into this statement.

For planners: A VCS is important because:

- It is a single source of reference which represents the view of the whole Parish;
- It complements the existing planning system and can help strengthen the planner's position when advising or negotiating on design and at appeal;
- It enables local people to make a positive contribution to the development debate, rather than having to rely on protest and a confrontational stance to make their views heard.

For designers and developers: A VCS describes what local people think is important and can, therefore, help reduce the amount of conflict over controversial proposals by giving clear guidelines about what will be acceptable to the community which can be followed in addition to Local Planning Policies in preparing development proposals.

What we hope to achieve:

By adopting our VCS as supplementary planning guidance the local planning authority have accepted that the design principles and planning recommendations we have made should be taken into consideration for any planning applications made within our Parish.

We hope that in doing this we will help Abbots Leigh develop and enhance its character into the future and avoid the pitfalls of poorly considered change.

Also, through the community action recommendations, we hope to galvanise the wider community of the Parish into action on a wide variety of projects to enhance both the quality of our environment and our lives.

Two types of recommendations

There are two types of recommendation in this VCS:

1. **Planning and Other Development** - i.e. Recommendations which supplement local plan policies and which, therefore, will need to be taken into account in the drawing up and consideration of development proposals. These are in bold type; and
2. **Community Action** – i.e. Recommendations which could be implemented by the Parish Council, Civic Society, other village organisations or the community at large. These are in italic type.

It should be noted, however, that both types of recommendations provide the basis for a partnership between the local authority and the community. Just as householders and others preparing development proposals will need to take note of the planning and other development recommendations, so North Somerset Council will have an interest in and, on occasion, some responsibility for, particular community action recommendations.



2. The village context

2.1 History

There was a settlement at Abbots Leigh in Anglo Saxon times and the original name was 'Lega', a Saxon word meaning hill or meadow. There has been a place of worship on this ridge from the 11th century, and after the Norman Conquest, William gave Lega to the Bishop of Coutances. The Manor House of Lega, which was situated near the present day Leigh Court, became the rest house for the Abbot and Monks of St. Augustine Monastery in Bristol. Gradually the name 'Lega' changed to Leigh and later 'Abbots' was added to distinguish it from other places in the area called 'Leigh'.

In 1811 the whole of Leigh Court Estate, which included the village of Abbots Leigh was sold to the Miles family. They pulled down the old Tudor manor house and the present day Leigh Court mansion was built.

From a development perspective, however, the most significant event in our history began with a combination of the opening of the Clifton Suspension Bridge in 1864 and the break up of the Miles estate shortly afterwards. This opening up of land enabled wealthy Bristolians to begin the development of Abbots Leigh and the construction of country homes within commuting distance of the city.

A hundred years later the construction of the M5 motorway and the Avonmouth bridge took some of the pressures off the roads between Bristol and North Somerset, but in turn

reinforced the attractiveness this rural area for development. Since then Portishead has expanded considerably, the new Royal Portbury Dock and surrounding service area has been built, and the A369 - which cuts the parish and village in two - has become a major commuter and HGV route into Bristol and beyond.

2.2. Abbots Leigh Today

Abbots Leigh, like other villages faces continuing pressures: The South West Regional Planning Framework suggests that in the former Avon area about 69,000 additional dwellings will be needed by 2016. National policy demands that many of these be built through the reuse of previously developed land and buildings, but in the former Avon area there is relatively little scope for such 'brownfield' development. The Joint Replacement Structure Plan recognises the heavy demand for development but also proposes 'to maintain the established Green Belt in order to maintain the separate physical identity and setting of towns and villages, to promote the openness of the countryside and safeguard it from encroachment, and to assist in regeneration within the Bristol conurbation and Bath'.

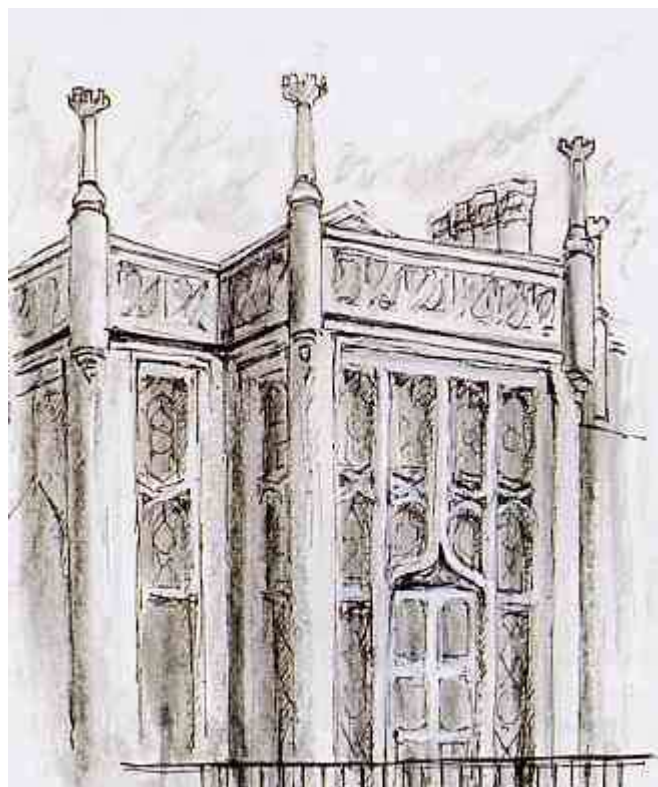
The Regional Framework suggests there may be some need to look at the future of the Green Belt in the light of these continuing pressures. The Green Belt, however, remains a crucial element in the local planning framework and the North Somerset Local Plan, adopted in June 2000 confirms the status of the Green Belt in general (one aim of the Plan, through Policy HOU/3, is to 'maintain the integrity of the Green Belt'), and of Abbots Leigh specifically.

'New dwellings in the following Green Belt villages will be permitted within settlement boundaries only for the infilling of small gaps in small groups of dwellings, and the replacement of existing dwellings, provided that the character of the settlement is not adversely affected (Policy HOU/3)'. Abbots Leigh is on this list.

With respect to development outside the settlement boundaries, Policy HOU/1 states that 'new dwellings outside settlement boundaries will not be permitted unless provided for exceptionally in accordance with other policies in the Plan'.

There are therefore conflicting demands on Abbots Leigh. On the one hand there is the continuing pressure for housing land, the possibility at least of infill within the village and traffic and amenity pressures arising from development elsewhere. On the other hand there are strong reasons to protect and enhance the character of the village within a Green Belt setting.

This Village Character Statement recognises that there may be pressures for new development but seeks to ensure that any such development or change



which may occur as a result of infilling is undertaken within guidelines which preserve the quality of design and character of the village.

Abbots Leigh has a number of interesting and important buildings some of which are listed (indicated by †):

The Parish Church † - There may well have been a building on the site of the church in Saxon times but there is no evidence of this. We can be fairly sure that there was a church in the 11th century. In addition to the Church itself, the Churchyard Cross and two monuments in the graveyard are listed.

Glebe House † - which is adjacent to the church, used to be the vicarage in the 19th century. Parts of the house are very old and may date back to the late 17th century.

Leigh Lodge † - Parts of this house are 600 years old. The Norton family used it as a Hunting Lodge and the village stocks were located outside. The adjoining house, Elm Lodge is also listed.

The Priory † - was built in 1832 by the George family and was later the home of the Fry family (famous for their chocolates) for over 50 years. The house has a splendid Orangery built shortly after the house itself.

Leigh Court † - An early Tudor mansion (which gave shelter to King Charles II in 1651 when he escaped from the Battle of Worcester) stood close to the site of the present house, which was built in 1814 for the Miles family with grounds laid out by Sir Humphrey Repton. In 1884 the Miles family entertained the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII. In 1915, after Sir Henry Miles' death, Leigh Court was sold and the whole estate, amounting to some 2,400 acres including the whole of the current village, was split up.

Abbots Leigh House † - was built around 1775 and extended in the 1850's probably by the Miles family, for whom it became the Dower House. Part of the property, a coach house and squash court, were subsequently converted in the 1950's into a separate dwelling - "Carey's Cottage".

The Village Hall - one of Abbots Leigh's most valued buildings, was built in 1896 by Sir Cecil Miles. In 1915, the hall was sold for £190 to a Mrs Richardson who in 1927 gave it to the Parish Council.

The George Inn - is another notable building in the village. Probably built in the 17th century, in 1719 it was recorded as 'church house and stables' and was an ecclesiastical property and alehouse.

Also of community importance is the village playground, originally the school field. This piece of land is leased from North Somerset Council by the village and includes play equipment provided by the community. Trees in the field include a mature hornbeam and a commemorative millennium oak recently planted. It provides a recreational facility for children and families throughout the year. In 1992 the Parish Council acquired the leasehold for 20 years with a nominal rent. It is strongly recommended that the village now purchase the freehold in order that this valuable resource may be retained in perpetuity.

3. The Natural Environment



The essence of the village is defined by its position on the ridge, the glorious views in all directions, especially towards the Bristol Channel, the Welsh hills beyond and the proximity of beautiful unspoiled countryside all around.

Over the years the village has spread into the adjoining valleys and hillsides. There are many wooded areas, some man-made and others natural, in between the fertile valleys. The whole area is designated Green Belt and its local setting is very rural with an abundance of wild life and flora. Much of the adjoining countryside is farmland, however there are now only a few working farms, the remaining farmland is used for rearing sheep and cattle by farmers outside the Parish.



Geology:

The Parish has a wide range of soil and rock types within its boundaries supporting residential, farm, woodland and agricultural uses. There is a series of beds of Devonian Old Red sandstone, overlaid with carboniferous limestone (as visible in the Avon Gorge). These rocks form the ridge on which the village was established. On top of the limestone there is a layer of clay which hinders water drainage and which has built up the pressure to create a series of springs above Sandy Lane and elsewhere. Towards the Avon at Horseshoe Bend, where the river valley widens out, there are shales, thin sandstones and limestone which form a belt of relatively low lying land.



In the grounds of Leigh Court, celestine was extracted in the late 19th century. Celestine is the principle source of strontium salts used in the pyrotechnics industry to give a crimson flame. Extraction ceased around 1912 when the supplies ran out. There are the remains of a quarry at Chapel Pill Farm, the stone from which (dolomitic conglomerate) was taken upstream and used to build Temple Meads station in the 1830s.

Views:

Because of its position, views in, through and out of the village are important aspects of the village character. The village is virtually surrounded by fields and woodland, which offer views over the countryside in all directions, to the benefit of both villagers and visitors.

The principal roads, Church Road and Manor Road are built along the village ridge, giving an impressive skyline composed of church, buildings and trees, when viewed from the approaches to the village on the A369 and from the outskirts of Ham Green and from Home Farm. There are also beautiful views within the village, for example from the Church across to Home Farm, towards the church along Church Road, and from Church Road towards The George pub. There are excellent views between Home Farm and Leigh Woods, from Beggar Bush Lane down the bridlepath towards Manor Road, along Sandy Lane in both directions, the rural part of Manor Road and the paths around Abbots Pool. There are outstanding views over the Severn to Wales, towards Leigh Woods, and towards Failand.



The value of the open views, and the more intimate views of fields and woodland found up and down lanes and footpaths around the village contribute much to village character. Some views have already been obscured by large new dwellings which have replaced the smaller, original buildings. Planting of trees in gaps may also cause a reduction in views in the future. The high hedges along the drive to Leigh Court and on the field side of Manor and Harris Lane also block beautiful views.



Countryside:

In the area there is a wide variety of woodland, some of which is owned and managed by the National Trust, other parts of which are managed by English Heritage, Forest Enterprise and North Somerset Council. A number of trees have Tree Preservation Orders. Amongst the species in the parish are chestnut, beech, silver birch, sycamore, oak, hornbeam, field maple, holly and yew. The majority of trees in the wooded areas are broad leaved deciduous trees. Some of the woodland comes within the grounds of Leigh Court and of particular interest is the arboretum known as Paradise Bottom, recently awarded a lottery grant for its restoration.

The whole of the grounds of Leigh Court are designated as an Historic Park and Garden. There are also five unregistered historic parks and gardens in the parish: the garden of the Priory; The Manor House; Abbots Leigh House; Glebe House and Campfield though these have been much altered in the last fifty years.

Also in the grounds of Leigh Court, the old walled kitchen garden has recently been reclaimed and now produces organic vegetables. There is also a farm and a garden centre.

Within the parish there is an extensive cider orchard which is now supported by a Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries grant. There are a number of old varieties of cider apple trees in this 25 acre orchard which is managed on an organic basis, with sheep grazing under the trees from time to time. The trees do not lend themselves to mechanical harvesting, hence the need for a grant. When the orchard is in blossom, the sight is breathtaking.. As these trees approach the end of their lives the owners should be encouraged to replant. The Parish Council owns a small quarry adjacent to the A369 which has recently been planted with native trees and plants.



Within the parish boundary there is a nationally recognised Site of Special Scientific Interest, namely the Avon Gorge SSSI which is also a European Special Area of Conservation. We have an enormous number of interesting species, some of which, such as the whitebeam



(*Sorbus bristoliensis*), the Bristol onion, spiked speedwell (*Vernica spicata*), wild service tree (*Sorbus torminalis*) and the Bristol rock-cress (*Arabis scabra*) are native to the area. We are also fortunate to have small leaved lime trees more than 1,000 years old close to Paradise Bottom. Until the end of the 19th Century these were coppiced regularly. One of the yew trees in the churchyard is older than the present church. Many other species are common such as digitalis, wild garlic, euphorbia, reeds, bluebells and some orchids. The woods are also rich in fungi including bracket fungus and birds nest fungus, which is rare.

The village is fortunate too in having three sites of Nature Conservation importance. One of these has been set up to protect the feeding grounds of peregrine falcons which now nest in the Avon Gorge. The other two are located close to Abbots Pool and Old Park Wood.



There is a great abundance of bird life in the parish, from the familiar blackbirds, sparrows, robins, starlings, many different tits, finches, and woodpeckers to the rarer birds such as goldcrests, woodcock, red poll, ravens and the already mentioned peregrine falcons. However, there has been a noticeable reduction in the numbers of some birds such as house martins and sparrows and some species such as skylarks, spotted flycatchers and nightjars have not been seen for some time and the cuckoo is rarely heard. There has, however, been an increase in birds of prey such as buzzards and kestrels. This may be due to the proximity of the M5 the verges of which offer good hunting grounds for them. Birds such as cormorants, sea gulls and geese fly over the area and there is a heronry in Leigh Woods.

In the woods there are roe deer, badgers, grey squirrels, foxes, brown rats, wood mice, moles, hedgehogs, water shrews, common shrews and voles. The fish in Abbots Pool include carp, roach, and tench. There seem to be fewer frogs and toads of late but there are palmate and common newts.



The parish has a large number of hedgerows, some of which are quite ancient. A survey undertaken in June 2000 found over 130 different wild flowers, grasses, shrubs and trees. Of particular interest is 'The Town Hall Clock plant' (*Adoxa moschatellina*) which is rare in this part of the country.

We are also fortunate to have a wide variety of butterflies and moths in our area including Brimstone, Orange tip, Tortoiseshell, Common Blue, Holly Blue, Meadow Brown, Skipper, Red Admiral and from time to time the Clouded Yellow butterfly. The moths include the Cinnabar, Tiger Moth, and Humming-Bird Hawk Moth.

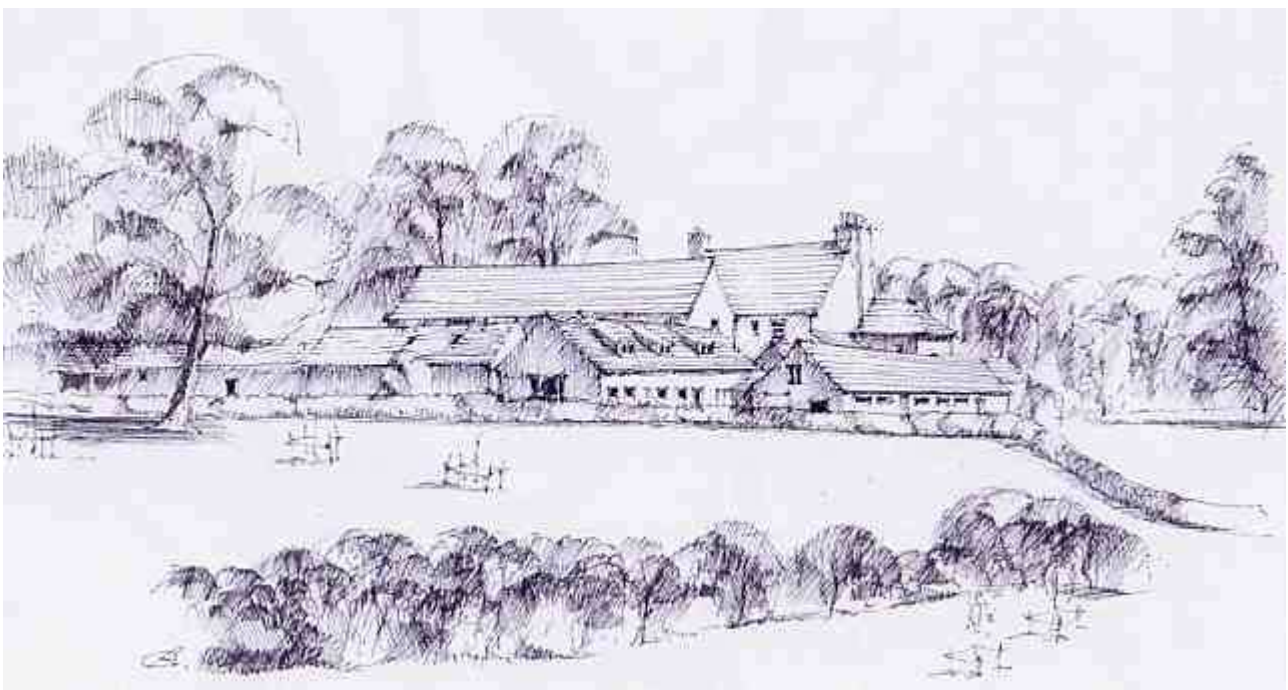
Planning & Other Development - Recommendations:

- 1. Support the Green Belt as currently defined in the North Somerset Local Plan in accordance with policies GRB/1, GRB/3 and GRB4.**
- 2. Important views of, within and from the village should be safeguarded.**
 - **Views over the Severn to Wales as seen from Church Road, Manor Road, Harris Lane.**
 - **Views to Home Farm and Leigh Woods from Church Road and the old school playing field**
 - **Views towards Failand from Sandy Lane and the A369**
 - **Views from Home Farm towards Church Road**
- 3. Any development should respect the open rural character of the landscape.**



Community Action - Recommendations

1. *The Parish Council to take the necessary action to acquire the freehold of the village playground in perpetuity*
2. *There should be an active but sensitive policy of woodland management (including felling, pruning, thinning etc.) and renewal, especially in the Abbots Pool area after local consultation;*
3. *Villagers should be encouraged to plant native species of trees and shrubs, especially those which attract butterflies and provide food for birds.*
4. *Landowners should be encouraged to maintain their hedges, preserving views, leaving saplings occasionally to create a progression of trees.*
5. *Landowners should be made aware of grant aid available to support the maintenance and enhancement of wildlife habitats.*
6. *The planting of leylandii should be discouraged. Landowners who have these on their property should be encouraged to manage them with sensitivity and avoid overshadowing adjacent properties.*
7. *The retention of orchards should be safeguarded and new ones encouraged.*
8. *Landowners should be encouraged to plant hedges of, for instance, hawthorn and hazel, instead of erecting fencing.*
9. *Landowners should be made aware of the benefits of planting native species prevalent in the local area planted in gardens bordering open countryside as a soft transition between the urban and the rural and to provide wildlife habitats.*



4. The Built Environment

Although the historic focus of the village was centred on the Church and Leigh Court, Abbots Leigh has always been quite spread out with a significant number of dwellings along the access routes to the numerous local farmsteads. Essentially these were workers' cottages for the Manor House or the farms.



However, from the completion of the Clifton Suspension Bridge in particular, Abbots Leigh became a prosperous country village in which it was possible to live and still work in the City. It was at this time that the distinctive structure of the intermixed large and small housing began.

In 2001 the village consists almost entirely of privately owned houses, the great majority of which have been built in the last century. Generally one or two storey, almost all of them are detached, on individual plots with relatively generous front and rear gardens.

The fact that we still have many large, prosperous properties next to modest, small cottages is a key element of the inherited character, which contributes significantly to the richness of design in the village. If we were to lose either type, the entire character of the village would change.

The older part of the village is strongly shaped by the use of local, natural stone. This can be distinguished from the general development of the last 50 years during which a wide variety of materials have been utilised creating a significantly different feel. In some instances, this could be said to detract from the character of the village by introducing styles and features more commonly associated with suburbia.

Design & Materials

These are often linked in our minds, but are two separate topics as applied to the appreciation of our village. Simply, the village contains examples both of good and bad design, but not all the bad design suffers from poor choice of materials. However, even the

way materials are used will not turn a bad design into a good one.

Abbots Leigh as a whole does not have a dominant building material. There are numerous examples of natural stone, render, shiplap boarding, brick and even hanging tiles. There is also a variety of roofing materials including natural slate, clay pantiles, clay tiles and various concrete tiles. As a village we need to accept this variety as part of our character, however there are some materials which do not fit well within the village and we should seek to discourage use of these.

As referred to above, there is considerable variety of both design and materials in the village. It is this variety combined with a rich diversity of scale which essentially defines the character of Abbots Leigh. In general the design characteristics which are common to the village include: steeply pitched tiled roofs with chimneys; one or two storey dwellings; stone boundary walls and native hedges. It is impossible to define particular design styles which are singularly appropriate, although it is fair to say that we do not have many examples of standardised, volume built housing by the national builders, and this is beneficial to the character of the village.

As a community, we should continue to encourage unique, individual designs, even eccentricity whilst discouraging the type of pervasive, 'off the shelf' construction which is being erected in almost every town and village in the country.

At present we do not have any bad examples of mock Victorian fascias and barge boards, or half timbering on 'Tudorbethan' style dwellings, which happen to be this year's sales gimmicks for executive homes. We need to protect ourselves from an invasion of this type of design.



Having emphasised variety, we do however, have some lovely examples of high quality design in the village with many listed buildings and 19th century cottages.

A further notable feature of modern house design is the garage. In Abbots Leigh, garages are far less dominant than in many villages or new estates. There is a clear requirement for cars in the village, however we should continue to maintain the unobtrusiveness of the garage in the house and street frontages.

Conservation

The survey invited residents' views on the possibility of having all or part of the village designated as a conservation area.

Of the 168 who responded to this question:

- 44% felt it should cover the whole village
- an additional 19% felt it should cover part of the village e.g. Church Road / Manor Road / the area around the church
- 14% were not in favour
- 16% were not in favour, provided that this VCS gives sufficient protection and
- 7% had no opinion.

A clear majority of 63% favour further investigation into this issue, which should be initiated by the Parish Council, as a means of protecting the character of at least part of the village.

Future Development

The community as a whole have voted overwhelmingly to resist any expansion of the existing settlement boundary and the Parish Council would be likely to oppose any development which breached it. In a popular village, this will undoubtedly bring further pressure for infill and replacement development.

Many of the opportunities for development within the village have already been utilised. However as land values continue to rise and commercial developers seek ever more keenly for development sites, the pressure on some of our more desirable plots and gardens will be relentless.

Any new development should retain the feel of individual, quality properties set in their own gardens. Particular care should be taken not to block existing views through to the countryside and Bristol Channel which are critical to maintaining the character of Abbots Leigh as a country village.

Planning & Other Development - Recommendations:

- 1. The existing settlement boundary, as defined in the North Somerset Local Plan, should be maintained to protect the character of the village.**
- 2. Overall, the sense of spaciousness and privacy should be preserved. This means no over-dense infilling or squeezing in of out-of-scale development.**
- 3. Existing natural stone structures, including boundary walls and agricultural buildings (whether redundant or not) should be retained or incorporated into new development and new plots should be required to have boundaries of natural stone whenever possible.**

- 4. Newly built garages and car parking areas should be unobtrusive. Blocks of garages should be avoided.**
- 5. The mixture of large and small, intermingled properties should be continued, against separate enclaves of such property types.**
- 6. Avoid Abbots Leigh becoming "suburban" through inappropriate development.**
- 7. Homes and gardens should remain private places in accord with Policy RL/1.**
- 8. The scale, design and materials of any refurbishment , redevelopment or new development (including extensions) should be appropriate to the existing character of nearby dwellings. In particular:**
 - New dwellings should not be more than two storeys in height;**
 - Standard designs should be avoided and certainly not grouped together;**
 - Roofs should be pitched to no less than 35° - 45°.**
 - The building of blocks of flats to replace existing dwellings should be discouraged;**
 - Local limestone – for both walls and boundaries should be encouraged;**
 - The following materials are not common in the village and would therefore be considered out of character by the community:**
 - Walls: Reconstituted stone walling, timber faced walls, concrete and calcium silicate brick, half timbered construction, and flint**
 - Roofs: Stone slates, thatch, asbestos cement slate, copper, flat or monopitch.**



Community Action – Recommendations:

The Parish Council to consider further the issue of seeking conservation status for all or part of the village

5. The Community

Although the Leigh Court estate was broken up on the death of Sir Henry Miles in 1915, significant change in the profile of the community only began after the Second World War. The increasing affluence of Bristol and Bristolians, increased car ownership and development of the A369 all contributed to Abbots Leigh's growing popularity as a rural home close to the city. This trend has accelerated over recent years, with almost all infill sites developed and 'incomers' heavily outnumbering the original villagers - only 5% of the present population was born in the village.

The last census of 1991 showed an adult population of 608, of whom 56% are over 50 and 41% are over 60. Nearly a third had lived in the village for 20 years or more.

In terms of employment, our survey shows that 55% are employed or self-employed, of whom the majority work in Bristol and travel there by car - only 4% regularly use the bus service. Of the balance most are retired. There are few opportunities for local employment.

Since the village is only 2 miles from Clifton and 2.5 miles from Pill, the requirements of most residents can be readily met. Particularly as car ownership is on a rising trend - 71% of households admit to 2 or more cars today, compared with 57% in 1991.

A hundred years ago the village enjoyed a coffee shop, a butchers, a village tennis court, police houses and a police station, a post office, a school room (the primary school was built in 1923 and demolished in 1992). What is left now is the church, the old school field for recreation, The George Inn, a nursing home, a cricket club (barely supported by the

residents) a village hall and skittle alley. A mobile library calls regularly. Lack of gas and mains drainage is seen by many as a blessing and an impediment to further development.

Whilst there is a wide variety of social activities on offer in the village now - keep fit, bridge, amateur dramatics, painting, regular civic society socials, gardening club, coffee mornings - to name but a few, the results of our survey show considerable nostalgia for the past.



The vast majority of residents love living in the village and most of them will retire here. There are, however, a number of repeated concerns, besides the overwhelming concern regarding the growth of traffic on the A369.

In no particular order, the concerns identified in the survey, may be summarised as follows:

1. The village, whilst friendly and sociable, is not as cohesive as it could be. One of the contributors to this situation is seen to be the lack of linking footpaths between the roads in the village, e.g. Blackmoor Rd / Church Rd and Dennyview Rd/Sandy Lane, apart from via the A369 itself;
2. With the loss of the school and the village shop, opportunities for informal socialising are limited;
3. Since a new village shop (strongly supported) is unlikely to be any more viable than the last one, there is some support for a regular mini-bus service to Clifton - both for those who choose not to drive and for those who dislike trying to park in Clifton;

Half the adult population confirmed access to E-mail and the web, which no doubt explains the level of support for an Abbots Leigh web site. Whilst the survey also revealed substantial resistance to harnessing computer technology, the tide of progress seems

irresistible.

The benefits of a web site - which opened in May 2001 - are seen to be:

- up to the minute information on village activities
- an adjunct to the Link (Parish newsletter) & notice board;
- a facility for various bodies, Parish Council, Civic Society, etc to canvass the village on local issues;
- an opportunity for individuals to influence the events and issues of the day.

Planning and Other Development - Recommendations:

1. **Plans involving the creation or enhancement of facilities which would serve the whole community (e.g. tennis courts, tele-cottage) should be sympathetically considered .**

Community Action - Recommendations:

1. *All opportunities for re-instating linking footpaths and creating new footpaths across the village should be seriously examined.*
2. *Any plans for a shop/post office (or possibly a mobile option) should be actively considered.*
3. *The village hall should enhance its facilities further (e.g. bigger oven, retractable projector screen, loop audio system) and expand its role as a social meeting place for all ages.*
4. *The provision of a mini-bus service to Clifton should be carefully re-examined.*
5. *Support of the village web site should be actively encouraged and consideration given to the need for communal IT facilities or tele-cottage.*

6. Traffic and Movement

Although one of the dominant characteristics of the parish is its division by the A369, away from this there is a quiet network of country lanes, which are adequate for light use by motor traffic and are often enjoyed by walkers, cyclists and horse riders.

Most people who work outside the village use a car to commute; there is some inward commuting too. There is a frequent bus route through Abbots Leigh along the A369. This goes to Bristol bus station and to Pill and Portishead, where there are shops and libraries. There is no direct bus route to Clifton, which is favoured by many residents, because of the weight limit on the Suspension Bridge. Overall, there is a high level of dependence on the car.

A369

Residents are worried about traffic safety, particularly on the A369. In May 2000, in the morning peak hour, over 2000 vehicles passed through the village. Many people consider that the 40 mph limit through the village is too high and would be pleased if this were reduced. There is concern that the present limit is exceeded by many drivers and that not enough is done to prevent this.

There are nine junctions with the A369 within the parish. At several of these (particularly Manor Road) sight-line distances are below those recommended for a 40 mph limit. Forward visibility at the crest of the hill is lower than is appropriate for a 40 mph limit. However, a possible solution is seen as reducing speeds rather than increasing sight-lines.



The number and size of heavy trucks also concerns residents. The road at the crest of the hill is too narrow for two trucks to pass safely and widening the road is not a solution because there are houses on each side.

Any additional development within the Parish would increase traffic pressures on the A369 and exacerbate existing problems.

Through traffic on the A369 could be reduced by establishing a Bristol Park & Ride at Portbury and/or by opening up the Portishead rail link to passengers.

Cyclists

There is a new off-road path through to Ashton Court and Clifton. If we really want to cater for cyclists, then there should be a link from Abbots Leigh to the Avon cycleway at Pill. This would need a new crossing near Dennyview Road.

Pedestrians

Pedestrians can safely cross the A369 near the crossroads. There is no provision for pedestrians or cyclists crossing near Home Farm Road, Sandy Lane or Dennyview Road, although the footpath is on the opposite side of the A369. A new crossing is required near Dennyview Road.

Abbots Leigh is popular with walkers. This is a benefit to the village and should be encouraged by ensuring public rights of way are maintained in good condition.

Planning and Other Development - Recommendations

- 1. Measures to reduce speed limits through the village should be investigated and implemented as resources allow.**
- 2. The Highways Authority to be asked to consider the use of a low noise surface when replacing the existing road surface on the A369.**
- 3. Pedestrian/cycle crossing facilities should be installed on the A369 and Footway/cycleway improvements be considered to facilitate movements between Dennyview Road and Blackmoor Road.**
- 4. The new cycle path from Clifton and Ashton Court should be extended to link with the Avon cycle path at Pill.**



Community Action - Recommendations:

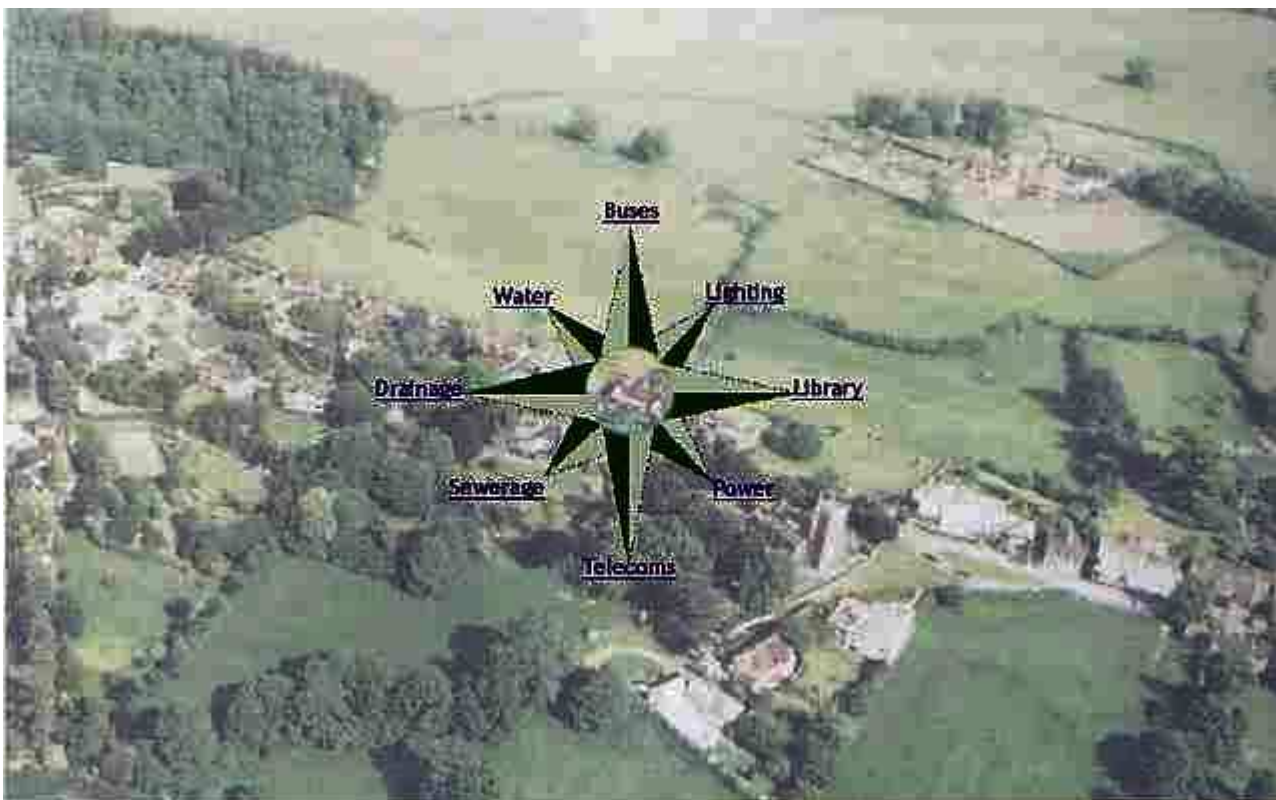
- 1. The community will seek to review all strategic possibilities which could lead to the reduction/elimination of heavy lorry traffic on the A369.*
- 2. Landowners should be encouraged to keep footpaths open and fully maintained.*
- 3. The setting up Bristol 'Park & Ride' near the M5 should be given to actively supported as proposed in the Local Plan.*

4. *The village, through the Parish Council, should support the current efforts to promote the re-opening of the Portishead railway line for passengers.*
5. *There should be a review of road signs and street furniture within the Parish to reduce clutter.*
6. *Local Authorities should maintain public rights of way on their land.*

7. Services

For a village so near to Bristol, Abbots Leigh is very rural with regard to services. There is no mains sewerage or gas supply nor cable television and many groups of properties are well separated, making the potential provision of these services quite expensive.

Properties have septic tanks for sewerage and use oil, electricity, liquefied gas or solid fuel for cooking and heating.



Water - Abbots Leigh has a very good water supply both in terms of quality and pressure. Some lead service pipes have been replaced recently but in any case the water is treated to reduce any harmful effects from the lead service pipes. There are no water towers, overground pipes or pumping stations within the village that might spoil the views.

Electricity and Telephone - Quality of supply of both these services is good. Most of the main high voltage electricity supplies and telephone cables are buried underground along the main road. However, the low voltage electricity lines and services and the telephone distribution poles and services are very visible. These two overhead systems form quite a tangled 'wirescape' in most of the village. It is expensive to bury existing overhead utilities largely because of the cost of excavation and reinstatement.

Potential Improvements

Two places where the undergrounding of overhead electricity and telephone services would be most beneficial are at the George Inn and at the Church.

- At the George Inn crossroads, a collection of poles, columns and signs has built up over the years which collectively spoil what would otherwise be an attractive location. The removal of electricity and telephone poles would go a long way to improving the scene at this location.
- When new building development takes place, adjacent electricity and telephone lines should be placed underground where feasible.
- At the Church the electricity line and the telephone services spoil what is a splendid location with good views of both the Church itself and the longer distance.

New Development

Electricity supplies on new developments are by underground cables as a matter of general policy by the distribution company. Likewise BT provides new properties with underground services. Whenever feasible existing services adjacent to new development should be placed underground.

Sewerage – Properties rely on private septic tanks which have generally been successful.

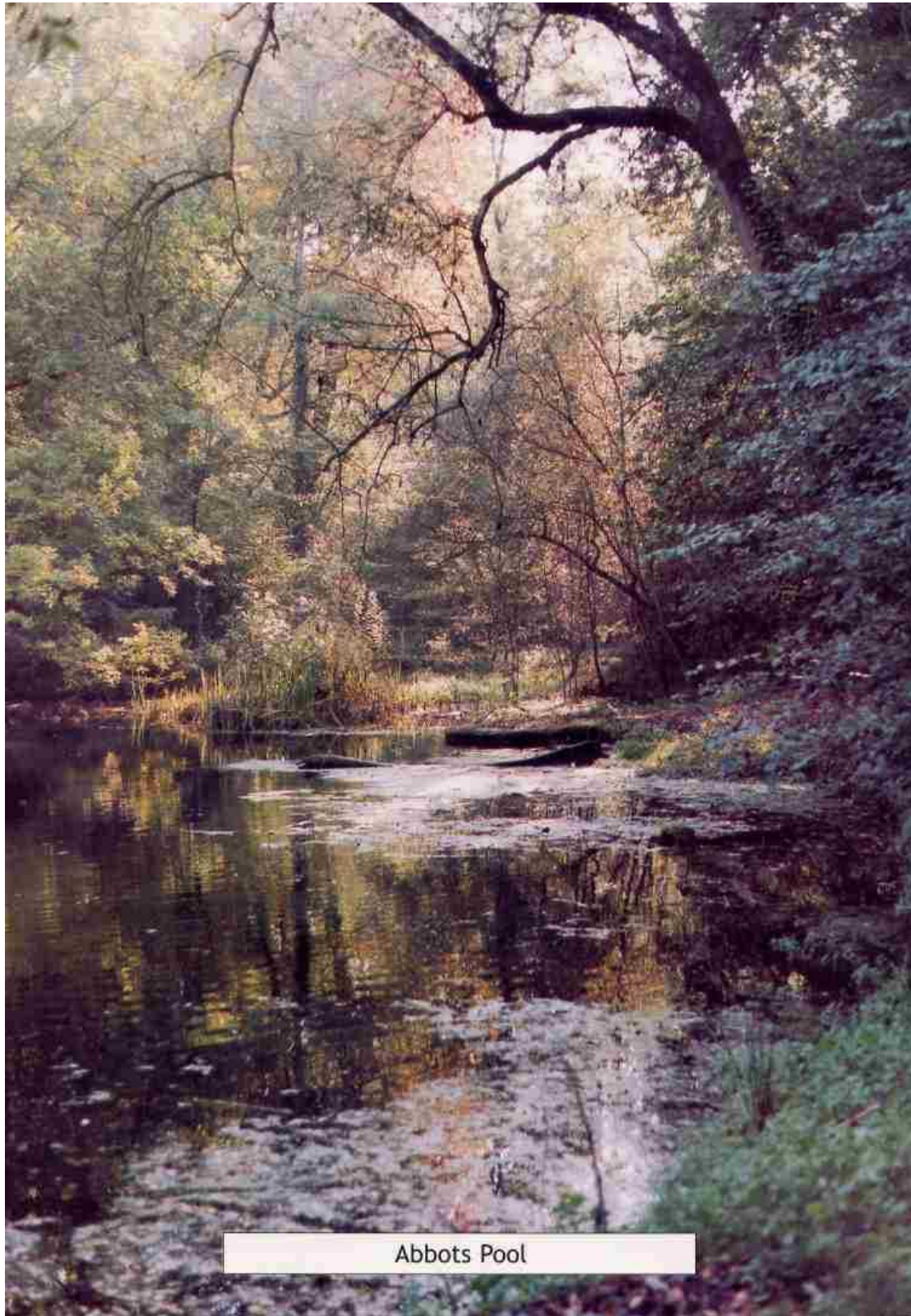
New Development - Until recent changes in legislation the lack of mains drainage inhibited new development. Wessex Water can now require developers to deal with sewage by a mini drainage scheme at the developers' own expense.

Planning and Other Development - Recommendations:

- 1. When new building development takes place, adjacent electricity and telephone lines should be placed underground where feasible.**

Community Action - Recommendations:

- 1. The relevant utilities - Western Power Distribution and BT - should be encouraged to place underground the lines and services adjacent to the Church and the George Inn.*
- 2. Householders should co-operate with the electricity and telephone utilities to facilitate the undergrounding of services and to grant any necessary wayleaves.*
- 3. Householders must ensure that discharge from their septic tanks does not run on to footpaths or roads or otherwise cause offence. (Small high performance packed sewage treatment plants are now available for domestic applications).*
- 4. The Parish Council should oppose the erection of any mobile phone towers or any other structures which affect the rural character of the countryside around the parish.*



8. Summary of Planning and other Development Recommendations

The Natural Environment:

- 1. Support the Green Belt as currently defined in the North Somerset Local Plan in**

accordance with policies GRB/1, GRB/3 and GRB4.

2. Important views of, within and from the village should be safeguarded.
 - Views over the Severn to Wales as seen from Church Road, Manor Road, Harris Lane.
 - Views to Home Farm and Leigh Woods from Church Road and the old school playing field
 - Views towards Failand from Sandy Lane and the A369
 - Views from Home Farm towards Church Road
3. Any development should respect the open rural character of the landscape.

The Built Environment:

1. The existing settlement boundary, as defined in the North Somerset Local Plan, should be maintained to protect the character of the village.
2. Overall, the sense of spaciousness and privacy should be preserved. This means no over-dense infilling or squeezing in of out-of-scale development.
3. Existing natural stone structures, including boundary walls and agricultural buildings (whether redundant or not) should be retained or incorporated into new development and new plots should be required to have boundaries of natural stone whenever possible.
4. Newly built garages and car parking areas should be unobtrusive. Blocks of garages should be avoided.
5. The mixture of large and small, intermingled properties should be continued, against separate enclaves of such property types.
6. Avoid Abbots Leigh becoming "suburban" through inappropriate development.
7. Homes and gardens should remain private places in accord with Policy RL/1.
8. The scale, design and materials of any refurbishment, redevelopment or new development (including extensions) should be appropriate to the existing character of nearby dwellings. In particular:
 - New dwellings should not be more than two storeys in height;
 - Standard designs should be avoided and certainly not grouped together;
 - Roofs should be pitched to no less than 35° - 45°.
 - The building of blocks of flats to replace existing dwellings should be discouraged;
 - Local limestone – for both walls and boundaries should be encouraged;

- The following materials are not common in the village and would therefore be considered out of character by the community:
 - Walls: Reconstituted stone walling, timber faced walls, concrete and calcium silicate brick, half timbered construction, and flint
 - Roofs: Stone slates, thatch, asbestos cement slate, copper, flat or monopitch.

The Community:

1. Plans involving the creation or enhancement of facilities which would serve the whole community (e.g. tennis courts, tele-cottage) should be sympathetically considered .

Traffic and Movement:

1. Measures to reduce speed limits through the village should be investigated and implemented as resources allow.
2. The Highways Authority to be asked to consider the use of a low noise surface when replacing the existing road surface on the A369.
3. Pedestrian/cycle crossing facilities should be installed on the A369 and Footway/cycleway improvements be considered to facilitate movements between Dennyview Road and Blackmoor Road.
4. The new cycle path from Clifton and Ashton Court should be extended to link with the Avon cycle path at Pill.

Services:

1. When new building development takes place, adjacent electricity and telephone lines should be placed underground where feasible.



PROCESS

This village character statement has been prepared by the residents of the Parish of Abbots

Leigh. The Civic Society initiated its preparation with the full support of the Parish Council.

The idea was first put to residents in the Parish at a special meeting organised by the Civic Society in November 1999 which was attended by 65 people. A vote was taken and the motion to go forward with the Character Statement was overwhelmingly approved. Two half day workshops were held later in November and early December, during the first of which groups carried out a photographic survey of the parts of village which were of special interest. They met together at the second workshop to decide the themes to be contained within the VCS.

An update on the progress of the VCS was given to the Civic Society AGM in January 2000.

A group of about 25 people agreed to be involved in carrying the document forward and they attended 11 workshops. An editorial group was chosen and the different sections of the statement were allocated to teams who then prepared drafts.

In the meantime, a questionnaire was developed and circulated to everyone in the Parish in July, 2000. A total of 197 people responded representing 43 of the adult population and 55 of households. The results were incorporated by the team into the various recommendations within the VCS.

The key planning and other development recommendations were put before the village at the Civic Society's AGM in January 2001. The draft VCS was subsequently published on the church notice board and on the Parish website and feedback requested.

After taking into account all the comments received, the final document was submitted to the planning department of North Somerset Council in October 2001 and adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance on 6th December 2001. It will in future be used by them when deciding planning applications and by the residents of the Parish when considering alterations to their properties.

Acknowledgements:

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