

March 2004

## The Church Stretton Area Partnership



## Church Stretton Area Strategic Action Plan



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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The market town of Church Stretton is located beneath the Long Mynd in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It has long been a magnet for both tourists and retirees.

The town acts as a service centre for the many surrounding villages and hamlets, particularly those in Apedale and on the northern fringes of the Long Mynd.

There is a strong desire on the part of the local community to preserve what is best about Church Stretton and its hinterland. However, social and economic change takes place in all communities. This strategy is designed to recognise that change and to shape it to reflect the expressed needs and desires of the local community.

### ***Economy***

Church Stretton has a large number of small companies, many of which are lifestyle businesses, and a limited number of large ones. A key issue is the need for further land to be allocated for light industrial expansion, access to broadband, the need to provide training and retain residents with craft level skills within the town and to develop the area as a tourism centre.

### ***Social Issues***

Church Stretton has an ageing population. Young people move away for education and employment and many never return. Both young people and those with young families find it difficult to find accommodation suitable for their needs in the town as there is a shortage of properties to rent, starter homes, and second stage homes i.e. those suitable for couples with young families. In addition there is a lack of indoor sports and leisure facilities.

### ***Accessibility to Transport and Services***

Accessibility to transport and services in the rural areas is very poor. There are very few shops, post offices or public houses in the villages and little public transport. East-west communications are particularly poor. In the town and in the hinterland disabled access needs to improve.

### ***Environment***

Church Stretton is located in the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which is reflected in the ownership of part of the Long Mynd by the National Trust. However, there is some evidence of landscape degradation caused by too many visitors using the same paths. In addition the local townscape is in need of improvement both in terms of building and landscape maintenance.

### **Vision**

In response to these issues the Church Stretton Area Partnership have developed the following vision.

#### **Long Mynd Living – an inspiring and thriving environment**

The key objectives are:

- To improve the attractiveness of the Church Stretton area as a place to live by increasing the supply of affordable housing and housing to rent, and by increasing the range and quality of leisure facilities

- To ensure that the economic base of the Church Stretton area is strengthened by retaining local companies and providing land for expansion, by strengthening the town as a retail destination and by increasing the quality and scale of the tourist infrastructure
- To extend the range of cultural events and learning in the Church Stretton area.
- To increase access to transport and services in the rural areas of Apedale and around the Long Mynd
- To improve the quality of the built environment by enhancing town and village landscapes, traffic management, environmental improvements and recycling.

This is intended to shape the future development of Church Stretton for the next ten years.

### **Key Projects**

In order to make the vision into a reality the Partnership have identified the following key projects, which are listed by theme.

#### ***Economy***

- Land for employment and business expansion
- Access to broadband
- Enhanced education and training provision locally
- Development of tourism by means of a package of measures to enhance this key sector of the local economy

#### ***Social Issues***

- Provision of land for affordable housing
- Indoor leisure and sports centre to be developed and run in partnership with Church Stretton School
- Community chest to fund community activities and projects

#### ***Accessibility to Transport and Services***

- Church Stretton Ring and Ride

#### ***Environment***

- Town development and traffic management plan
- Pride of Place scheme for environmental improvements
- Church Stretton recycling centre.

**1. CHURCH STRETTON AND ITS HINTERLAND**

Church Stretton is a market town of 4186 inhabitants which lies alongside the A49 Shrewsbury to Ludlow road, which is the main north-south route through the Welsh borders. It is the second largest town in South Shropshire. Its location in the most scenically dramatic part of the Shropshire hill country is highly attractive, with the mass of the Long Mynd forming a backdrop to the town to the west and Caer Caradoc, a volcanic outcrop, dominating the skyline to the east. Because of this high quality physical environment the town has long been a magnet for tourists and retirees from the West Midlands and further afield.

The town serves as a local service centre for the many surrounding villages and hamlets. These include those that are sited along the A49, those around the Long Mynd itself and those in Apedale, the rural area which extends east of Church Stretton to the foot of Wenlock Edge, which provides a natural physical barrier. A map of the area is included in Appendix I, and a statistical profile in Appendix II. Set out below is a summary of the salient points.

**1.1 Economy**

The economy of Church Stretton is dominated by the retail and wholesale sector, but education, health and social work, real estate and manufacturing are all significant employers. Generally skill levels are high with only 10% of the workforce being semi-skilled or unskilled manual workers. In the area as a whole there are around 200 businesses (Chamber of Trade Directory 2001), with half of these being located in the town centre. Businesses are small concerns, with only two companies employing over 50 people. One of these, Polymer Laboratories Limited, has a highly educated workforce, with over 60% of the 120 employees being graduates and 25% of those having Ph.Ds.

Amongst the working age population there is a high degree of outcommuting to work, accounting for 70% of this group. In Church Stretton between 50% and 57% of residents are employed although this rises to 60.4% in Lawley and 64.4% in Apedale. This compares with a national figure for England and Wales of 60.6% and 61.5% for South Shropshire (Source 2001 Census). This is reflective of the fact that Church Stretton itself has a large number of elderly and retired residents. In Church Stretton North they account for 32.2% of residents and 24.9% in Church Stretton South. This compares to 18.9% for South Shropshire and 13.6% for England and Wales.

	<b>Church Stretton North</b>	<b>Church Stretton South</b>	<b>Apedale</b>	<b>Lawley</b>	<b>South Shropshire</b>	<b>England and Wales</b>
<b>% employed</b>	50.6	57.0	64.4	60.4	61.5	60.6
<b>% retired</b>	32.2	24.9	17.4	12.7	18.9	13.6

The high percentage of elderly people is mostly due to retirees settling in the area. However it is also due to the fact that young people, especially those with higher level qualifications, leave the area in search of work and affordable housing.

Tourism, as reflected in employment in hotels and catering, is at 7.74% of the workforce much higher than the England and Wales figure of 4.76%. However the industry was very badly affected by the Foot and Mouth crisis and seems not to be realising its potential.

This has also been a major factor in the decline of agriculture.

The trend towards Church Stretton becoming increasingly a retirement and dormitory town will continue unless remedial action is taken.

**1.2 Social Issues**

Church Stretton, especially Church Stretton South, ranks well in terms of the Index of Multiple Deprivation. However in terms of access to services Apedale is the 231<sup>st</sup> most deprived out of 8414

wards in the whole of England. This is reflected in the absence of local retail outlets, post offices, only two public houses and a very inadequate transport system.

The population of the area is stable, despite the incomers, within Church Stretton, there being only a 0.6% increase in population between the 1991 and 2001 censuses. As stated earlier the local population has significantly more elderly members than that for England and Wales. Conversely there are fewer young people than in England and Wales with the exception of Apedale which, with 21.2% of the population under 16, is above the England and Wales average of 20.2%. In contrast, in Church Stretton North only 11.5% of the population is under 16, whilst in Church Stretton South it rises to 15.8%.

	Church Stretton North	Church Stretton South	Apedale	Lawley	England and Wales
<b>% under 16 years</b>	11.5	15.8	21.2	16.4	20.2
<b>% 20-29 years</b>	4.9	6.0	6.0	7.1	12.6

The area is losing people in the 20-29 age group. These account for 12.6% in England and Wales, but only 4.9% in Church Stretton North (down from 8.9% in 1991), 6% in Church Stretton South (down from 9.7%) 6% in Apedale (down from 12.8%) and 7.1% in Lawley (down from 11.4%). This reflects a change which is occurring in South Shropshire as a whole and is caused by young people leaving the area for further and higher education, and then not returning due to the lack of jobs and affordable housing.

This process is accentuated by the fact that the local population is well educated and hence mobile in employment terms. Of people aged 16 to 74, 23.1% had no qualifications compared to a figure for England and Wales of 29.1% (2001 Census). In contrast 29.5% of Church Stretton residents, 27% of Apedale residents and 25.6% of those in Lawley have attained Level 4 / 5 qualifications which indicates a degree or equivalent. Contrastingly the figure for England and Wales is 19.8%. Local schools are considered to be good but the secondary school lacks a 6<sup>th</sup> form so that people seeking higher level qualifications commute to other centres such as Shrewsbury or Ludlow, or move out of the area completely.

This pattern is a very common one in the Marches where educated people leave the area to pursue their careers, but often return when they retire.

In terms of house prices in the last three years, Church Stretton has had consistently higher prices than the West Midlands as a whole. The costs of all types of property are above the national average with the exception of flats and maisonettes, exactly the type of properties which first time buyers might be attracted to. In this sector the problem is not price but lack of supply. Analysis of council tax bands as a proxy for value reveals that over 60% of properties are in tax bands D and above, with around 23% being in Band E alone and a further 13% in Band F. Hence the availability of properties at the lower end of the market is strictly limited.

Moreover there is very little housing to rent for those who cannot afford to buy. No less than 82.3% of properties in Church Stretton and 78.1% in Apedale are owner occupied compared to a figure for England and Wales of 68.9%. Social renting accounts for around 9% of properties compared to 19.2% in England and Wales, whilst private renting accounts for 6.6% of properties in Church Stretton. In Lawley social renting falls to 4.6% but private renting is way above the national average at 17.7%.

This shortage of houses and other properties to rent is reflected in Housing Association statistics which show that there are 173 Association properties in Church Stretton and a further 22 in the hinterland. However there are 237 applicants for social housing, 187 of whom are classed as being in housing need.

Hence there is a double problem. People who wish to buy at the lower end of the housing market cannot do so because of the absence of suitable properties and hence settle in nearby communities such as Shrewsbury; meanwhile the needs of those who cannot afford to buy are not being met either.

In terms of social and sporting facilities, Church Stretton and its hinterland reveals a contrasting picture. There is a very vibrant community life with a large number of social and sports clubs and a high level of volunteering. Indeed the volunteers, many linked to the Mayfair Centre, provide transport, social and care services, and in many ways fill the gaps left by the lack of public provision. In terms of recreation, there are outdoor facilities such as football and cricket pitches and a golf course, but some of these are poorly maintained. The Sports Pavilion is in need of replacement. There is very limited indoor provision. There is no sports and leisure centre in the town. There is a small swimming pool but it is located with St Lawrence's CE Primary School and consequently opening times are limited, and staffing is a problem.

There is a medical practice, two dentists and two pharmacists within the town and a police station which is only open on weekday mornings.

### **1.3 Accessibility to Transport and Services**

Car ownership in the areas of Church Stretton and Apedale is high, with 80% of households in the former area having access to a car and 95% in Apedale. In part the high figure in Apedale reflects the low access to other forms of transport.

Journeys to Shrewsbury and Ludlow to the north and south respectively take around 25 minutes. There is also a north-south railway line which runs from Crewe to Cardiff through Church Stretton. The journey time to Shrewsbury is 15 minutes, where east-west services can be accessed. However trains stop at Church Stretton only every two hours.

East-west communication is poor. To the west the Long Mynd and beyond that the Stiperstones offer major barriers to communication and are only crossed by minor roads. To the east Wenlock Edge forms a barrier, with the only major road running north east through Apedale before climbing Wenlock Edge and heading for the small market town of Much Wenlock. The Shropshire Hills Shuttles provide connections to seven local towns and villages and there are up to eight services a day to some destinations. They stop at a number of local points of interest. However while local people use the service, it is predominantly designed to serve the needs of tourists and only operates on Saturdays, Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays between April and September. This accounts for Apedale emerging as one of the most deprived areas in the country for access to services, a situation which is replicated for the hamlets around the Long Mynd.

Generally accessibility in the area is a problem with even services north-south being poor, and those east-west being very poor indeed.

### **1.4 Environment**

Church Stretton is centrally positioned in the most scenically spectacular part of the Shropshire hill country. It is part of the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty with a substantial part of the Long Mynd being in the ownership of the National Trust. It offers many opportunities for walking and cycling, although care is needed in the Cardingmill Valley and on the Long Mynd to avoid erosion and landscape degradation caused by too many visitors using the same paths. The Shuttle Service described in the previous section enables visitors to get from one location to another on weekends.

Apart from its landscape, the Church Stretton area is a Site of Special Scientific Interest geologically, containing amongst other features volcanic outcrops (Caer Caradoc) and coral reefs (Wenlock Edge). It has hence long been a mecca for geography and geology field trips at school, university and amateur level.

The built environment of Church Stretton is good. The centre is a conservation area containing a number of listed buildings, including many Edwardian style buildings as well as the black and white half-timbered buildings which are characteristic of the area. Unfortunately, with one or two honourable exceptions, modern developments have been unimaginative and not particularly attractive. In addition the environs of the railway station and the industrial estate which adjoins it are particularly ugly. The town has cafes, four pubs and numerous small hotels / B & Bs providing a total of 552 beds in the town and its environs, which serve the tourist trade as well as locals, a range of shops which meet most local needs, and shops selling antiques, including the Church Stretton Antiques Market.

Nearby local attractions include the Acton Scott Farm Museum, Mynderly Stables, Cardingmill Valley, Wenlock Priory, Acton Burnell Castle, the Devil's Chair and the Stiperstones, the lead mines at The Bog and Wilderhope Manor.

Because of the high landscape quality of the area, there is considerable reluctance in policy terms to permit green field developments, with emphasis being placed on the use of brown field sites. Because there are very limited numbers of these, there is considerable pressure to intensify use, for example by redeveloping properties with large gardens so that they can accommodate more dwellings.

## 2. THE CHURCH STRETTON AREA PARTNERSHIP

In order to review the needs of Church Stretton and to drive forward the process of regeneration the Church Stretton Partnership was formed in August 2001. It was established because Church Stretton appeared to have been overlooked in the Market Town Initiative as a joint initiative between Church Stretton Town Council and Church Stretton Chamber of Trade, and has subsequently been made more inclusive with the objective of carrying out a Market Town Healthcheck, as defined in the Countryside Agency Healthcheck Handbook.

The Partnership has no legal status but operates within a written Terms of Reference. Steps are being taken to broaden the membership and define the responsibilities and relationships between the Partnership and the Steering Group, In addition to the Steering Group, the Partnership has a number of working groups, which are theme based.

The Steering Group has been very active both in carrying out public consultations and in identifying projects.

Details of the Partnership are as follows.

### The Steering Group

Currently the membership of the Partnership is reflected in the Steering Group (*at 1<sup>st</sup> March 2004*):

Trevor Davies	Church Stretton Town Council ( <i>until 2003</i> )	Chairman
John Woolmer	Church Stretton Area Tourism Group	Deputy Chairman

### Chairmen of Working Groups

#### Transport and Accessibility

Stuart Wright	Ch St Chamber of Trade ( <i>Chairman</i> )	Estate Agent/Valuer
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#### Social and Community

Alan Fox	Ch St Chamber of Trade	Building Consultant
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#### Local Environment

Barrie Raynor	Stretton Focus Community Magazine	Retired Lecturer
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#### Local Economy

John Woolmer	Ch St Area Tourism Group ( <i>Chairman</i> )	Retired
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### Other Members

Barrie Oxtoby	ex-Project Co-ordinator	Business Consultant
Peter Carty	National Trust	Resident Warden/Manager i/c
Chris Stratton	National Trust	Education Officer
Jacqui Casey	Shrops County Council	Economic Development Section
Samantha Hine	South Shropshire District Council	Regeneration Manager
Jonathan Hyams	Community Council of Shropshire	Community Development Co-ordinator
The Rector	Church Stretton Parish	
Paul Sutton	S. Shropshire Housing Association	Director of Development
Laura Watson	Polymer Laboratories (Large employer)	Marketing Manager
Graham Young	Ch St Town Council	Town Councillor

The Partnership has agreed that membership of the Steering Group can be flexible to suit the needs and opportunities that may arise.

The Working Groups identify possible projects in response to the issues identified in their theme area and then report these to the full Steering Group. Membership is as follows:

**Church Stretton Area Partnership – Membership of The Working Groups**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Background</b>
<b>Social and Community</b>		
Alan Fox	Group Chairman	Building Development Consultant
Paul Sutton		SS Housing Association Director
Meg Bacon		Director, Mayfair Community Centre
Alex Champion		Young person
Sgt John Evans		West Mercia Police – local
David Jandrell		Chairman, Focus Community magazine
Sherrie Leask		School/Community Liaison
Kate Mitchinson		Coordinator, Rural Health Forum
Don Rogers		Local B+B Proprietor
Eileen Woolmer		Education/Community affairs experience
<b>Local Economy</b>		
John Woolmer	Group Chairman	Retired. Deputy Chairman Steering Group.
Charles Wood		Chairman Tourism Group
Simon Whaley		E-business proprietor
Maria Spurling		Local Government Officer
Dave Hills		Housewife. Co-ordinator at Mayfair Centre.
Trevor Johnson		Marketing Director, Alcatel. - Telecomms.
		Retired Banker
<b>Transport &amp; Accessibility</b>		
Stuart Wright	Group Chairman	Local Estate Agent
Basil Hamilton		Retired. RAF Senior Officer
Derek Askew		Retired. Chairman Rail User Group
Rebecca McCulluch		Theatre Nurse
Chris Kolvin		Transport Engineer
<b>Local Environment</b>		
Barrie Raynor	Group Chairman	Retired. University lecturer. Production
Adrian Cullis		Manager Stretton Focus Magazine
Wally Blake		Rural Development Consultant
Martin Taylor-Lee		Assessor Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme
Pat Creeth		Garden/Landscape Contractor
Julie Jordan		Retired Teacher
John Stephens		ex-Sales Coordinator, Polymer Labs
Chris Stratton		Garden/Landscape Designer/Contractor
Cllr John Lloyd		Education Officer National Trust
Paul Westall		District Councillor
Emily Westall		Police Officer
Kate Collins		Local Government Officer
John Greenhough		Teacher
Peter Lord		Retired. Lecturer. Chairman Civic Society
David Ward		Engineer. Now self-employed
Norma Taylor		Retired Postman
	Joint Editor, Focus magazine	

The Steering Group meets regularly to evaluate and direct work on the strategy. Since its formation in August 2001 it has met 30 times.

At present the Partnership is seeking to ensure that the farming community and young people are better represented. Another key partner is The Mayfair Trust, which is situated in the centre of Church Stretton. It was formed in 1997 to provide day care facilities for older people, meals on wheels and bathing / laundry services. It has expanded its activities to provide a Citizens Advice Bureau, IT training facilities for young people, and a variety of health related therapies. It is also a Healthy Living Centre. With 26 staff and 140 volunteers, it is the key voluntary sector agency in the area.

The accountable body for the Partnership is South Shropshire District Council. Samantha Hine, the Regeneration Manager, sits on the Steering Group and provides a link with the local authority and other regional and sub-regional partnerships including the LSP. The Partnership does not have any full time staff, but the District Council has recently recruited a full-time officer, who will provide support to the partnerships in Church Stretton and Bishop's Castle. In addition South Shropshire District Council has just appointed a new tourism officer.

Main contacts for the Partnership are as follows:

Name

Trevor Davies

John Woolmer

Stuart Wright

Alan Fox

Barrie Raynor

Samantha Hine

Barrie Oxtoby

Laura Watson

### 3. NEEDS ANALYSIS

In order to identify the key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in Church Stretton and its hinterland the Partnership has carried out extensive consultations with the local community over the last two years. Details of these are set out in Appendices III, IV and V. In summary these have consisted of:

- Two public meetings in Church Stretton
- A public meeting in Rushbury (Apedale)
- A public meeting in Picklescott (Long Mynd)
- A visioning meeting in Church Stretton
- A questionnaire distributed to local residents
- A business survey aimed at all the businesses in Church Stretton and its hinterland
- Consultations with key stakeholders
- Two consultation events with pupils at Church Stretton School (Secondary).

The key issues are set out by theme as they emerged from the consultation activities.

#### 3.1 Economy

A number of key benefits of being located in Church Stretton emerged from the recent survey of local businesses. Location in relation to customers served was cited by 29 of the 102 businesses which replied to the survey. This reflects the fact that the majority of them are small companies which serve an overwhelmingly local market. In addition the attractions of the area in terms of its surroundings, quality of life and social infrastructure emerged as a plus factor. The quality of education provided locally was also seen as a positive feature, a fact reflected by the desire of people who worked, but did not live in Church Stretton, to send their children to the local schools.

The range of shops in the town centre was also deemed to be good by many residents. Indeed one consultee said that there was no need to shop elsewhere. However a large number of residents, especially the younger ones, felt the facilities were inadequate and that a wider range of clothes shops, fast food outlets, music and computer games shops were needed. In addition some residents felt there was a lack of a good bakery, lack of locally produced produce and an underdeveloped market.

In contrast to the shopping facilities, on which there is at present no overall consensus, there are a number of issues which are seen as economic weaknesses and on which there is consensus. These emerged from the business survey (Appendix III).

Local businesses complained about the quality, cost and especially the availability of a local workforce. Polymer Laboratories, for example, complained that it was difficult to get administrative and technical staff, whom they seek to recruit locally. Local residents complained of a lack of jobs for young people, low pay and poor promotion prospects. It was also said that there was a lack of training available locally, with young people post-16 years of age travelling to Shrewsbury or Ludlow for further and higher education. This reinforces the picture of Church Stretton as a town offering few job opportunities, with the result that residents travel out to work and train, thereby denuding the supply of local labour.

Another key weakness cited by many local companies was the poor communications infrastructure both in terms of public transport and in terms of east-west road communications. The effect of this is that companies tend to serve a very local market or serve markets where time and cost of carriage is not a major issue and hence a deterrent to locating in Church Stretton.

While most companies did not see availability of land and premises as a major issue, it is of concern for Polymer Laboratories, the largest employer in the area. Polymer currently occupies 80% of the rented units on the Mynd Industrial Estate for its R and D and electronic assembly activities. In two to four years time Polymer will need to consider bringing these activities together in a new facility, which would accommodate around 50% of its staff, but on present land allocations, these may not be easily accommodated in Church Stretton.

Finally the underdevelopment of the tourist industry was seen as an opportunity for value added tourism. There is a shortage of good hotels and restaurants, a poorly located tourist information centre, poor infrastructure and inadequate levels of promotion of the town and its attractions. There was also a concern that not enough facilities for tourism were being offered by the National Trust on the Long Mynd and that access routes are deteriorating.

Taking threats and opportunities together the key issues which emerge are:

- the threat of the partial loss of a major employer in the town if land for employment expansion is not found. If it is found, the existing premises vacated will provide a supply for other businesses to start up or to move into the town and broaden the employment base
- the ongoing threat that more and more people will seek education, training and employment outside of the area, leading to shortages of labour locally and further development of Church Stretton as a retirement and dormitory community. Conversely an opportunity clearly exists to provide outreach education and training facilities, with the latter linked to the needs of local companies. This could help retain people of working age within the town.
- the threat to the town centre if the range of activities contained within it is not broadened, but the opportunity of attracting more spending by local residents and visitors if it is
- the threat that local tourism will decline without new investment, but the opportunity to attract many more visitors to the town if facilities are enhanced. This reflects the situation in Shropshire as a whole where the County's Economic Development Strategy sees tourism as a key growth area.
- lack of broadband, which is a concern for a number of local companies in the hinterland.

### **3.2 Social Issues**

A strong community spirit and sense of civic pride emerged from the consultation events as a key strength of Church Stretton and the surrounding area. Good schools with good community links also emerged as a strength, together with the low crime rate and very low level of vandalism. Local clubs and societies were seen as a strength, as were voluntary organisations such as The Mayfair Centre. The Skateboard Park and BMX bike track established by the Town Council and voluntary youth action were also appreciated.

The major weakness which was identified was the fact that Church Stretton is becoming more and more a retirement town and lacks young people. This problem is exacerbated by a lack of affordable housing for young people to buy, a severe shortage of second stage housing to buy and a chronic shortage of rental accommodation. The absence of an indoor sports and leisure centre was also seen as a weakness, as was the absence of adequate facilities for young people such as a drop-in centre or youth café. There was also a feeling that the level of policing was inadequate and concern that the police station was unmanned at night and for long periods during daytime.

In terms of threats and opportunities, these emerged as the threat of Church Stretton becoming less and less attractive to younger people due to the lack of affordable houses and a limited range of leisure facilities and the opportunities to broaden the age range of residents and users of the town by:

- building affordable housing, second stage housing and housing to rent
- building an indoor leisure and sports centre
- providing better provision for young people.

These reflect the objectives of the Community Well-Being theme of the South Shropshire Community Strategy.

### **3.3 Accessibility to Transport and Services**

Local residents perceived the strengths of Church Stretton as being good bus and rail links, and the fact that many services were within walking distance. This is not, of course, the case for the surrounding villages, where access to services is very poor.

Weaknesses were varied. Those mentioned by most residents were the absence of adequate transport links going east-west, few buses to the villages or in the evenings and at weekends and trains which were infrequent, overcrowded and often not on time. A number of passenger trains pass through Church Stretton but do not stop. An increase in the frequency of services would enable people to visit Shrewsbury more easily in the day and evening and make more use of the facilities there.

The other weakness which emerged was car parking. Church Stretton has 143 car parking spaces as compared to 578 in Ludlow. It was felt that there was not enough car parking for local people, that there was a lack of free car parking, and that paying car parks were expensive. This was seen as a particular problem for people from the villages who could only access services by car. There was also felt to be a problem caused by too much on street parking of cars and HGVs (mainly from the water bottling plant adjacent to the Town).

Cycle routes were also thought to be inadequate, combined with a lack of places to lock up bikes both in the town and in the Cardingmill Valley. Some residents also felt there was a need to improve the condition of footpaths and improve wheelchair and pushchair access both around the town and to shops and cafes.

In terms of opportunities, it was felt that accessibility could be improved by:

- providing bus services to neighbouring towns such as Telford, Shrewsbury and Ludlow
- providing minibuses services to the local villages
- improving the frequency of rail services to / from Shrewsbury
- providing minibuses services for young people in the evenings and at weekends.

### **3.4 Environment**

Both local residents and businesses are overwhelmingly of the view that the high quality landscape of the Church Stretton area, the attractive town centre, the peaceful environment and the open spaces are the major strength of the area.

The key weaknesses which detracted from this high quality environment were litter and unkempt areas including the condition of the railway station and footbridge. There was also a concern about dog fouling. Lack of dog litter bins and recycling facilities for plastic and cardboard were seen as issues, as well as the lack of recycling bins at homes.

In terms of opportunities it was felt that a major effort to improve the appearance of the town should be made including:

- measures to reduce litter including more litter bins and employment of road sweeping and litter prevention staff, as well as anti-litter education
- resiting and enhancing recycling facilities including community composting
- enhanced ground and verge maintenance especially at the Gateways to the town
- employing a dog / traffic warden
- developing a comprehensive town strategy
- developing a tourism strategy.

#### **4. A VISION FOR THE FUTURE**

In order to encapsulate the objectives of the Strategic Action Plan it is useful to have an overall vision which sums up what the Plan is striving to achieve. For Church Stretton it is:

**Long Mynd Living – an inspiring and thriving environment**

The next section of the plan sets out how this vision will be made a reality. The key objectives are:

- To improve the attractiveness of the Church Stretton area as a place to live by increasing the supply of affordable housing and housing to rent, and by increasing the range and quality of leisure facilities
- To ensure that the economic base of the Church Stretton area is strengthened by retaining local companies and providing land for expansion, by strengthening the town as a retail destination and by increasing the quality and scale of the tourist infrastructure
- To extend the range of cultural events and learning in the Church Stretton area.
- To increase access to transport and services in the rural areas of Apedale and around the Long Mynd
- To improve the quality of the built environment by enhancing town and village landscapes, traffic management, environmental improvements and recycling.

## **5. STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN**

This plan sets out a series of projects in response to the issues identified in the needs analysis. They are grouped by the four Market Town themes of Economy, Social Issues, Accessibility and Environment. For each project the key policy frameworks are identified and potential funding sources indicated.

### **5.1 Projects and Resources**

#### **5.1.1 Economy**

##### **LAND FOR EMPLOYMENT EXPANSION**

At present there is very little vacant industrial land in Church Stretton. Without new land being allocated it will be difficult for new start-up businesses or companies to move into the town, thereby broadening the employment base, or for existing companies to expand. For instance the major employer in Church Stretton, Polymer Laboratories, may require a new facility for its R and D and electronic assembly activities within the next 2 to 4 years at the most if their current rate of growth continues. Without new land being allocated in the town there is a real danger that local firms may not be able to expand and may relocate all or part of their activities elsewhere. A site on the A49 would be ideal to avoid any increase in industrial traffic passing through residential streets.

##### ***Policies***

The relevant policy document here is the draft South Shropshire Local Plan 1996-2011. Policy SDS4 Location of Industrial and Business Development favours development on existing industrial and business sites, other appropriate sites within the development boundaries of settlements, reuse and adaptation of rural buildings amongst others. There is a danger that without a fundamental change or an exception to the South Shropshire draft Local Plan, as well as a flexible interpretation of these policies it will be impossible to accommodate the needs of local companies within Church Stretton.

##### ***Funding***

AWM funding for site acquisition and infrastructure works could be needed. It would fit in with AWM's objective of developing sites in order to create conditions for growth.

##### **BROADBAND**

The absence of Broadband was felt to be a constraint on the development of businesses in Church Stretton and the attraction of new businesses. There have been a number of initiatives locally to get companies and individuals to register their interest in having Broadband with BT. The Church Stretton Area Partnership believes that it is important to obtain Broadband as quickly as possible and plan to work with BT and the Switch on Shropshire project to bring this about.

##### ***Policies***

BT have announced that the exchanges in Church Stretton and Longville will be upgraded to handle broadband. While welcome, this still leaves potential users located out of range of exchanges in need of alternative solutions. The Switch on Shropshire project, which is funded by the European Regional Development Fund and Advantage West Midlands Rural Regeneration Zone funds will allow community groups and businesses in Church Stretton to gain access to broadband. Community groups will be able to bid for funding to create a "broad place". Fully funded by Switch on Shropshire, community groups will be able to use grants for up to five new PCs, internal cabling and broadband connection for two years, provided that the minimum number of people will access the facilities. Funding available for businesses is granted on a matched funding principle. There are three different grants available to businesses:

- £5,000 to become “broadband ready” (PC, network, cabling etc)
- £5,000 for broadband connection for two years
- £9,600 e-commerce grant

Both business and community group applications are considered on a case-by-case basis.

These initiatives could increase the potential of existing businesses and enable self-employed people and new businesses to locate in the area, thereby increasing the stock of local companies.

### ***Funding***

See above.

## **EDUCATION, TRAINING AND LIFE LONG LEARNING**

A key weakness which emerged from the SWOT analysis was the fact that people seeking further and higher education had to travel to Shrewsbury, Ludlow or further afield due to the lack of facilities locally. This has the effect of helping to create a shortage of skilled labour locally as people tend to then obtain jobs from outside of Church Stretton. A possible solution would be to develop outreach facilities, perhaps at Church Stretton School and the Mayfair Centre with the support of Shrewsbury College and Shropshire Learning and Skills Council. This could be linked in with the school’s bid to become a Design Technology College, and also make it easier for it to offer vocational qualifications to pupils. The focus would be on laboratory technician training and training for care home staff. There is a shortage of qualified staff to fill these posts in Church Stretton at present.

### ***Policies***

Shropshire Learning and Skills Council Participation Strategy P3 Maximising Participation commits to reducing barriers to successful participation in learning including those caused by rural issues. The project accords with AWM’s objective of “Promoting a learning and skilful region”.

### ***Funding***

Potentially local colleges and the LSC could fund an initiative of this type.

## **Investment in Tourism**

Church Stretton and its hinterland has long attracted tourists. However there is concern that the tourist infrastructure is poorly developed and that without investment the attraction of the area could diminish especially with respect to less well-known attractions. Progress has been made through volunteer action in organising a Food Fayre, Ale Trail, walking festival, arts festival and other events, but this activity needs to be built upon. As a result the Partnership has identified a number of linked projects to address this opportunity.

## **TOURISM STRATEGY**

There is a need to develop a tourism strategy for Church Stretton building upon both the Shropshire and South Shropshire Tourism Strategies. This would act as a framework for other projects. It would support and give focus to the work of the tourism development officer. This post has just been created by South Shropshire District Council. The lead on strategy production would be taken by the Church Stretton Area Tourism Group, but with support from officers from the district and county councils. Moreover it would need to be tied into the review of the Tourist Information Centres in Shropshire, which is currently underway. Possible elements could include the promotion and packaging of local activity breaks including the promotion of the Long Mynd as the premier walking, riding and biking area of South Shropshire. Another possibility is the creation, along with other local towns, of a South Shropshire Market Towns Discovery Route. The strategy could also contain proposals for improving the tourism infrastructure in the town.

### **Policies**

Any development would need to accord with the Tourism Strategy for Shropshire (May 2003), and for South Shropshire Tourism Strategy, which is in the process of being prepared. In addition the Economic Strategy for Shropshire identifies tourism as a key sector in the County's economy. It would also need to fit in with the regional tourism strategy.

### **Funding**

Direct funding is unlikely to be available but officer support could be provided by district and county council officers.

### **INTEGRATED AND IMPROVED WEBSITE**

Church Stretton has two Websites – [www.churchstretton.co.uk](http://www.churchstretton.co.uk) is active and [www.churchstretton-tourism.co.uk](http://www.churchstretton-tourism.co.uk) has been inactive for six months. A new Website Management Group has been created by, and under the control of, the Town Council with substantial representation from the Tourism Group, to ensure that both residents and tourists are properly supported. The proposed (Mark 2) Website will incorporate the best of the two sites, update the general site style, devolve site content to appropriate owners of that content, automate renewal payments, involve the community in a wide range of activities and issues.

### **Policies**

Church Stretton Town Council is taking the lead on this project. The government has set a target of 2005 for getting all public services on line.

### **Funding**

The cost of developing the new website will be £8,000.

Possible funding sources are Shropshire Business Link, Switch on Shropshire and Advantage West Midlands.

### **TOURIST INFORMATION CENTRE**

The Church Stretton Tourist Information Centre, the only other in South Shropshire being at Ludlow, is currently located in a former school building in a back street away from the centre of the town. It is poorly signposted as a result of which many tourists only find it by chance. It is open for only part of the year although visitors come and walk the hills all year round. The Partnership wish to see the Centre relocated to a more prominent location. Possible sites are on Sandford Avenue, where there may be space in the telephone exchange or police station which are only partially used, at Lions Meadow Car Park in a purpose built facility or in a multi-purpose attraction at the railway station. The Centre would be responsible for promoting the area and providing information on accommodation and recreational activities. If the Centre were relocated it would allow the library, with which it currently shares premises, to be expanded.

### **Policies**

Shropshire County Council has just commissioned a review of all of the Tourist Information Centres in the County. Proposals for the relocation of Church Stretton TIC should be fed into this process.

### **Funding**

Shropshire County Council and South Shropshire District Council are potential funders given the current policy review.

## **CHURCH STRETTON RAILWAY STATION DEVELOPMENT**

As stated earlier, Church Stretton has a poorly located Tourist Information Centre. In addition it lacks a museum and art gallery. Moreover the railway station is run down, unattended, has minimal facilities and does not give a good impression to arrivals in the town. The Partnership have a vision of building a multi-purpose facility at the station to inform, educate and help visitors to the area. The proposed development would include:

- the Tourist Information Centre, biking centre and Shuttle Bus Service
- geology, fauna and flora exhibition
- a Museum of Stretton Life
- an art gallery
- a café for visitors and rail users
- public conveniences (no current provision)
- car parking and coach drop-off point
- affordable accommodation for the manager of the complex.

In addition there would be landscaping to improve the overall appearance of the site and the station.

If this project progressed the Tourist Information Centre could move there, following temporary relocation to a site on the main street (Sandford Avenue).

The first step in progressing this project would be to commission consultants to carry out a feasibility study and produce a business plan for the proposed development.

### ***Policies***

Key policies with respect to this proposed development are the draft South Shropshire Local Plan 1996-2011, the Tourism Strategy for Shropshire (May 2003) and the Local Transport Plan for Shropshire 2001 / 2002 to 2006 / 2007 Objective 9.5 Improving Infrastructure at Stations.

### ***Funding***

Given the range of activities to be included in the centre, a series of different funding sources could be accessed. They are:

**Feasibility Study:** Funding for this could possibly come from Advantage West Midlands, with contributions from the County Council, South Shropshire District Council, Arriva Trains Wales and Network Rail.

**Tourist Information Centre:** Rural Enterprise Scheme. It may be possible to access funding for "encouragement of tourist and craft activities". Shropshire County Council and South Shropshire District Council are also potential funding sources.

**Museum:** National Heritage Fund. The Local Heritage Initiative is a national grant scheme that helps local groups to investigate, explain and care for their local landscape, landmarks, traditions and culture.

**Art Gallery:** Arts Council. The application process for capital grants is now closed. The Partnership may be able to access funding under the grants for individuals, organisations and national touring.

## **YOUTH HOSTEL**

At present the use of Church Stretton by walkers and cyclists is limited by the lack of a youth hostel. The nearest ones are Wilderhope Manor to the east, which had 8038 visitors staying overnight in 2000 / 2001, and Bridges in the west, on the other side of the Long Mynd to Church Stretton. Bridges had 3124 overnight visitors in 2000 / 2001. The distance between the two hostels is 13 miles, including the ascent of the Long Mynd. Walkers and cyclists may prefer a Church Stretton start or end point for their journeys. The Partnership has held preliminary discussions with the Youth Hostels Association who are keen to open a hostel or other facility in Church Stretton, and help identify a suitable building for conversion or a suitable partner.

### ***Policies***

In January 2003 the YHA launched the YHA Enterprise Initiative aimed at establishing new YHA accommodation at key locations in partnership with businesses and organisations. These include existing owners of guest houses and bed and breakfast accommodation, who could join the YHA network, and farmers wishing to diversify their activities. The Welsh Marches are a target area for expansion. In addition DEFRA's Rural Enterprise Scheme (RES) offers funding for the conversion of farm buildings to provide accommodation such as bunk beds and hostels.

### ***Funding***

Funding would be provided by the YHA and local businesses working in partnership. Funding would also be available under the Rural Enterprise Scheme.

## **5.1.2 Social Issues**

### **LAND FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING**

The needs analysis identified a shortage of affordable housing and housing to rent as a major factor in discouraging younger people to settle in the town. The draft South Shropshire Local Plan 1996-2011 identifies Church Stretton as one of the seven towns in the district for further housing development. It is assumed in the Council's Urban Housing Capacity Assessment that 150 dwellings can be accommodated in Church Stretton by sub-division of large sites, flats over shops and development of commercial sites.

It seems unlikely that this number of dwellings can be accommodated given that there is already a shortage of commercial sites. It is therefore proposed that part of a site at the rear of Church Stretton School and extending eastwards to the railway line and north to Spring Bank Farm should be released for housing. This would be for a mixed use development comprising first and second stage affordable homes for sale and to rent, live / work space, open space, water features, landscape corridors and footpaths providing links to schools and the surrounding area.

There would be land for sports and leisure facilities with developers contributing to the cost.

Other appropriate sites would also be sought within the confines of the existing settlement boundaries.

### ***Policies***

The key policy document is the draft South Shropshire Local Plan 1996-2011. Church Stretton is designated as an area for housing development. However the Joint Structure Plan requires the building of 190 houses a year. Currently completion rate has run at 234 dwellings a year for the last 6 years. Hence the District Council is under pressure to reduce the rate of house building by deleting some sites and phasing development on others. The South Shropshire Community Strategy contains a target of providing at least 1050 affordable homes between 1996 and 2011. This is also included in the County Council's Community Strategy "improving the quality of life in Shropshire".

### ***Funding***

Funding for this development would come from private developers and the Housing Corporation.

### **INDOOR LEISURE AND SPORTS CENTRE**

There is at present no indoor leisure and sports centre in Church Stretton, although there is limited access to school facilities. This detracts from the attractiveness of the town especially for younger residents. The Partnership would like to see a centre developed adjacent to Church Stretton School, and in partnership with it. This would be used by school pupils, local residents and tourists. A fitness suite could be incorporated for use by both younger and older residents, some of whom would come via GP referrals and would link with the Healthy Living programmes of the Mayfair Centre. The school is bidding for Design Technology College status. If it is successful more space will be needed to house the new activities. This would be possible if the space used by the gymnasium is converted with facilities for sport being replaced by the new centre, which would be jointly managed with the school.

### ***Policies***

Again the key policy document is the draft South Shropshire Local Plan 1996-2011, Policy AC3 Community and Recreational Facilities states that development will be permitted for new community and recreational facilities where they are in accordance with the location, siting and design policies of the Plan provided that they reflect the needs of the local community, fit in with the scale and character of the area and are located in or adjacent to the area they serve. This clearly does not present a problem, indeed it is an opportunity to develop facilities on the School site in partnership with the School, if additional land is gifted from the proposed housing development.

### ***Funding***

If the land to the rear of Church Stretton School is developed, it is assumed that the developer will contribute to the development costs. Sport England is another potential funding source. In addition if the facilities are also available for school use, then Shropshire County Council, as the Local Education Authority might make a contribution.

### **COMMUNITY CHEST**

Church Stretton already has a vibrant community life. Examples of this are the high levels of volunteering, the Arts Festival, the Food Fayre & Ale Trail and the Christmas Lights. In order to build upon these activities and fund new ones both in Church Stretton and the surrounding villages the Partnership is proposing the creation of a Community Chest. This will provide small grants of up to £1,000 for community activities.

### ***Policies***

There is a history of Church Stretton residents raising significant amounts of money within a short period. £32,000 was raised for tiered seating at Church Stretton School and £67,000 for a youth minister linked to St Laurence Church. An example of this type of scheme was that funded by the MTI programme in Craven Arms, where the community chest gives grants for community buildings, environmental improvements and recreational projects.

### ***Funding***

The Partnership plans to set up a separate charity for members of the public to subscribe as benefactors to the fund.

### **5.1.3 Accessibility to Transport and Services**

#### **CHURCH STRETTON RING AND RIDE**

The hinterland of Church Stretton has some of the poorest access to transport and other services anywhere in the country. This was an issue which emerged at three initial public meetings and from 238 returned questionnaires. East-west communications are particularly bad. The Partnership wish to establish a Church Stretton Ring and Ride scheme. The aim would be to operate three vehicles, a 5-seater and a 14-seater, acquired as part of the project and a 9-seater vehicle belonging to the County Social Services Department. There are long periods in the day when this vehicle is not in use and is available for other purposes. The aim would be to provide transport for people in the rural areas to access the services in Church Stretton such as shops, recreational, medical and social services. Additionally it could be made available to bring less active elderly residents from the suburbs to the services of the Town. Moreover the service would enable pupils from the villages to access the after-school club at Church Stretton School, and the Mayfair Centre.

A pilot scheme, was set up by the Mayfair Centre to provide services of this type, known locally as the "Snowdrop Scheme". It illustrated the need for more rural services. Transport would be provided on demand. This seems to be a more effective way of meeting rural needs as in many areas of the country where new rural bus services have been laid on they are poorly used because the services do not coincide with when potential customers wish to travel.

#### ***Policies***

Objective 7.2 of the Local Transport Plan for Shropshire calls for an inclusive bus network and recognises that services are needed in rural areas to prevent them becoming isolated. There is a specific mention in the plan of demand responsive bus services of the type proposed.

#### ***Funding***

There are two potential sources of funding. Rural Transport Grants are available to assist communication in rural areas including funding for bus services on demand. The other source of funding is the Rural Development Scheme, where support is available for the provision of basic services for the rural economy. After drafting this Strategic Action Plan £261,650 of funding for four years has been made available from the Bus Challenge Schemes 2003.

### **5.1.4 Environment**

#### **TOWN DEVELOPMENT PLAN**

The built environment of Church Stretton is very attractive. However, opinion is divided on the vibrancy of the shopping centre, and there is clearly a danger of increased competition from neighbouring town centres and from on-line shopping. Moreover the High Street is becoming blighted by shops being converted to office or residential use. Shop frontage and signage are poor and are in need of improvement. There are also traffic management issues within Church Stretton itself and the Partnership feel that there is also a need to tackle the issue of traffic and car parking in the other Stretton communities. Designated car parking spaces in the centre are only 149. These are required for residents, people working and visitors. There is no pedestrian area in the town and traffic calming is also needed in some places. In addition the lack of a suitable coach park reduces the number of visitors who are dropped off to enable them to visit the centre of the town. The Partnership wish to commission consultants to produce a comprehensive town development and traffic management plan to improve the attractiveness and convenience of Church Stretton both for local people and tourists. The plan should also include the provision of disabled access.

#### ***Policies***

The South Shropshire Local Plan 1996-2011 Policy E4 lays down the guidelines for development in conservation areas. In addition there is Supplementary Planning Guidance for Church Stretton. This will shape the Town Development Plan. The Local Transport Plan for Shropshire also has the aim of reducing the impact of cars and traffic on town centre roads, and reducing unnecessary traffic on roads elsewhere in the town. A number of towns in Shropshire have already benefited from schemes of this type under the Integrated Transport Plan.

### ***Funding***

Funding is needed to carry out the town development and traffic management study. Advantage West Midlands is a possible source of funding for this.

This initiative could be overseen by a Town Manager / Warden, who would subsequently become responsible for carrying through the changes with the Partnership and the Town and District Councils and contributing to the ongoing appearance of Church Stretton. Changes to council tax charges on second homes, which are at present being considered by the County Council, could potentially provide funding for the Manager / Warden.

### **PRIDE OF PLACE**

As in many communities, dramatic changes can be made to the local towns and villages appearance by detailed environmental management. This includes:

- ensuring that litter bins and other street furniture are of a high quality and consistent in design. In addition there is a need for regular painting and maintenance
- ensuring that streets are swept regularly, bins emptied, weeds removed and verges kept tidy
- surveying and maintaining trees
- ensuring that footpaths both in the towns and villages are sign posted and maintained
- installing more dog litter bins and employing a dog warden
- promoting disabled access.

In order to progress this the Partnership wish to create a Civic Pride Fund in order to permit small projects to be funded working in conjunction with the Town Council, parish councils and South Shropshire District Council.

### ***Policies***

The Church Stretton Area Tourism Group is an active collection of volunteers who since February 2003 have undertaken:

- Litter picking – regular working parties
- Railway station – painting of railings, new signs, bike racks and general cleaning-up of grounds and shelters
- Additional hanging baskets, to complement the existing baskets and planters
- Coach park – being tidied up with new signs
- Painting and maintenance of Civic Society notice board
- Events calendar for Church Stretton and villages
- Production of new visitor guide
- Established a website.

In addition the draft South Shropshire Tourism Strategy envisages funding of up to £7,500 for initiatives to improve town interpretation and visitor experience.

### ***Funding***

Church Stretton Town Council, Parish Councils, South Shropshire District Council and Living Spaces.

### **CHURCH STRETTON RECYCLING CENTRE**

In a highly attractive environment such as Church Stretton it is important to maximise recycling and minimise waste going to landfill. The Partnership wish to create a purpose built re-use, recycling centre in the Strettons on similar lines to the one which already exists in Bishop's Castle. To complement this, the Partnership wish to increase the range of recycling facilities in the Strettons and move existing facilities to a more acceptable location.

### ***Policies***

The South Shropshire District Council Recycling Plan 2002-2006 outlines South Shropshire's commitment to recycling. Any recycling proposals would need to be in accordance with this plan. In addition the Partnership could consider joining the Community Recycling Network, which acts as the national voice for community-based recycling and waste reduction. Whilst the Network does not have funds for projects, it does possess a very wide range of expertise on recycling matters.

### ***Funding***

South Shropshire District Council is one potential source of funding given that a recycling centre would contribute to its recycling plan. Another source is the Community Recycling and Economic Development programme (CRED). The (CRED) programme is funded by the New Opportunities Fund, through its Transforming Communities Initiative. Funding is made available for community-based recycling, re-use and composting projects which meet specified criteria.

## **5.2 Monitoring and Evaluation**

The Partnership Steering Group will be responsible for managing projects in conjunction with the lead organisation. The Partnership has formed a sub-committee which will be responsible for the monitoring and evaluation of projects setting distinct and quantifiable objectives. Detailed arrangements will vary from project to project depending upon the funder. However for all ongoing, as opposed to one-off projects, quarterly data on performance will be requested. It will be a condition of funding support that funding recipients agree to provide monitoring information. Examples of data collected could include numbers of people being trained and obtaining qualifications from the education outreach facility and number and location of users of the Ring and Ride service.

All projects would be reviewed yearly against project targets to ascertain the extent to which they had achieved their objectives and delivered value for money.

## **5.3 Timetable**

Details of the timetable for the implementation of each project are set out in Appendix VI.

## **5.4 Conclusions**

No community, irrespective of the beauty of its setting and innate attractiveness, can remain immune from economic and social changes. This strategy recognises that fact and seeks ways to enhance the attractiveness of Church Stretton as a place to live and work for a wider age range of residents, whilst building upon its major attractions as a tourist centre. A number of the major projects proposed can be funded by the private sector, although public sector support is needed in policy terms and possibly in infrastructure provision. Clearly public sector resources are needed for the major development at the railway station, the Ring and Ride scheme and the recycling project.

Overall the strategy offers a means of adapting Church Stretton and its hinterland to changing circumstances, whilst preserving the high quality environment which makes it such a special place.