

## **ENVIRONMENT DRAFT**

Ringwood is superbly situated on the western edge of the newly created (2006) New Forest National Park and is bordered on the east by the beautiful River Avon and on the north by Blashford Lakes. Further afield to the west and north, but within easy reach by car, are the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Part of the parish falls within the boundaries of the national park and it is only ten miles to the New Forest Heritage Coast. The town's position in relation to the New Forest, the coast, the surrounding countryside and the three cities and towns of Southampton, Salisbury and Bournemouth is the asset most highly prized by 55% of residents in the Love It, Hate It, I Wish Survey.

A large part of the town centre is a conservation area designated in 1983 by New Forest District Council and redesignated in 1999. There are 145 listed buildings. The High Street and the Market Place have been described as the 'jewel in Ringwood's crown.' There are many old and attractive buildings along the winding High Street, and the fine period buildings are a feature of the Market Place. There are important and beautiful views west from the Market Place towards the river.

A recent shopping development, The Furlong, with its high quality and exclusive High Street shops and Waitrose, has been developed in character with the market town image and the bronze statues of the New Forest mare and foal are much appreciated by residents and visitors alike. However, the A31 bypass cuts through the middle of the town creating noise and pollution problems for residents.

The New Forest National Park and the Avon Valley and river system are SSSIs and RAMSAR sites (wetland of international importance designated under the Ramsar convention). The town's natural environmental landmarks such as the Bickerley Millstream, St. Leonards and St. Ives Heaths, and Blashford Lakes are all SSSIs and are well protected. There are a number of sites of importance for nature conservation such as Hightown Copse and Parsonage Wood amongst others. There is a plethora of SSSIs outside the parish but of importance, such as St. Leonards and St. Ives Heaths, Ferndown Common and Holt and West Moors Heaths.

There are two byways open to all traffic, fifty four footpaths, five bridleways and two safeguarded cycle ways, with two proposed cycle ways. However, cycle ways tend to peter out when they arrive at the town and this needs attention. The Castleman Trailway from Brockenhurst to Hamworthy largely follows the track of the old railway line but is incomplete in places as sections have been sold for housing and industrial development over the years.

In order to fulfil the overall vision for the Town, the Environment Group has had to consider the following:

- Open Space
- Access to the Riverside
- Litter and Vandalism
- Built Environment – housing and industrial development
- Pollution
- Street Furniture
- Signage
- Environmental Issues, such as Recycling
- Footpaths
- Cycle Ways
- Pavements and roads

The SWOT Analysis for the Environment Group has identified the following:

	Strength	Weakness	Opportunity	Threat
On the edge of and partly within New Forest National Park.	X		X	
Within easy reach of the Coast and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in Wiltshire and Dorset	X		X	
Vitality and character of the Town including the Conservation Area	X		X	
Appearance of the town from the Furlong Car Park		X	X	X

Some unattractive shop fronts and run down buildings (esp. old cinema) out of keeping with the historic market town image		X	X	X
River Avon	X		X	
Lack of access to the riverside		X	X	
A 31 – noise and pollution		X		X
Closure of the livestock market has weakened the links with the hinterland and local produce is not really evident in the town		X	X	
Cluttered signage		X	X	
Lack of open space in the town		X		X
Narrow and unattractive pavements		X	X	X
Litter and vandalism		X		X
Footpaths and cycleways – good but links need to be improved	X	X	X	
Recycling – existing provision inadequate		X	X	

The following are the issues identified through the worksheets and public consultations:

## BUILT ENVIRONMENT

### HOUSING

There is a national problem regarding both the shortage and price of housing. Ringwood has become one of the most expensive market towns in the country with the average price of a three bedroom house now being £250,000. Residents and businesses have both expressed much concern regarding the shortage of affordable housing, with some businesses identifying this as being a threat to their future success. If Ringwood is to be able to keep its young people and attract in other young families in order to help to ensure its vibrancy and success, this problem needs to be analysed and addressed. At present, New Forest District Council allows 20-30 new properties a year to be built which does not keep pace with demand. House prices, therefore, are pushed up at a rate faster than the national average.

In line with central government policy, there has been considerable infilling. Whilst some see this as an acceptable way of providing housing, many others see it as a fast ticket to destroying the essential character of the town. Already short of green open space within the town itself, Ringwood can ill afford to lose its gardens. There is fear of the town being spoilt by over development and by inappropriate development but at the same time there is fear amongst families and young people that they and future generations will not be able to afford to buy houses in their home town. Whilst it is clear that great care must be taken to ensure that future building fits in with the historic market town image, it is also clear that the shortage of housing is an urgent problem that needs addressing.

The High Street and the Market Place are referred to by some as 'the jewel in Ringwood's Crown' and there are a number of buildings of historic interest in the Town such as Monmouth House, Church Hatch, the Bank House and two Coaching Inns. These areas define the character of the Town and are protected under the Conservation Area. However, residents and visitors have singled out specific areas as being detrimental to the special quality of the Town and these are the old Cinema, the area at the back of Woolworths and the adjacent buildings as seen on entering Ringwood, the service roads behind Long's and Keskins. These areas have been described as 'seedy and dismal.'

The historic town centre would be greatly enhanced if the area were pedestrianised or at least subject to traffic restrictions. This problem is dealt with more fully under the Transport section but there is no doubt that the volume of traffic travelling through the town centre and the congestion there is detrimental to the market town environment. The narrow streets were not built for cars, lorries and buses and there is a great desire amongst respondents to see this problem addressed.

The Town boasts a number of charming thatched cottages which are also listed.

## ACCESS TO THE RIVERSIDE

During the various consultations and through the surveys, many residents expressed a strong desire for greater access to the riverside for all. Ringwood enjoys proximity to the beautiful and nationally important River Avon, and to the Bickerley Mill Stream, but access to these areas is limited. The Town Council is enhancing access to the Bickerley Mill Stream and there is scope for developing riverside walks to provide a priceless asset for the Town.

## CASTLEMAN TRAIL

Residents are delighted with the Castleman Trailway which is a cycle path, bridleway and footpath from Dorset into the New Forest but it finishes at Barrack Lane, Crow. There is also a break at present at the Castleman Industrial Estate for bicycles and horses. Improvements are therefore strongly sought to extend the path towards Burley and Brockenhurst.

## GREEN OPEN SPACE

The town has a number of beautiful parks, such as Dr. Little's gardens, which are highly prized. However, the town is 47 acres under-provisioned for green open space for the number of residents. Development is very intense in some areas and there is considerable pressure to continue with the policy of infilling, which is generally very disliked. Consequently such open space as exists is highly valued.

The Town Council has bought some land on the edge of the town to develop a centre of sporting excellence, and is currently negotiating to buy more in the same location, making a total area of approximately 50 acres. This may have the result of Carvers being freed from its current sporting commitments and enable it to be developed as a lovely park in the centre of the town catering for cross-generational needs.

## SEATING

A lack of seating was generally identified throughout the town to enable people to rest and enjoy the environment. It is proposed that a seating audit is carried out and a suitable style of seat sourced to give a uniform, up-market and less cluttered look to the town.

## TREES

The Furlong Car Park boasts a number of attractive trees which were mentioned often in the Love It, Hate It, I Wish survey. It is clear that these trees are regarded with great affection by many people and should be preserved wherever possible. They soften the aspect of the car park and the entry to the Town to the back of the town. They also provide welcome shade and create the illusion of a small 'plaza.'

## LITTER, DOG EXCREMENT AND VANDALISM

The approaches to the Town are disfigured by increasing amounts of litter along the A31. Litter and dog excrement are problematic on occasions on paths and in public open spaces. There are complaints of insufficient dog bins generally. It has also been noted that there are increasing incidents of graffiti and vandalism.

## POLLUTION

Although the A 31 trunk road is Ringwood's lifeline, it also cuts through the middle of the town and contributes overwhelmingly to the problems of both air and noise pollution. Much has been written about the road in the Transport Section and it is Highways Department policy to resurface in a quieter material when resurfacing is required. With the strong likelihood of traffic increasing as a result of the planned development in South East Dorset and Bournemouth Airport, the problem of noise and pollution is likely to increase.

## STREET FURNITURE

Signage is cluttered in places and there is a need for a uniform, heritage style to complement the character of the Town. A Signage Project Group is already addressing this problem and has formed an Action Plan to tackle it. It is actively seeking sources of funding for the town centre signage, which will be green lettering on white in a heritage style.

## ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

With its proximity to the River Avon, there have been problems with flooding in the town in the past. A considerable amount of work has been done in the town to alleviate this but some areas are still identified by residents as being a problem. With the uncertainty regarding climate change and its effects upon sea levels and quantities of rainfall in the future, this is an area that needs to be watched.

Whilst New Forest District Council has introduced a certain amount of recycling, many residents and businesses have said that they would like more initiatives

regarding environmental issues, such as better recycling and doorstep recycling. Many would like to have alternatives to conventional energy, such as wind power, investigated. All the businesses who responded to the survey have said that they would like to know what opportunities are available for them to respond positively to the threat of climate change and at the same time improve their bottom line.

## **LIST OF PROJECTS TO FULFILL THE VISION**

- Conduct an environmental audit of the High Street and historic town centre. Identify improvements which are likely to be reducing street clutter, improving buildings and shop fronts. Pay particular attention to the old cinema.
- Create a Green Zone in the heart of the town.
- Affordable, attractive housing for young people from the local area
- Carry out a feasibility study into opening up more access to the River Avon from the Town.
- Investigate possible pedestrianisation of the town centre
- Development of the Market with an emphasis on local produce
- Increase waste recycling by extending services and encouraging more people to use them.
- Signage project group to continue with audit and to look at signage outside the town as well – Western Gateway theme
- Improve the footpath and cycle networks both within the town and the links into the countryside working with the existing walking and cycling group
- Where possible create spaces and encourage tree planting in the town. Where new development is proposed, ensure that there is sufficient green space included.
- Carry out a seating audit and create a plan to add seating at strategic points around the town. Link in to Healthy Walks.
- Look at ways of tackling litter and vandalism
- Organise a Sustainable Business Roadshow
- Look at possible environmental initiatives to help tackle climate change