



## 2.1 POPULATION AND HOUSING

This section considers the social and economic problems facing the town, providing important background context to the overall strategy. A more detailed report produced by Roger Tym & Partners is available as an Appendix.

Ilfracombe functions as an Area Centre and serves communities along the eastern part of the North Devon coast.

The population of the town was 10,858 in 2001 (5,130 households), a 0.7% decrease since 1991 and contrary to national trends.

About 20.6% of the town's population are retired, slightly higher than Barnstaple and Bideford (19.2% and 19.9% respectively) and higher than England and Wales (16%) and the South West (18.6%). This is an indication of the area's popularity as a retirement destination but may also be a result of young people moving out of the area. This is important as it has implications for the local economy in terms of meeting the needs of the elderly population.

On average residential property prices in Ilfracombe have risen by between 116% and 137% since 2000, broadly in line with the North Devon average and above the regional average. Although once regarded as a relatively affordable location, property in Ilfracombe is unaffordable for those on the local average wage.

## 2.2 EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMY

Over the medium term the demand for housing in Ilfracombe (both lettings and sales) has been strong, with the price differential between Ilfracombe and Barnstaple closing. Demand for sales has been from new residents as well as prospective second home owners, with factors such as the recent North Devon Hospital recruitment drive pushing up demand.

There is continued developer interest in new sites for housing as well as for the conversion of properties (such as old hotels and the old youth hostel) into apartments. The strongest demand has been for houses with parking, reflecting the wider issues associated with parking in the town.

Residential development may help to reverse falling population trends and provide a good base for supporting local businesses. There are a number of sites identified for potential housing development in Ilfracombe, as well as a larger area around the proposed retail development at Killacleave. It may be possible to swap some of the town centre housing sites for housing on less central locations in order to create town centre opportunities.

The town's key sectors for employment are tourism, manufacturing and public sector services.

Within the town centre the key employment areas consist of:

- retail and office space around High Street;
- retail, catering, tourism and marine businesses around the harbour; and
- hotels and tourism on Wilder Road.

There are also some isolated pockets of employment within the town core.



Employment use within the town centre

Manufacturing is a significant sector, but the majority of businesses are located outside the core study area. The sector is dominated by two major employers in the town, Lambda and Pall, who between them currently employ over 900 people. As well as direct employment, these two large organisations indirectly support employment through local purchases of goods and services. It is important that Ilfracombe continues to present itself as a suitable location for these businesses and other manufacturing firms looking to relocate into the area.

Average earnings in Ilfracombe are low in relation to North Devon, which in itself has earnings below both the county, and England and Wales average.

There are particular pockets of deprivation in Ilfracombe and although unemployment has fallen over the past decade in line with the national economic cycle, it is still around double the North Devon, and the national average. Unemployment rates are seasonal, with industries such as tourism providing summer employment.

Further out of town, there is public sector employment at the hospital, police station and college. Mullacott Cross is an edge of town industrial estate of about 38

acres managed by Devon County Council and contains the majority of the town's manufacturing activity.

Tourism and retail sectors are clearly important employers in the town centre and they are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

## 2.3 TOURISM

Along with relatively high unemployment, wage levels are low in relation to North Devon, which in itself has earnings below both the county and England and Wales average. These issues are compounded by the town's gradual decline as a major tourist resort.

Ilfracombe attracts around 190,000 staying visitors per year, spending around £36million. The staying visitor expenditure is estimated to support around 700 FTE (full time equivalent) jobs in accommodation, attractions, retail, catering and travel (although not all of these jobs will be in Ilfracombe).

Within Devon, Ilfracombe is the sixth largest resort in terms of capacity, despite a 10% reduction in accommodation capacity in under 10 years. The fall has mainly been in hotels and guest houses in favour of self-catering accommodation, in line with market demand.

### Accommodation

The tourism industry in Ilfracombe still needs to respond to changes in the industry and appeal to emerging markets. One of the issues in Ilfracombe is that the service delivery of some accommodation operators has not changed in line with customer demand, i.e.

there is a lack of investment in the facilities and/or the customer service which does not match current market expectations. As a result, coupled with the structural changes in tourism, many accommodation businesses have seen turnover fall. This further diminishes the opportunity to invest and update the offer.

There is a gap in the provision of accommodation at the top end of the market, with no three or more star hotels on the coastal strip. However, there is good accommodation provision for tour operators who offer all-inclusive holidays with travel by coach.

Whilst beneficial, this form of tourism has fewer benefits for the local economy than independent visitors because much of the income goes to the tour operator.



Town centre

### Attractions

Recent investment includes the Aquarium and Tunnels Beach. Additional investment planned for the short term includes a substantial project by John Fowler Holidays, as well as continued investment at Tunnels beach.

While the centre of Ilfracombe has no major attractions except for Tunnels Beach, nearby major commercial attractions include the Combe Martin Wildlife and Dinosaur Park and there is a good selection of major attractions across the North Devon coast and hinterland.



The

### Physical Environment

Ilfracombe is set within a high quality natural environment. It also boasts a good quality built environment although there are issues relating to poor maintenance and presentation, cleanliness and linkages between the town centre and the seafront, which need to be improved.

The harbour, its facilities and its activities form a natural magnet for visitors to Ilfracombe and is an important 'selling point'. There is the opportunity to grow Ilfracombe's marine tourism through additional yachting activity and further cruise ship visits. However this opportunity requires substantial capital investment.



The

## 2.4 RETAIL

The retail centre is focused on High Street. The area is an important focus for employment with an increase in numbers employed due to a growth in the number of restaurants and licensed premises. There are few vacancies, and the rate has fallen since the mid 1990s.

### Food Shopping

Ilfracombe town centre plays a relatively minor role for convenience shopping, even for the town's residents. There is substantial use of large food stores in Barnstaple and previous work has indicated a need for further convenience shopping in the town centre. New retail developments include plans by the Co-op for a store of 2,359 square metres on Wilder Road, and a 2,787 square metre Tesco store at Killacleave. These two stores will employ up to 200 people between them and could bring benefits to the rest of the retailing in the town by reducing the need to travel to Barnstaple.

### Other Retail

Regarding the comparison shopping sector, there are very few national multiples in

Ilfracombe and although the diversity of local independent retailers has the potential to attract visitor markets (depending upon the quality of the offer), overall this is considered a weakness.

Ilfracombe has a relatively high service retail employment such as estate agents, banks and building societies.

In general there is a poor perception of the choice and quality of supermarkets, the range and choice of non-food shops, adequacy of parking and town centre congestion. There may be an opportunity to change people's attitude towards Ilfracombe's retail offer.



High Street

The size and location of car parking, combined with congestion on the route through Church Street and High Street, has been identified as having an impact on the attractiveness of these streets. Particular issues relate to the lack of a pedestrian-friendly environment and insufficient parking in the peak visitor months. While Ilfracombe appears adequately supplied with both long and short stay car-parking facilities, this makes no allowance for the topography, or the relationship between the car parks and the town centre. Car parking is discussed in more detail in the following sections.



Quality independent retailing on the main shopping street

## 2.5 CONCLUSIONS

Ilfracombe functions as a key service centre in North Devon. The town's economy is dominated by tourism, although retail is also an important sector in the town centre, and manufacturing within the wider built up area.

Unemployment rates are comparatively high and wage levels are common with other tourist-based economies.

Retail and tourism are likely to continue to be key economic drivers within the town centre, and therefore these sectors should be supported and strengthened where possible.

Although manufacturing occurs outside the town centre, it is an important sector and the regeneration of the town centre will help to encourage investors into the area.