

# NATURAL SEATON MASTERPLAN

*9<sup>th</sup> July 2025*



## Contents

List of Figures.....	2
1. Executive Summary .....	3
2. Background.....	4
2.1 Scope and Approach.....	4
2.2 Strategic context.....	5
3. Issues and Opportunities.....	9
3.1 Seaton Wetlands .....	9
3.2 Discovery Points .....	12
3.3 Seaton Tramway .....	15
3.4 Seaton Museum.....	16
3.5 Seaton Town Centre .....	17
3.6 The Undercliffs .....	18
3.7 Axe Vale and District Conservation Society .....	18
3.7 Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site.....	19
3.8 South West Coast Path.....	20
3.9 Connected locations.....	20
3.10 The marine environment.....	22
3.11 The Visitor Journey .....	22
3.12 Historical themes – the power of nature .....	23
3.13 Events and activities .....	24
3.14 Marketing.....	25
4. Audiences.....	26
5. Analysis and Proposition.....	27
6. Vision, Aims and Objectives.....	28
7. Detailed Proposals .....	29
7.1 Seaton Wetlands .....	29
7.2 The Visitor Journey / Discovery Points .....	32
7.3 Seaton Tramway .....	32
7.4 Seaton Museum.....	33
7.5 Connected locations.....	33
7.6 Events and activities .....	34
7.7 Involving people.....	34

7.8 Natural Seaton Partnership .....	34
8. Interpretive and Marketing Concepts.....	35
8.1 Marketing .....	35
8.2 Interpretation.....	36
9. Next Steps .....	41

## List of Figures

Figure 1 Extract from the East Devon Cultural map .....	6
Figure 2 Key visitor facilities at Seaton Wetlands.....	10
Figure 3 The original concept for the Discovery Points.....	13
Figure 4 Discovery Points on location .....	14
Figure 5 View upriver from the Riverside Halt .....	15
Figure 6 A display case at Seaton Museum .....	16
Figure 7 The museum entrance (far left) .....	17
Figure 8 Undercliffs interpretation.....	18
Figure 9 Extract from the Devon LCWIP .....	21
Figure 10 View towards the sea from the steps of Seaton Tram Station; no obvious route in sight..	23
Figure 11 Seaton Town Council website home page .....	25
Figure 12 How the new land acquisition enables improved access links .....	30
Figure 13 The southern half of the recommended visitor trail.....	0
Figure 14 An example of trail signage combining interpretation .....	37
Figure 15 William Stukely's view over Seaton, c.1724 .....	38
Figure 16 Alfred Robert Quinton, 1920's postcard – copyright J Salmon Image Archive .....	39
Figure 17 Extract from the Jurassic Coast Storybook .....	40



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# 1. Executive Summary

The natural beauty of the landscape around Seaton is recognised as a huge asset for the town, which provides a strategically important gateway to the East Devon National Landscape and the internationally important Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site. Its location at one end of the wildest section of coast in the south of England is exceptional, as is the proximity of the wildlife-rich haven of the Seaton Wetlands and the existence of the unique Seaton Tramway.

A great strength of the area is that the organisations and individuals managing these and related assets recognise their value and are dedicated to caring for them and attracting people to enjoy them. The Jurassic Coast brand has been adopted enthusiastically, and the area's Cultural and Tourism strategies place the natural world at the top of their priorities.

Several natural environment and heritage projects have been developed in and around Seaton over the years and some of these have been, and are, extremely successful. Others have struggled, but there has been no shortage of enthusiasm and ideas, reflecting Seaton's potential to make more of its natural and cultural heritage to foster community connections and attract visitors.

This Masterplan aims to provide a blueprint for the realisation of this potential, under the headline of "Natural Seaton". It aims to capture the enthusiasm of key stakeholders in the community and further afield, and act as a focus for a wide-ranging programme of action that will support the area's regeneration and long-term resilience.

The Masterplan assesses existing natural and heritage assets and recommends a range of improvements to help realise their potential as essential parts of the Natural Seaton offer. Seaton Wetlands, Seaton Tramway, Jurassic Discovery, Seaton Museum, the Undercliffs, and the South West Coast Path, plus connected locations further afield, such as Beer Quarry Caves and Hooken Undercliff, all have an important part to play in developing and delivering the Natural Seaton Masterplan.

The headline recommendations in this Masterplan are:

- The formation of a Natural Seaton Partnership to support coordination and delivery of the Masterplan.
- A range of physical infrastructure improvements so that people can more easily access Seaton's natural assets.
- The creation of a Natural Seaton Trail that promotes these new connections.
- The development of a Natural Seaton brand.
- The development of a busy programme of events and activities under the Natural Seaton umbrella.
- The involvement of local residents and other stakeholders in the refinement and delivery of these plans.
- The development of applications to the National Lottery Heritage Fund and other funders to help deliver the above.

## 2. Background

This report was commissioned by East Devon District Council (EDDC) to create an integrated Masterplan for communicating and making more accessible what many consider to be Seaton's most significant asset – its natural environment.

Several natural environment and heritage projects have been developed in and around Seaton over the years and some of these have been, and are, extremely successful. Others have struggled, but there has been no shortage of enthusiasm and ideas, reflecting Seaton's potential to make more of its natural and cultural heritage to foster community connections and attract visitors.

This Masterplan aims to provide a blueprint for the realisation of this potential, under the headline of "Natural Seaton". It's a plan that hopes to capture the enthusiasm of key stakeholders in the community and further afield, and act as a focus for a wide-ranging programme of action that will support the area's regeneration and long-term resilience.

The production of this report has been funded from the proceeds of the sale of the Seaton Jurassic Centre to Seaton Tramway in 2023. This building was originally part-funded by Devon County Council, EDDC and the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The resulting fund is now dedicated to improving Seaton's nature-based assets. One of the purposes of this Masterplan is to identify how best to apply the fund to this end.

### 2.1 Scope and Approach

The focus of this Masterplan is first and foremost the natural environment, which provides such a striking setting for the town of Seaton. Framed by the massive Undercliff and White Cliff, backed by Seaton Wetlands, with the mighty River Axe reaching the sea at Axmouth Harbour and Seaton Beach defending it from the sea, nature is an ever-present dimension of the town and makes it one of the key access points for the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site.

How humans have responded to the rapidly changing landscape of the Axe estuary is also an important part of the story, and so the heritage of Seaton as it connects with the natural world is included in the scope of this Masterplan.

The Masterplan is interested primarily in how the story of Natural Seaton can best be shared with people and used as a connecting and regenerating force. This includes the content of, and messages arising from, that story; and, just as importantly, how people access that story, both intellectually and physically.

The Masterplan focuses mainly on Seaton in terms of planned physical developments; but develops a marketing and communications strand that reaches out across a broader landscape to create a package of experiences that is likely to be attractive to the target audiences.

The Masterplan has been developed via a series of interviews and site visits with key stakeholders in the community and with representatives of organisations that have a strategic interest in the area. This has been supplemented with background documentary research. James Chubb, Countryside Manager for EDDC and manager of the Seaton Wetlands site, who commissioned the Masterplan, has played a central role, sharing his extensive knowledge and contacts and bringing his own exciting vision for the area to the table.



Interviews / site visits have been held with:

Name	Role	Organisation
Alison Hayward	Project Manager Place & Prosperity	East Devon District Council
Doug Stanton	Projects Manager Place & Prosperity	
Julian Gray	Director	South West Coast Path Association
Tom Sunderland	Undercliff National Nature Reserve Manager	Natural England
Jenny Nunn	Chief Executive Officer	Seaton Tramway
Kate Hind	Natural Environment Officer (Partnerships)	Devon County Council
Sam Scriven	Head of Heritage and Conservation	Jurassic Coast Trust
Sally King	Visitor, Tourism and Access Manager	Dorset National Landscape
Joanna Cairns	Museum Development Officer (Devon)	Museum Development South West
Lesley Clarke	Chair	Axe Vale and District Conservation Society
Laura Hewitt	Curator	Axe Valley Heritage Museum
Peter Thomas	Assistant Curator	

The time and thoughts that these people have contributed to this plan are much appreciated.

The Masterplan assesses the current situation and opportunities relating to existing assets and activities in and around Seaton; then moves on to identify a vision for Natural Seaton backed up by a coherent programme of interventions to deliver that vision.

## 2.2 Strategic context

Some of the main strategies relating to Seaton are described below. This is not a comprehensive list but aims to identify those strategies with most relevance to the theme of “Natural Seaton”.

Several of the organisations interviewed for this Masterplan have relevant strategies and these are described within the relevant “Issues and Opportunities” chapter below to present them in the context of the organisation’s ambitions and current activities.



i) The **East Devon Cultural Strategy 2022-2031**<sup>1</sup> has a vision “for East Devon to be a VIBRANT CULTURAL ECOSYSTEM whose distinctive communities and outstanding natural environment are enhanced and enriched through creativity, curiosity and collaboration”. One of its four Values underpinning the strategy is “Connected with Nature” and one of its eight Themes is to “Protect and enhance the natural environment”. The Objective of this theme is to

<sup>1</sup> <https://eastdevon.gov.uk/arts-and-culture/east-devon-cultural-strategy/>

“Establish East Devon as an innovator and regional beacon of culture-led environmental protection, enhancement and activism”. A priority action is to” Develop a year-round programme that celebrates and connects people with East Devon’s natural environment and inspires them to protect and enhance it”.

The Strategy is supported by a Cultural map that features key assets and experiences across East Devon, Seaton being a key location.



Figure 1 Extract from the East Devon Cultural map

ii) The **East Devon District Council Tourism Strategy**<sup>2</sup>, developed in alignment with the East Devon Cultural Strategy and approved in 2022, sets as its goal the ambition “to become the leading, year-round tourism destination in Devon, whose diverse ecosystem of outstanding natural environments, distinctive, high- quality businesses, set within towns and villages, all thrive and grow through a commitment to Net Zero, accessibility and collaboration”.

It identifies East Devon’s environment, coastal assets, and biodiversity as “the core fundamental strength of the district” that needs to be at the centre of all future product development. Of the four “core product themes”, two are:

2

<https://files.eastdevon.gov.uk/papers/cabinet/070922bpcabinet%20tourism%20strategy%20for%20east%20devon%20appendix%20a.pdf>

- **Natural diversity** - the natural beauty and landscape of our area can attract visitors all year-round, decreasing our reliance on the traditional seaside high season offer.
- **Active nature** – this proposition builds on the strengths of our natural environment but needs further curation to improve accessibility for the visitor and to ensure that activities such as cycling, walking and water sports within the district are promoted responsibly to protect biodiversity.

One of the areas of opportunity identified is to “Leverage the natural assets to suggest ‘affordable’, activity based/well-being propositions, to encourage visitors to visit the area during difficult economic times”.

Other suggested priorities include:

- The natural beauty and landscape can attract visitors all year-round – coastal/inland walking, nature reserves, peace and tranquility in addition to the traditional seaside high season offer.
- The current offer would be strengthened by the co-ordination and production of more walking trails and linked biking trails.
- If curated well, the routes can provide links to local ‘gems’ such as cafes, artisan crafts, developing cultural offers and generally disperse expenditure across the whole district area.
- A well curated product suite would be suitable for driving traffic in the shoulder seasons supporting the vision of a year-round destination.
- By supporting and coordinating the promotion of medium-sized events which have strong enough content to attract visitors to the area and take place in June/early July and September/October, there is potential to grow shoulder season trade.

iii) The **Seaton Regeneration Strategy**<sup>3</sup> was commissioned by Devon County Council as part of an Urban Renewal Programme for Devon’s towns to support economic growth and regeneration in eight coastal and market towns in Devon.

The Objectives of the strategy are:

- Create a high quality of employment with a thriving and diverse local economy including training and education options, particularly for young people
- Improve the quality of the seafront and town centre public realm
- Improve accessibility, transport, and parking, with a variety of eco travel options including for electric vehicles and bicycles.

The strategy finds that “Identity” is a challenge for the town, stating:

“Seaton lacks a clear identity and could benefit from developing a strong vision for its future. As part of the IRF funded ‘Coast meets Country’ project, five towns in East Devon have recently created an online forum for local tourism and hospitality businesses. This process involved establishing a vision for Seaton, which centred on the town’s friendliness, tranquillity, sense of community, and natural capital”.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://eastdevon.gov.uk/regeneration-projects/seaton-regeneration-strategy/>



One of the town's strengths, however, is described thus:

“Seaton’s outstanding natural beauty and environment is a significant asset for attracting tourism to the town, and more could be made of this. Located within the East Devon AONB, Seaton is seen as the ‘Gateway to the Jurassic Coast’ and offers year round outdoor activities including the South West Coast Path, the Wetlands, and the seafront”.

iv) The **Devon Countywide Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan**<sup>4</sup> (LCWIP) was published by Devon County Council for consultation in October 2024 and responses are currently being reviewed. The plan adopts a strategic approach to identifying cycling and walking improvements required at a local level and proposes ten routes for improvement where there is currently, or is forecast to be, high demand for active travel. One of the ten is the **Beer to Axminster**

**and Uplyme** route, passing through Seaton and covering 23km in total. This is allocated a Medium term priority.

Much of the route would be on-road and the report identifies some sections as having high vehicle traffic volumes, requiring further investigation and potential routing off-road. The existing Stop Line cycle route through Seaton Wetlands is one of the few existing off-road sections of this route.



<sup>4</sup> <https://www.devon.gov.uk/haveyoursay/consultations/countywide-local-cycling-and-walking-infrastructure-plan-lcwip/>

## 3. Issues and Opportunities

This section explores current assets and activity relevant to the theme of Natural Seaton.

### 3.1 Seaton Wetlands

Seaton Wetlands is Seaton's flagship natural asset, featuring a wealth of wildlife, a highly accessible landscape of wetlands, boardwalks and wildlife hides, a team of skilled nature reserve staff, a busy programme of activities to engage people and a big team of volunteers supporting that work. The reserve is owned and managed by East Devon District Council's Countryside team and has developed its excellent reputation over a period of over 20 years. It continues to innovate and seek to extend its conservation impact and audience reach.



Being located on the floodplain, the reserve is extremely level and accessible, other than where paths cross ditches or similar features. The Stop Line Way walking and cycling route, which connects Bristol to Seaton, runs through the reserve and provides a mostly off-road link direct from the town through to the village of Colyford.

In 2024 an additional access link was installed: a new Wetlands stop on the Seaton Tramway route that provides another dimension to accessing the reserve.

The reserve's facilities include a Discovery Hut and classroom, 5 bird-watching hides, pond-dipping platforms, interpretation boards, a site office, a dedicated car park and a network of paths connecting the different locations. Dogs are not permitted on the reserve.



Figure 2 Key visitor facilities at Seaton Wetlands

Visitor numbers to the reserve are monitored by automatic people counters at key access points. In 2024 over 110,000 visitors were recorded, a high point following rapid growth in recent years: 50,000 visitors were recorded in 2018. These numbers were no doubt boosted by increasing wildlife appeal, such as the arrival in the autumn of 2024 of a group of four ospreys that provided spectacular displays to watchers in the bird-hides, as they used the Axe estuary to catch fish before migrating to sub-Saharan Africa; breeding avocet – a first ever record for Devon; and the summer spectacle of the increasing colony of sand martins in the artificial nesting cliff.

Activities delivered by the reserve team and volunteers include running school visits, organising guided walks, public events and canoe safaris, habitat management and wildlife monitoring. The reintroduction of water voles and improving the site's condition for migrant birds are core conservation goals.

Key issues and opportunities to consider are:

- The free to use Cemetery car park is small and accessed from a minor road through the town's cemetery. The car park is currently heavily used by dog-walkers who walk south from this point keeping outside the reserve's dog-free zone. The car park is not serving visitors to the reserve particularly well and could be reduced in size and dedicated for the use of staff, volunteers and visitors for specific activities. Alternatively, it could become a charged-for car park that would generate income for the reserve (via EDDC).
- The main Underfleet car park (charged for) on the edge of the town has good capacity and connectivity to the town's facilities but is distant from the reserve's main facilities. There is no sense of "arrival" from this car park.
- EDDC has recently purchased two fields adjacent to the Underfleet car park that consolidate its ownership at the southern end of the reserve. This purchase allows a new welcome point and access route to be envisaged for the reserve, closely linked to the Underfleet car park, where there is surplus unused land available for this purpose.
- The two new fields are adjacent to Sheep's Marsh, already owned by EDDC. This area lies below high tide level but is protected from saltwater ingress by sluices under the tramway. An exciting prospect is to allow the inundation of Sheep's Marsh and its reversion to a saltmarsh habitat that will be of great wildlife benefit.
- The reserve is divided into two distinct halves, separated by the privately-owned Whitecross Farm. Connecting the two halves is the Stop Line Way which runs next to a housing estate for this section, weakening the quality of the visitor experience. There is also a change to a more agricultural style of land management at Whitecross Farm that represents a marginally lost opportunity for wildlife. If the portion of the farm lying on the floodplain could be brought into the reserve either by purchase or by lease, these issues could be addressed, and Seaton Wetlands could become an even more attractive regional nature destination.
- A further land acquisition or lease opportunity exists at the northern end of the reserve, at Colyford / Bridge Marshes. This purchase could bring additional land into positive wildlife-friendly management and enable the Stop Line Way to be routed off road around its present on-road path through Colyford
- The reserve's online presence is through EDDC's Wild East Devon website, Instagram and Facebook pages. Officers report difficulty in keeping this website fresh and updated within a commercial timescale, and the events booking system currently used is a repurposes theatrical online box office and does not provide the ease of use or marketing sophistication a purpose-made system such as Eventbrite would. A fresh and vibrant



dedicated website and social media channels are essential basic tools to help the reserve expand its reach to new audiences and act more commercially in a competitive marketplace.

- On-site interpretive boards are the main communication tool for visitors, but these are currently focused primarily on orientation, so that visitors can understand the layout of the reserve. While these are in the process of being updated, there is a lack of story-telling and entertainment to bring the amazing wildlife of the place to people's attention. The history of how Seaton and the wetlands developed over time, including the context of the Jurassic Coast, is also missing.
- There is significant volunteer support for the reserve, with volunteers providing expert assistance in the bird-hides ("Guide in the Hide"), walking wardens, opening the Discovery Hut, carrying out habitat management and monitoring wildlife such as water vole surveys or running a BTO licenced bird ringing observatory. This established support is welcome and could be extended further.
- The reserve has some good partnerships in place with local organisations, including the Seaton Tramway and the Axe Vale and District Conservation Society (described below). Some partnerships with organisations in the area could be developed further. An example is Seaton Museum, which is now seeking new partners and has very relevant collections. Through such links the reserve could broaden its appeal to a wider range of people and harness the skills and knowledge of existing community organisations.
- The Natural Seaton Festival is organised annually in partnership with Seaton Tramway – this is described below (section 3.13).
- There is an occasional issue of anti-social behaviour in the bird-hides, eg rough sleeping / vandalism, especially at the southern end of the reserve, closer to the town. Any plans to boost facilities and access at this southern end will need designing carefully to reduce this risk.

In conclusion, Seaton Wetlands is a superb asset for the Natural Seaton story and, with the right development, is poised to be the powerhouse behind the development of the brand.

### 3.2 Discovery Points

Four "Discovery Points" were installed in and around Seaton when the Seaton Jurassic Centre was opened in 2016. The concept was to draw people to locations that delivered elements of the Natural Seaton theme and for these interpretive features to host associated events and activities. A central orientation point was also installed, next to the Underfleet Car Park and the Seaton Jurassic Centre.

The image overleaf shows the four installations and their conceptual locations around the central hub. These were a strong concept, albeit with some flaws, but are now, nearly a decade since their creation, in varying states of decay. All include Seaton Jurassic branding that is no longer relevant, since the closure of the original Centre in 2021.

A full audit of the installations and associated signage has been carried out by Devon County Council and their recommendations have helped inform this Masterplan.





Figure 3 The original concept for the Discovery Points

The issues with the Discovery Points can be summarised as follows:

- Overall, there is little sense of how visitors might journey between the Discovery Points. It is left up to the visitor to devise their own itinerary.
- It is not clear who (if anyone) has responsibility for the maintenance of the Discovery Points.
- Seaton Jurassic branding is no longer appropriate, but a Natural Seaton brand could be devised to form part of a re-design of these Discovery Points.
- The Stargazer at Seaton Wetlands, being made of wood, is in advanced decay and has recently had to be removed for safety reasons. The original concept was rather tangential to the site's main attraction and a more powerful concept that links to birdlife or wildlife experiences should be installed in its place.
- The Prow, overlooking Axmouth Harbour, is well-located with a superb setting and outlook. The wooden structure needs to be inspected and a maintenance regime adopted.
- The Waves on Seaton Seafront are made of stainless steel and are weathering well. Their location and design are excellent, but both the related Discovery Posts are on the seaward side of the sculptures and an interpretive board on the landward side is rather dated and in poor condition.
- The Portal at Seaton Hole is an attractive design but has been damaged, obscuring the original concept. Its location, hidden halfway up a steep path with overgrown views, leaves much to be desired and feels very distant from the main centre of activity.
- The central Discovery Orientation Point interpretation has been damaged and removed.



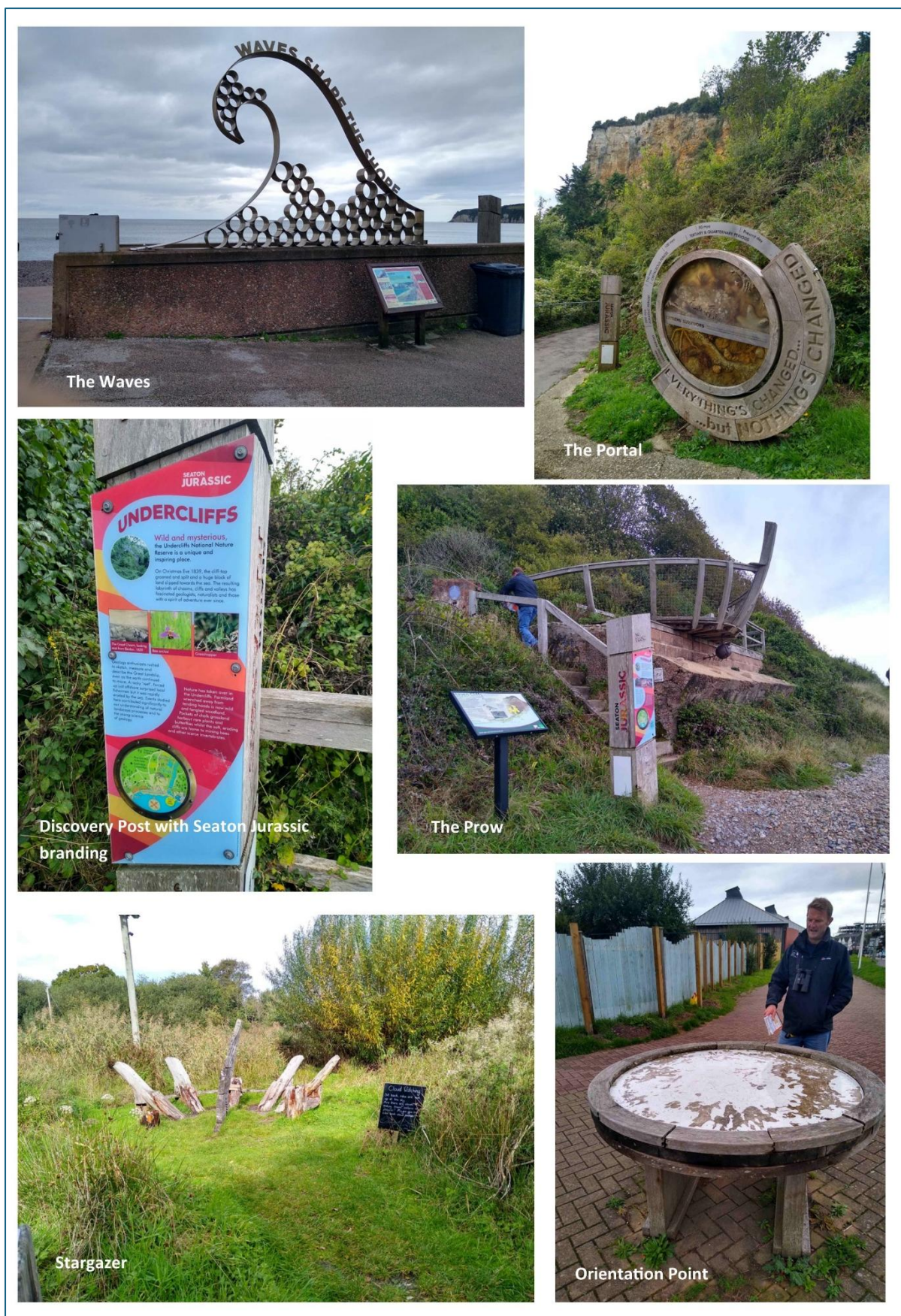


Figure 4 Discovery Points on location



### 3.3 Seaton Tramway

Seaton Tramway is Seaton's principal commercial tourist attraction, with over 100,000 visitors a year using its fleet of historic tramcars to travel up the valley of the Axe from Seaton as far as Colyton. The business operates year-round and runs a series of events to attract custom and create a viable business outside the traditional tourist months.

The tramline runs parallel with the Seaton Wetlands nature reserve and the River Axe and the trams provide an excellent view over the wetlands and the river and great opportunities to see the birdlife. Several of the tram drivers are experienced birdwatchers and provide useful interpretation of the wildlife to be seen.



Figure 5 View upriver from the Riverside Halt

The Seaton Wetlands Halt was opened in 2022 and part-funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF). This Halt provides new access from the tramway to Seaton Wetlands and means that visitors can explore a circular route combining footpaths and riding the tram.

When the Seaton Jurassic Centre, which is an immediate neighbour to the main Seaton Station, came on the market, Seaton Tramway decided to purchase it to establish a sister business under its roof – Jurassic Discovery. The attraction, which opened in 2024, features animatronic dinosaurs, a soft play area and café, and has recently added a fossil collection and displays about palaeontology. It is also delivering a programme of education and outreach, partly funded by an award from the NLHF.

Seaton Tramway and Jurassic Discovery have been successful in attracting people's interest in the natural world and generating business opportunities from that. Some of the dinosaurs featured in

Jurassic Discovery are not in fact found in the Jurassic World Heritage Site and more could be done in the centre to build links with the World Heritage Site, but in general terms the operation of the Tramway and Jurassic Discovery complements the Natural Seaton offer.

Overall, the Tramway is a strategically important partner in developing the Natural Seaton concept further and should be central to the development of the brand and the creation of new recreational and learning opportunities.

### 3.4 Seaton Museum

Seaton Museum is actually named the “Axe Valley Heritage Museum” but is commonly known as Seaton Museum for short. It is located on the second floor of a Seaton Town Council-owned building at the top of the town’s main shopping street, sharing the building with a local theatre. The Museum is run by the Axe Valley Heritage Association, a registered charity, and its work is entirely delivered by volunteers. The charity has around 70 members who pay an annual subscription, reduced from a historic peak of around 200. Following the recent death of the Museum’s founder and first curator, it is now undertaking an inventory of its collections, digitising them, reviewing its



Figure 6 A display case at Seaton Museum

exhibitions and updating its website and social media as far as possible with its limited funds. It generates income from membership subscriptions and visitor donations.

The Museum is not currently accredited but was some 20 years ago. It is one of many small museums across the region being supported by Museum Development South West, an Arts Council funded body that provides training, advice and small grants to the small museums sector. MDSW has recently funded software to assist with the digitisation of the collection which will then be made accessible online.

The Museum has collections of great interest to the Natural Seaton theme, including old photographs and watercolours of historic landscapes and people, maps, fossils and minerals. Many of its displays are however rather dated and in need of rejuvenation and this work has begun.

The Museum is normally open May to October, Monday to Friday from 11 – 4pm. There is no heating in the Museum section of the building, which makes winter opening unattractive. Attracting volunteer cover at weekends is more difficult, but there are hopes that Saturday opening could be possible if volunteer numbers grow; there are approximately 10 regular volunteers at the moment.

Around 1,000 visitors go through the Museum each year, with c.60% of these assumed to be tourists. Visitor numbers would be higher, but one of the building’s main disadvantages is that there

are two flights of stairs to ascend to access its exhibitions and there is no lift in the building. Relocating to a more accessible venue has been hoped for but to date nothing affordable has been found.

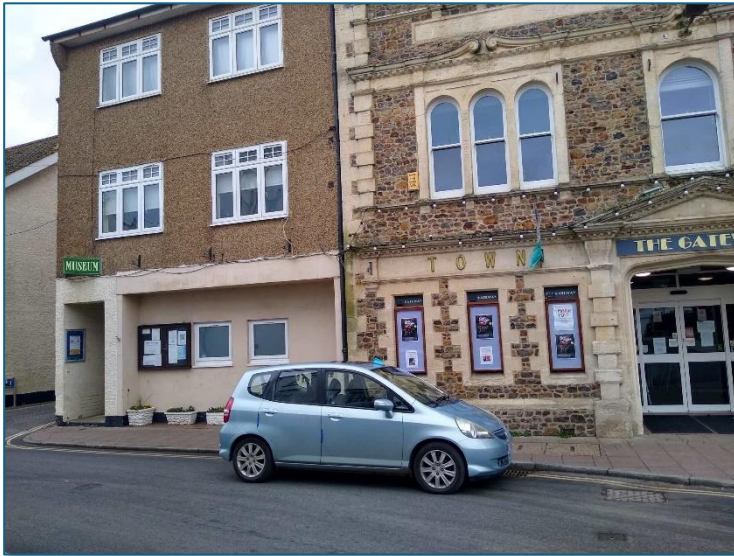


Figure 7 The museum entrance (far left)

The Museum has a good reputation locally and maintains good relationships with local community groups including cubs and scouts and a local art group. Projects have been organised with Colyton Grammar School A' level students and with the local primary school and there are plans to take memory boxes around some of the care homes in the area. It organises occasional talks (hiring an accessible venue to do so) that are popular and has an active presence on a local Facebook group, Seaton Memories.

The new Museum Curator is also engaging with local networks, such as the East Devon Tourism Network, and is keen to develop new initiatives. They were part of a project devised by EDDC's Cultural Producer, focusing on climate change impacts on the estuary which, although it failed to secure funding, provides the foundations for possible future collaboration.

There is great scope for a partnership to develop between the Museum, the Wetlands and the Tramway under the banner of Natural Seaton. This could help attract new visitors and volunteers to the Museum, support the updating of exhibits and use its collection to inspire people to explore the landscape. One concept aired is to develop a walking route that takes visitors to locations where they can compare the present-day scene to historic views that they can access on their phones and then see in reality when they visit the Museum. Another is to organise temporary exhibits at other locations.

### 3.5 Seaton Town Centre

The regeneration of Seaton is an important goal identified in the Strategic context section above. This Masterplan aims to support that goal by offering new experiences that generate additional visitors and extend the stay of existing visitors, as well as building even greater community involvement in Seaton's natural and heritage assets.

This work complements activity already underway by EDDC, Devon County Council, Seaton Town Council, the Chamber of Commerce and others to improve the public realm and implement other measures to enable the town's regeneration, that are outside the remit of this Masterplan. These include EDDC's projects to convert former public toilets to café/ toilets and improvements to the seafront.

However, an important public realm improvement very relevant to this plan is described in more detail below in section 3.11 *Visitor journey*. Creating a legible link between natural and heritage



features of the town that visitors can easily follow is a key step towards building the Natural Seaton offer.

### 3.6 The Undercliffs

The Axmouth to Lyme Regis Undercliffs National Nature Reserve (NNR) is one of Seaton's prime natural assets and represents one of the biggest and most inaccessible areas of "wilderness" on the south coast of England. Looming over the eastern end of the town, it is managed by Natural England and is maintained primarily for its biodiversity. The South West Coast Path (SWCP) provides access along its 10km length.

Unfortunately, accessing the Undercliffs from Seaton is not straightforward. The SWCP follows an inland circuit through the golf club to gain access to the top of the cliffs, before diving into the wilderness; a more direct route is not possible, due to the steepness of the terrain. This also rules out a short circular walk that could have made the Undercliffs part of a not-too-strenuous experience starting from Axmouth Harbour. As it stands visitors to the Undercliffs need to be fit and confident to appreciate this extraordinary landscape.



Figure 8 Undercliffs interpretation

The Prow Discovery Point is positioned at the foot of the Undercliffs and there is some interpretation of the NNR here. This is likely to be the best "easy" vantage point from which to appreciate the Undercliffs, albeit from the outside. Here too there are good rock-pooling opportunities and the combination of the Prow with these assets makes this a useful and viable destination on the visitor journey.

Despite the challenges of its terrain, the Undercliffs are an essential part of the Natural Seaton story and should be offered as one of the main natural

experiences available in the area. The rewards will make the effort worthwhile!

### 3.7 Axe Vale and District Conservation Society

The Axe Vale and District Conservation Society (AVDCS) was established in 1974, initially to oppose the planned development of a marina; it continues to keep a watching brief on proposed developments, but its principal work now is to support nature conservation initiatives in the area of the Axe Vale – defined as running up the Axe catchment approximately as far as Chardstock.

The society is managed by a small team of volunteers but has accrued a fund (mainly through legacies and membership subscriptions) that it uses to provide grants to projects in its area. It has made many grants to Seaton Wetlands over the years to support their work, as well as to local bird and bat groups, as examples. The team has an ambition to develop projects in Axminster, engaging

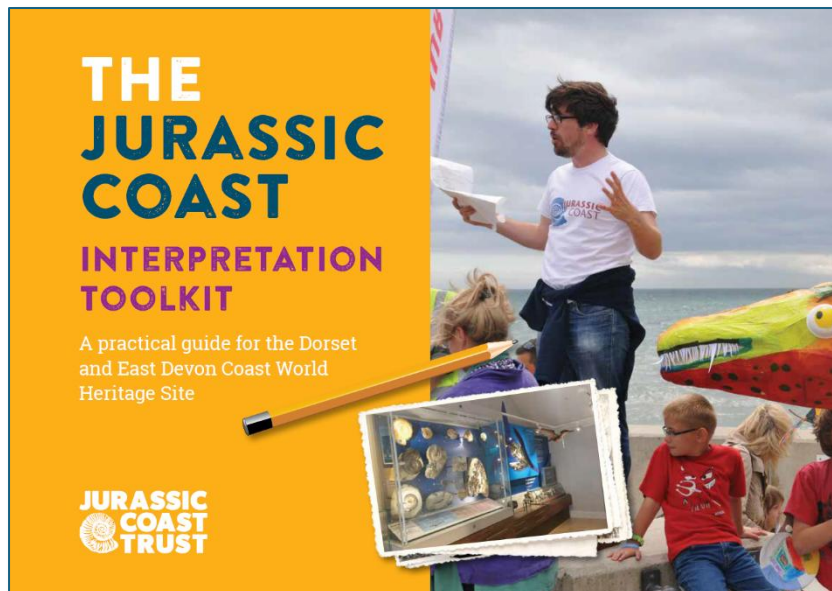
with more deprived communities there and has provided a grant to Axminster Primary School to deliver nature / farming activities.

The society is keen to be closely involved with the development of the Natural Seaton concept.

### 3.7 Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site

The designation of the Jurassic Coast as England's first natural-world based World Heritage Site (WHS) in 2001 was an amazing coup for East Devon and Dorset and was the culmination of years of hard work by many individuals. The WHS spans 155km of largely undeveloped coastline from Exmouth to Studland Bay and is designated for its "outstanding combination of globally significant geological and geomorphological features" and considered to be "one of the most significant earth science teaching and research sites in the world"<sup>5</sup>.

As this Masterplan was being written in early 2025, news came of the sad collapse of the Jurassic Coast Trust (JCT). The Trust had been tasked with the coordination of the Jurassic Coast WHS, and Devon and Dorset County Councils will now assume that role. The Trust's Head of Heritage and



Conservation contributed to this Masterplan late in 2024 and some of the Trust's resources have also informed the plan, principally the Jurassic Coast Story Book<sup>6</sup> and Interpretation Toolkit<sup>7</sup>.

A key strategic goal for Seaton is to establish the town as a "gateway" to the Jurassic Coast. This was the driver behind the creation of the Jurassic Coast Discovery Centre, led by Devon Wildlife Trust, which opened in 2016

but had to close in 2021. In discussion with the JCT the view was expressed that one of the problems with the Discovery Centre was a too narrow focus on the centre itself and not enough on connectivity to surrounding assets. The obvious gap was the under-promoted links between the Centre and the Seaton Jurassic Discovery Points.

The JCT's interpretation resources mentioned above offer some useful analytical approaches and powerful templates to help shape the Natural Seaton offer. These resources have been used to inform the following chapters 4 (Audiences) and 8 (Interpretative and Marketing Concepts).

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<sup>5</sup> Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site statement of Outstanding Universal Value from <https://whc.unesco.org/en/documents/194993>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.jurassiccoast.org/dbimgs/Jurassic%20Coast%20Story%20Book\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.jurassiccoast.org/dbimgs/Jurassic%20Coast%20Story%20Book_WEB.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.jurassiccoast.org/dbimgs/Jurassic%20Coast%20Trust%20Interpretation%20Toolkit\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.jurassiccoast.org/dbimgs/Jurassic%20Coast%20Trust%20Interpretation%20Toolkit_WEB.pdf)

The ambition to offer a gateway to the Jurassic Coast remains a high priority for Seaton and for the Natural Seaton concept. The Jurassic Coast WHS brand is a huge asset for the area and must be woven tightly into the fabric of the place.

### 3.8 South West Coast Path

Another highly valued asset for the town is the South West Coast Path (SWCP), which connects Seaton to the wild coastline to east and west. The links to the Undercliffs have already been mentioned; to the west the SWCP takes walkers through Beer and out to the Hooken Undercliff which is a little sister to the more extensive Undercliffs NNR. As a national trail attracting an estimated 9 million visits a year, the SWCP is a major tourist attraction in the region, contributing an estimated £520m per year to the local economy in spend by walkers and supporting 10,500 jobs (2019 figures)<sup>8</sup>. It also provides health and wellbeing benefits to users of the path estimated as saving the NHS £7.4m a year in health care costs from ill-health and disease<sup>9</sup> and proven mental health and wellbeing benefits.

The South West Coast Path Association (SWCPA) which coordinates management of the SWCP, is keen to see the Natural Seaton project develop and is happy to be a delivery partner and / or supporter of the concept. Two initiatives stand out as being relevant to Natural Seaton, where collaboration could be beneficial.

The first is a result of the creation of the King Charles III England Coast Path which, when complete, will extend right around all 2,700 miles of the English coastline. Part of the development of the Trail is the concept of the “coastal margin” which aims to create open access across the land between the coast path and the sea (excluding private gardens etc). The SWCPA sees this as an opportunity to create a “Wild Belt” along the shoreline that will boost nature recovery and mitigate the losses of coastal space we are seeing through climate change and sea-level rises. Could this legislation help secure better access to the Undercliffs close to Seaton?

The second is the SWCPA’s business sponsorship scheme which has attracted over 500 businesses along the SWCP, who see the majority of their business coming from coast path users, to become “Waymaker +” supporters. These are featured on the SWCPA’s website guide to the path and can access a range of other benefits. Natural Seaton could promote Waymaker + membership to local businesses and could potentially develop its own presence on the SWCPA website as a Waymaker + entity, to help target the audience of Coast Path users and connect them to the Natural Seaton offer.

### 3.9 Connected locations

Whilst the focus of this Masterplan is Seaton and promoting its natural assets, the town sits in a wider landscape that is also striking for its natural beauty and wildlife. Connecting Seaton to these

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<sup>8</sup>

[https://issuu.com/southwestcoastpath/docs/swcpa\\_economic\\_impact\\_report\\_2021\\_final?fr=sNjE0NjE0ODIxNDU](https://issuu.com/southwestcoastpath/docs/swcpa_economic_impact_report_2021_final?fr=sNjE0NjE0ODIxNDU)

<sup>9</sup>

[https://issuu.com/southwestcoastpath/docs/swcpa\\_health\\_and\\_wellbeing\\_report\\_2020\\_final?fr=sODZlYTE0ODIxNDU](https://issuu.com/southwestcoastpath/docs/swcpa_health_and_wellbeing_report_2020_final?fr=sODZlYTE0ODIxNDU)



locations both physically and conceptually is one of the aims of this plan, seeking a balance between spreading effort too thinly and concentrating it too much.

The landscape around Seaton (excluding the town, the village of Beer, Colyford, Colyton and the Wetlands) is designated as part of the East Devon National Landscape (EDNL) which promotes projects designed to conserve and enhance its special qualities. Natural Seaton sits well in this context and can act as a gateway to the EDNL, as well as the Jurassic Coast.

The Undercliffs to the east have been described above; whilst to the west the village of Beer is an important allied location. Here Beer Quarry Caves are an established tourist attraction and home to colonies of bats that regularly use the Seaton Wetlands as a feeding area. Beyond Beer the coast path takes walkers to the Hooken Undercliff running along the coast to Branscombe, which offers a 4 mile circular walk from Beer to experience a flavour of the wilder and less accessible Undercliffs.

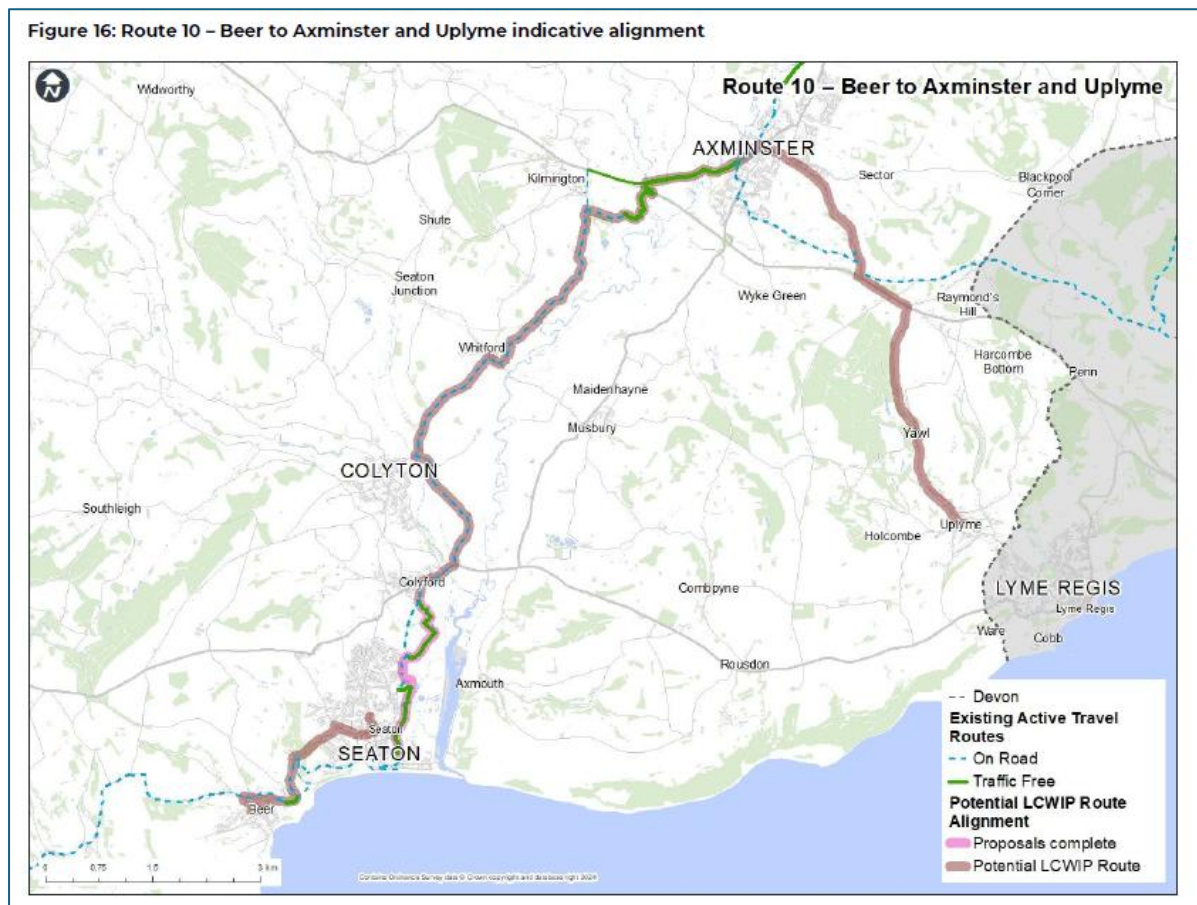


Figure 9 Extract from the Devon LCWIP

Inland, the town of Axminster and the Vale of the River Axe is accessible via National Cycle Network route 2. Most of the route beyond Colyford is on-road, but the Devon Countywide Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (described in Chapter 2.2 above) identifies enhancements to this route as a Medium priority for future investment (see extract left). Securing these improvements would be hugely beneficial to the Natural Seaton offer because a safe cycle route between the train station in Axminster and Seaton would make a car-free package based in Seaton an attractive option for some tourist audiences.

### 3.10 The marine environment



The sea that gives Seaton its name is also of huge wildlife value. Along this coastline the seabed supports rare corals, sea fans and valuable scallop and lobster populations. The Lyme Bay reefs are part of England's largest marine protected area (MPA) and for the last decade a 200 square kilometre area has been subject to controls on fishing activity. Sustainable fishing techniques are being supported and local fishing boats have banded together to maximise the value of their catch. A "Reserve Seafood" brand has been developed that guarantees provenance and sustainability<sup>10</sup>.

Experiencing the underwater marine environment first-hand is not easy, but supporting the fisher people who are carefully exploiting this natural resource is an excellent way to engage with the story. Natural Seaton could make these connections and encourage use of the seafood retail outlets in Beer and Seaton as well as pubs and restaurants that use these local supplies.

The tidal Axe Estuary is also a Marine Conservation Zone, designated in 2019 for its areas of saltmarsh, saline reedbeds, estuarine rocky habitats and mudflats. It is an important nursery area for juvenile fish, including sea bass, and is home to the endangered European eel. The reconnection of Sheep's Marsh to the sea will extend these valuable habitats considerably.

### 3.11 The Visitor Journey

It is widely agreed that the development pattern of Seaton along much of its seafront has left parts of the town poorly connected to the beach, with views of the sea blocked for long stretches. This contrasts with many other seaside resorts that have maintained open vistas along their seafronts. Routes from the main Underfleet car park, where most visitors will arrive, to the seafront are not obvious and visitors must walk along rather nondescript streets for some way before the seafront is reached. Even then, the sea wall that protects the town from storms gives access to the beach at only a few locations. Signage is limited and in places run down.

There is also a challenge connecting the Underfleet car park with the main shopping street. The routes available are quite circuitous, several involving walking through other car parks. For non-

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.lymebayreserve.co.uk/>



locals, these are not at all obvious. The same is true of the route connecting the Underfleet with the main Seaton Wetland site.

Visitors need to be able to follow a simple, attractive and legible route connecting the various features that create their Natural Seaton experience. The geographical spread of the Discovery Points and their associated natural assets, combined with the complexity of the routes connecting them, means visitors can become frustrated or go away with a poor impression of the area. Resolving this challenge is a priority for the development of Natural Seaton.



*Figure 10 View towards the sea from the steps of Seaton Tram Station; no obvious route in sight*

### 3.12 Historical themes – the power of nature

The ancient Axe Estuary was once about half a mile wide and could only have been crossed by boat. It was an important boundary, a food resource and a focus for trade and settlement in prehistoric times. There is also strong evidence that the Axe estuary at Seaton was the site of an important Roman harbour located at the southern end of the long-distance military road, the Fosse Way, and the area could have had a Roman naval base and substantial civil settlement.

In the early mediaeval period the estuary was beginning to silt up but it's likely the harbour at Seaton was still able to function. Salt production was part of the local economy, alongside fishing, sheep and coastal trade. In mediaeval times the town of Seaton started to develop more actively; it had an important role shipping out Beer stone as well as fish, wool and cloth, trading also with continental ports.

By 1540 though, the shingle bar had extended all the way to its current position, larger boats could no longer access the river, and the estuary was silting up rapidly. This marked the end of Seaton's vigorous mediaeval expansion, and it did not find another such valuable economic role for many centuries, until the arrival of the railway. The town lacks the substantial later mediaeval buildings that mark more successful economic centres.

Attempts in post-mediaeval times to build a new harbour for Seaton on the shingle bank were thwarted by severe storms that destroyed the new structures.

In the 17th century efforts were made to drain the marshes and create grazing meadows, with the construction of a Dutch-style embankment. The reclaimed land was let for pasture but was still inundated by the sea at times and salt works continued to operate here. Fishing continued to be the principal economic activity until the later 19<sup>th</sup> century, with salt-making remaining active until the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century.

Seaton's development as a genteel tourist resort began in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and was boosted in 1839 by the huge landslip that created a substantial part of the Undercliffs we know today. Visitors came to see this natural phenomenon and it became a regular feature of the area's attractions. As the century progressed villas were built on the slopes to the west of Seaton. When the railway arrived in 1868, routed along the embankment built to reclaim the marshes, the town's availability to the newly developing mass tourism market and its future growth was guaranteed.

These shifts in human activity and the town's fortunes, so often dictated by natural events and processes, provide a complementary strand to the Natural Seaton story that can attract different audiences and enhance people's experience of the place.

### 3.13 Events and activities

Seaton Wetlands runs a popular programme of events and activities in and around the nature reserve throughout the year, including seasonal holiday trails, Guide in the Hide, summer canoe safaris on the river, a summer holiday club, bat walks and pond dipping. Wildlife events are run by staff and volunteers, while external event providers are brought in for activities such as willow weaving, pottery workshops or yoga. These events are all very popular and book up quickly through facebook and newsletter marketing. There is potential to expand the scope and frequency of these events to increase the visitor draw, but it requires significant additional resource and time.

Seaton Tramway offers Bird Watching Tram tours, and the Axe Vale and District Conservation Society organises occasional events and work parties. Seaton Museum organises occasional talks, mainly on historical themes.

The Natural Seaton Festival is currently the potential centrepiece of Seaton's natural events offer. It is held on the public realm area around Seaton Tram Station and Tesco's, with a range of stalls and activities over a weekend in late July, with outlier events held at Seaton Wetlands and the beach. Seaton Tramway take the lead in organising the event and the Wetlands team support this work.

There is scope for enhancing this programme in a number of ways. The Natural Seaton Festival has scope for considerable growth and wider marketing. A broader programme of events at the Wetlands could generate interest and engagement from the regional audience. There is potential for Natural Seaton to lead on the development of a migration-focused festival held in the Autumn half-term, centred on the Wetlands, helping boost the town in the shoulder season.

### 3.14 Marketing

Marketing activities for Seaton’s natural assets tend to be sporadic and disconnected. This is partly a result of the lack of an overall plan and partly a reflection of the lack of resources available. There is a need for a plan that can provide some shared messages, techniques and approaches to improve marketing coordination and target resources to greater effect.

The concept of “Natural Seaton” has been talked about for many years. The plans for Devon Wildlife Trust’s Seaton Jurassic Centre were embedded in a “Natural Seaton project” that aimed to “establish Seaton as a Gateway to the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site through the creation of a world class Jurassic Coast Discovery Centre (JCDC) and learning and leisure experiences”.<sup>11</sup> As discussed above, the focus at this time was very much on establishing a physical centre and this ultimately distracted from the need to build a deeper-rooted and broader-based platform of experiences and connections that would provide a more sustainable pathway for the Natural Seaton concept. Since then, Natural Seaton has not been developed as a concept, other than through the Natural Seaton Festival.

The Jurassic Coast has become an important marketing asset for Seaton, with Seaton Town Council headlining its website “Gateway to the Jurassic Coast” and Seaton Tramway buying into the Jurassic brand with its new Discovery Centre. The Jurassic Coast brand also appears on interpretation boards around the town and on exhibits in the museum.

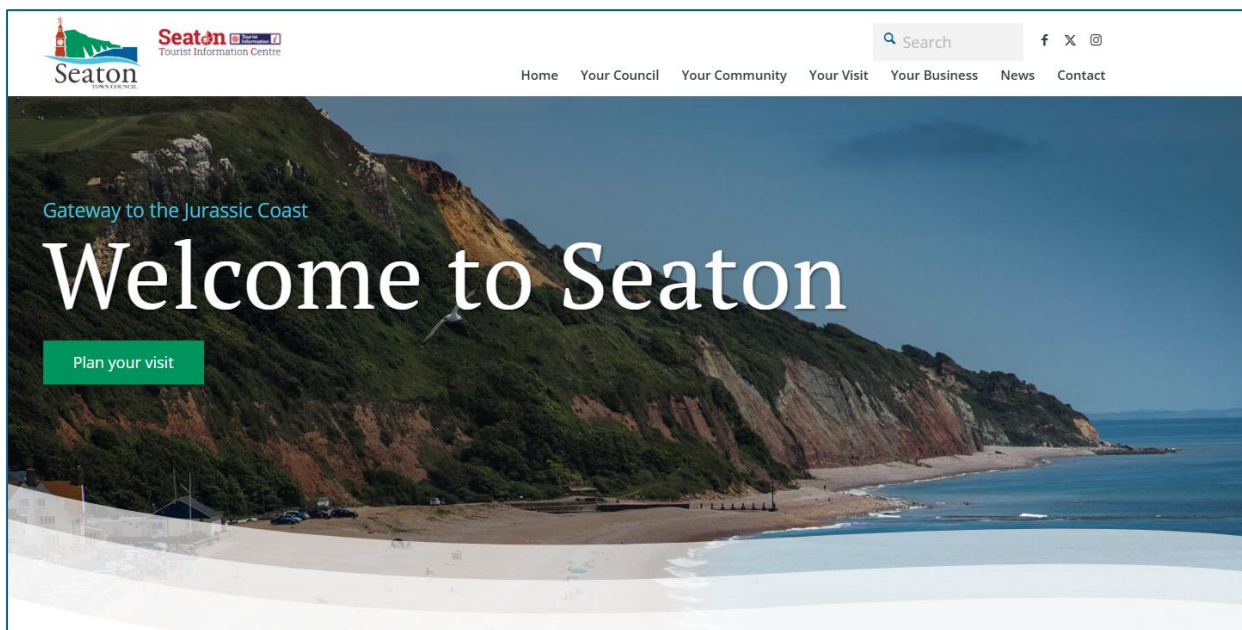


Figure 11 Seaton Town Council website home page

One challenge for the concept of Natural Seaton will be designing it to sit alongside the Jurassic Coast brand. It is imperative that the two are complementary, but they need to be deliberately aligned to avoid confusion. The Jurassic Coast Story Book explains its ambition for its relationship to local initiatives as a “string of pearls” of interpretation sites and facilities along the coast:

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<sup>11</sup> Natural Seaton Interpretation Plan – EDDC / DWT

This was to reflect the linear nature of the geography of the WHS and its associated record through geological time. It was also a means to give each community a way of expressing the unique heritage in their local area, whilst building a connected heritage offer along the entire site.

Natural Seaton could therefore act as a locally-managed channel that drives traffic to the Jurassic Coast. This has the benefit of allowing the flagship Seaton Wetlands site (which is primarily a wildlife experience) to sit alongside the main Jurassic Coast geological and geomorphological sites on the coast. This approach is explored further in chapter 8 below.

Another important aspect of the marketing of Natural Seaton is to ensure that the product being marketed is available to the customer. This can be taken for granted but the reality is that many people need experiences to be packaged up and presented in accessible formats, and the range of “designed” products available in Seaton, in the form of events, activities, trails and learning and engagement opportunities, is currently limited. An ambition for Natural Seaton must be to ensure that reality matches the message.

## 4. Audiences

This chapter presents the conclusion of an analysis of potential audiences carried out by three other relevant organisations, to gain an understanding of how Natural Seaton will appeal to different people. These are:

- The **Natural Seaton project Interpretation Plan** which was developed in the period running up to the opening of the Seaton Jurassic Centre in 2016.
- The Jurassic Coast Trust research into audience types (detailed further in the **Jurassic Coast Story Book**)
- The **East Devon Tourist Strategy**, which adopts Visit England customer segment analysis.

These organisations developed different categories of audience that have been used to create a Natural Seaton audience profile as follows:

Audience	Description	What they seek
Nature Explorers	Families and couples/individuals who are post family (55+); also younger, pre family couples /individuals.	Motivated by curiosity, wonder and a desire to get out and enjoy new experiences. Emphasise spending time outdoors to socialise with friends. They are more likely to engage with activities involving a new, adventurous way to see the coast.
Family Fun	Families and extended families.	Looking for novelty and to be entertained and for moderately energetic experiences. Visits often revolve around hobbies, familiar places where access is easy, or where the facilities are good and there is infrastructure that aids relaxation and socialising.
Careful and Curious	Mainly older adults who may or may not be retired, this group tend	This group places a much stronger emphasis on the social aspects of any visit and are looking for quality experiences that have an enriching aim in mind and which provide an experience suited to general rather



	to be more conservative.	than specific knowledge. This group will be less inclined towards strenuous physical activity. Their interests are typically local and specific, eg local history.
Natural Learners	School groups, community groups, volunteers, young people and local and Explorer families.	Normally taking part in an organised group visit.
Friends and Champions	Likely to be more affluent and active older people local and/or community leaders and active local volunteers.	Seeking opportunities to volunteer and socialise. May already be very active in the community and are ready to help out on a regular basis and to promote the Natural Seaton concept amongst their network of contacts.

What seems clear is that there is likely to be a strong demand for the Natural Seaton concept from a wide range of audiences, but the offer needs to be multi-faceted to maximise accessibility for these different audiences.

## 5. Analysis and Proposition

The review above has described how Seaton's natural assets are currently being managed and has explored elements of their potential. This chapter brings together these many different threads to shape the Natural Seaton concept.

The natural beauty of the landscape around Seaton is recognised as a huge asset for the town, which provides a strategically important gateway to the East Devon National Landscape and the internationally important Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site. Its location at one end of the wildest section of coast in the south of England is exceptional, as is the proximity of the wildlife-rich haven of the Seaton Wetlands and the existence of the unique Seaton Tramway.

Another great strength is that the organisations and individuals managing these assets recognise their value and are dedicated to caring for them and attracting people to enjoy them. The Jurassic Coast brand has been adopted enthusiastically, and the area's Cultural and Tourism strategies place the natural world at the top of their priorities.

However, the full potential of Seaton's natural assets is not being realised. There is a relatively low level of nature-based events aside from the Wetlands, a lack of strong nature-focused communications and the various natural assets are rather disconnected physically. Tackling these three areas of weakness will transform the way people appreciate Seaton and its surroundings and power up the town's regeneration and pride of place. Addressing these issues should be a central principal for the Natural Seaton Partnership.

The concept of Natural Seaton is not new. It was developed at least 20 years ago and underpinned the early development thoughts of the Seaton Jurassic Centre. This was seen as being at the hub of a wheel of natural experiences, but it became focused on its own survival and could not do enough to connect the spokes of the wheel through communications, organised activities or physical



infrastructure. The failure of the Centre has meant that those original plans for a wider promotion and connection of Seaton's natural assets have fallen by the wayside.

Now is the time to revisit the Natural Seaton concept and reshape it in a form that partners will find more cost-effective and sustainable. The acquisition of land for Seaton Wetlands adjacent to the Underfleet Car Park means that new access and a new Welcome Point can be installed here. The rebirth of the Seaton Jurassic Centre as Jurassic Discovery means that there is life back in the building and it can act as part of the Natural Seaton offer. Seaton Museum is entering a new phase of development, public realm improvements are underway and local people sense an uplift in the energy and fortunes of the town. Natural Seaton could be the driving force that supports the development of these assets and catalyses new partnerships and activities across the community.

The main planks of the Natural Seaton concept proposed in this Masterplan are detailed in chapter 7 below. In summary, these are:

- Partners from across the community should help refine this plan, adopt it and then collaborate to deliver it. This should include forming a Natural Seaton Partnership to coordinate delivery.
- Seaton Wetlands is the obvious flagship site for Natural Seaton and should be developed with improved access and a new Welcome Point close to the town.
- Seaton Tramway is a key partner in delivering the vision and in facilitating better access to Seaton's natural assets.
- Seaton Museum has an important role to play as a learning and volunteering space and needs to be supported to fulfil that role.
- The Discovery Points need rebranding and refreshing, with one being relocated to support the creation of a more legible circular route connecting Seaton's natural assets.
- Allied natural assets and experiences, along the coast towards Branscombe and Lyme Regis, up the River Axe and out to sea, are important parts of the Natural Seaton concept.
- A busy programme of partner events and activities needs to be delivered throughout the year, linking to visitor and resident audiences.
- Marketing needs to be better coordinated and driven, founded on a Natural Seaton brand and connecting with other key East Devon and West Dorset brands and experiences.

## 6. Vision, Aims and Objectives

The **Vision** proposed for Natural Seaton is that:

Natural Seaton has ensured that Seaton's natural assets and heritage develop strongly as a source of pride and the main driver of the town's prosperity, providing secure jobs, learning opportunities and community connection alongside a richness of wildlife and natural beauty.

Natural Seaton's **Aim** is:

To work together to protect, enhance and promote Seaton's natural assets so they catalyse the regeneration of the town, enhance community life and support nature's recovery.

Its **Objectives** are:

- To foster collaboration across the community to secure the Vision.
- To ensure Seaton's natural assets and heritage are as accessible as possible, respecting the need to protect wildlife.
- To provide excellent interpretation on site and online to encourage learning about and engagement with the themes of Natural Seaton.
- To organise a busy programme of events and activities to improve access to and celebrate Natural Seaton assets.
- To connect with allied locations and brands that help build the area's role as a gateway to the natural world and our heritage.

## 7. Detailed Proposals

This chapter, and the following one, describe in more detail how the Natural Seaton concept could be implemented over the coming years. These are very much draft ideas for further discussion, elaboration by partners and development from the Natural Seaton Partnership.

### 7.1 Seaton Wetlands

With its existing wildlife richness and accessibility Seaton Wetlands is the natural flagship site for Natural Seaton. It now has the opportunity to build on its excellent reputation to become a regionally recognised nature reserve and wildlife experience that can attract visitors from even further afield and co-ordinate a wider programme of themed events and activities.

#### i) New access route and visitor reception

A key plank in realising this potential is the recent purchase by EDDC of Salt Plot & Church Plots, adjacent to the Underfleet Car Park, which consolidate the nature reserve's southern land holding neighbouring the town. Crucially, the acquisition means that a footpath link can be made directly from the car park onto the reserve and, from there, a new route can be created alongside Sheep's Marsh intertidal habitat creation scheme, with the potential for new bird hides to be installed, linking to the existing hide overlooking the River Axe (see plan below).



The plan also shows a potential location for a new highly accessible visitor reception point and entrance feature sited at the commencement of the new path, adjacent to the car park and play. This could be of similar design to the facilities that the reserve has created elsewhere, ie a simple timber building, with some interpretation, that would be staffed by paid staff and volunteers. It would provide a Seaton Wetlands arrival point and a hub for Natural Seaton, where information could be shared

on all the experiences on offer. The design of this gateway reception point should be enticing and include features to provide a powerful sense of arrival at a significant visitor destination.



Figure 12 How the new land acquisition enables improved access links

## ii) Sheep's Marsh

Complementing this acquisition are plans to connect Sheep's Marsh to the estuary so that it would become a dynamic intertidal environment, changing with the tides and creating precious new areas of saltmarsh. This would make Sheep's Marsh even richer in wildlife with excellent spectacles of birdlife and introduce concepts of coastal squeeze and climate resilience.

## iii) Whitecross Farm

The next major opportunity for Seaton Wetlands is to physically connect the northern and southern portions of the reserve. The privately-owned Whitecross Farm divides the two and the multi-use path connecting the two halves is forced to divert inland into a semi-urban environment. Whitecross Farm lies mostly on the floodplain and is farmed with livestock; but with sympathetic management for nature these low lying fields could provide a huge boost for nature recovery and provide space for wetland features currently missing from the various nature reserves. It would also





offer the chance to create new permissive footpath connections away from the urban area that would massively enhance the visitor experience as they explore the wider reserve. The map below shows the central block of land that makes up Whitecross farm, separating the two halves of the reserve.

Discussions are underway with the landowner to explore the potential for the long term lease or purchase of the floodplain areas of the farm.

#### iv) Colyford / Bridge Marshes

There is also a third possible phase of land acquisition to the north of the reserve at Colyford and Bridge Marshes, running alongside the reserve up to Seaton Tramway's Colyford Halt. These fields are currently managed agriculturally across part of their area but a formerly valuable wetland feature has fallen into disrepair and no longer holds water. Their purchase, long lease or partnership working would enable not only the habitat to be improved for wetland species but also provide space for an off-road extension to the multi-use path. This would give access to Colyford Halt and the cycle route northwards without going on-road through Colyford.

#### v) Car parks

Another element of access infrastructure discussed above was the role of car parks. With a new visitor reception point, the Underfleet car park becomes the obvious access point for the reserve, leaving the role of the Cemetery car park potentially in question. Reducing the size of this car park and limiting it for staff,

volunteers and disabled drivers is an option. Alternatively, charging for the car park and maintaining it for local use (no longer signposting it as the reserve's car park) could be a better approach, as this retains a valued local asset however the area would need significant investment for it to be a chargeable parking location.

#### **vi) Engaging people**

Seaton Wetlands has much to offer in terms of engaging people with nature and already does good work on this front. There is potential to achieve a lot more, though. This would include:

- Amending and updating external interpretation boards to communicate a stronger narrative about the natural history and heritage of the site
- Organising more events and activities on a wider variety of themes
- Developing partnerships with community organisations to broaden the appeal of the site. This would include developing new programmes and skills to help meet the needs of people who don't traditionally visit the site because of various barriers
- Developing a new and more dynamic online presence.

## **7.2 The Visitor Journey / Discovery Points**

As reviewed in chapter 3, the Discovery Points have the potential to be useful but are currently under-exploited, lacking in connectivity and, in some cases, in poor condition. The proposal outlined here is to create a "Natural Seaton Trail", which is a recommended route connecting the different Discovery Points and incorporating as many of the key Natural Seaton experiences as possible. The Trail needs to be:

- easy to follow
- avoiding busy roads and less attractive urban streets
- accessible by a wide range of people
- making the best of Seaton's assets and views

Achieving this is challenging, but the development of a new gateway to Seaton Wetlands from the Underfleet opens up a natural circuit that takes people straight into the Wetlands experience, closely followed by a tram ride. The route then follows a riverside road to access the coast and returns inland via Fore street and the Museum.

The Trail also entails repairing and relocating The Portal from Seaton Hole, where it is distant from the main centre of activity, and quite inaccessible. The new location proposed is at the point where the recommended route first meets the seafront promenade, beside Axe Yacht Club, providing a stage on what is otherwise a long stretch of the journey.

The Discovery Points will then act as steps on a journey of discovery between the natural assets of Seaton Wetlands, Seaton Tramway, the Undercliffs, Seaton beach and Seaton Museum. The concept is mapped overleaf (southern half only).





Figure 13 The southern half of the recommended visitor trail

The recommended Natural Seaton Trail is as follows:

From your arrival at the Underfleet car park you head north via Sheep's Marsh through the Wetlands up to the Tramway Wetlands Halt. Here you catch a tram heading back down to the Riverside Halt where you leave the tram and walk south along Riverside Way to Harbour Road. Here you join the South West Coast Path briefly, crossing the old River Axe Bridge, before turning off into Axmouth Harbour and thence to the Prow and the Undercliff.

From here you retrace your steps back on the South West Coast Path, over the river to Harbour Road, and then immediately turn left (still on the Coast Path) through Axe Yacht Club to reach the seafront and The Portal.

From here you follow the promenade as far as the Wave and then head north up Fore Street, Seaton's main shopping street, to Seaton Museum. From here a quiet road, which is also a public footpath, takes you back to the Underfleet car park.

This circuit would take a half day, at least. It would be recommended to be done in the sequence described here, but it could be done in reverse, or broken into more bite-sized chunks, or varied according to your interests and appetite.

The Trail should be waymarked with a distinctive and robust design, with a Natural Seaton theme, and seating should be installed at regular intervals.

The proposals for the Discovery Points are:

- To renew the interpretation boards on all the Discovery Points and rebrand them with Natural Seaton and Jurassic Coast.
- To retain The Wave but replace the worn-out interpretation board and relocate this to a natural viewing point approx. 100m to the west.
- To renew the Interpretation Hub board on the existing plinth and retain its location.
- To inspect and if necessary repair The Prow, refreshing the seating.
- To redesign and possibly relocate The Stargazer within the Seaton Wetlands site, giving it more of a wildlife focus.
- As mentioned above, to repair and relocate The Portal to the seafront near Axe Yacht Club.

## 7.3 Seaton Tramway

Seaton Tramway is already active in promoting birdwatching by tram and has installed wildlife interpretation at its Riverside and Wetland halts. Jurassic Discovery also has strong potential links to Natural Seaton which could be developed further. The Tramway has a very active online presence and is well-placed to help develop the profile of the Natural Seaton concept with its audience. There are also opportunities to collaborate on events, described below.

Its collaboration with the recommended route is needed, to enable passengers to disembark at the Riverside Halt, and from there pick up the Riverside Way section of the route. This may require a new section of footpath constructing to skirt the Riverside depot, which is the Tramway's repair shed.

## 7.4 Seaton Museum

The Museum's work to improve its collection management and exhibits needs supporting and Natural Seaton could provide a context to help frame the reinvigoration of the museum. This could take the form of developing links between the museum's collections, the Natural Seaton story and the nature-connected elements of the town's history. Exhibits telling this story could be given prominence and the museum could establish itself as a seat of learning and discovery about Natural Seaton. This could inform its work with volunteers, community and educational groups and external organisations and assist with funding bids. The museum can also broaden the Natural Seaton offer, providing opportunities for research and learning that are distinct to its role in the community.

The museum has been included on the Natural Seaton Trail and this, it is hoped, will provide an additional attraction on the Trail to give it another dimension, help grow visitor numbers and boost the museum's viability. Ideally volunteers would be found to enable the museum to open on Saturdays for some of the year, to tap into a likely increase in visitors at weekends.

An alternative option is for the museum to be supported to find a more accessible permanent home, or to develop an accessible Natural Seaton exhibition space in partnership with other organisations.

## 7.5 Connected locations

The key locations that connect to the Natural Seaton story are, to the west, the village of Beer, Beer Quarry Caves and the Hooken Undercliff; to the east, the Undercliffs; to the north, the East Devon Natural Landscape, the River Axe and Axminster; and to the south the marine environment.

The Natural Seaton story should embrace these destinations and encourage people to explore them, acting as a signpost and setting out potential itineraries. These should be designed to provide experiences that suit the different audiences identified in chapter 4 and thereby maximise the appeal of the Natural Seaton concept. So, whilst there are challenges in accessing each of these points of the compass, they are not insurmountable and different experiences can be designed for different capabilities. For example, for some the challenge of exploring the Undercliffs on foot will prove irresistible, whilst others may prefer a boat trip from Beer to view the same dramatic landscape whilst engaging in some mackerel fishing.

Signage and route accessibility needs to be reviewed for these connected locations. The east and west stretches of the South West Coast Path are likely to be well-signed and maintained but return loops and connection points may not be in such good condition. These should be upgraded if necessary.

The inland cycle route to Axminster is recommended for upgrade but is not currently a high priority on a county-wide scale. The development of the Natural Seaton concept could help bring this forward as a priority, because it demonstrates the potential of the area and the commitment of local stakeholders to a vision that depends upon making the natural world more accessible.



## 7.6 Events and activities

For many audiences, organised events and activities are an important gateway to discovering new places or finding out about new aspects of a known place. Therefore, an enhanced programme of events is an essential element of the Natural Seaton concept. The Seaton Wetlands events programme is currently operating at capacity in terms of its number of events and bookings, so developing resource to help broaden this programme and coordinate partner contribution to this programme is key.

However, it may take time to build an audience for an expanded programme and so the delivery of this programme should be carefully designed. For instance, it would be sensible to gradually increase the availability and range of events alongside improvements in accessibility, new infrastructure, new marketing platforms and new partnerships, to give the best chance of success.

Partnerships will be key to developing the programme. The Wetlands, Tramway, Museum, Axe Vale and District Conservation Society, Axe Estuary Ringing Group and Seaton Town Council are likely to be at the core of this partnership. Local organisations supporting community activities in and around Seaton will also play an important part.

The **Natural Seaton Festival** in July should be continued, reimagined and boosted to broaden its reach and impact using funding from this scheme. Once the Wetlands have improved their accessibility and scope there is also a huge opportunity for an **Autumn Wetlands Week** to be organised in East Devon that sees a collaboration from wetland managers on the Axe, Otter and Exe Estuaries to celebrate wetland wildlife and heritage of these nature reserves.

## 7.7 Involving people

The residents of Seaton and its surrounding villages and towns will play an important part in making the Natural Seaton concept a success. They may benefit from the improved facilities and access to nature that is created on their doorstep; they may access new experiences and learning and create new friendships; they may become volunteers or gain employment supporting an aspect of the work; or they may benefit indirectly through the town's regeneration, as local businesses grow and the public realm improves.

It is important, therefore, that local people can help shape the Natural Seaton Masterplan and have a sense of ownership of it. There are also very likely to be new partnerships and opportunities that emerge as the plans are shared and people's ideas come forward, that will help enhance the concept, make it work for a wider range of people and root it fully in the community.

For this reason, this report should be seen as a draft document. A consultation phase is needed that takes this Masterplan out initially to the key partners but then to a wider audience to access community knowledge and initiatives and shape the plan accordingly. This will then lay the foundation for long-term, sustainable activities that engage local people with Natural Seaton in multiple ways.

## 7.8 Natural Seaton Partnership

Natural Seaton should be developed and coordinated by a partnership of stakeholders to ensure it meets local needs and is properly embedded in the local community. A **Natural Seaton**

**Partnership** should be formed as an informal advisory forum to fulfil this role. It should have terms of reference, an appointed membership and an independent chair but it would not have any decision-making powers over any of its members. It would aim to support and guide the organisations involved to align their activities with the Natural Seaton Masterplan, iron out problems at an early stage and be responsive to opportunities as they emerge.

Membership of the Partnership should be by invitation, but should include representatives of the following organisations as a minimum:

- Seaton Wetlands
- Seaton Tramway
- Seaton Museum
- Axe Vale and District Conservation Society
- Axe Estuary Ringing Group
- Seaton Town Council
- Seaton Chamber of Commerce
- Jurassic Coast (Devon County Council)
- Natural England
- East Devon Cultural Lead
- East Devon Placemaking Lead
- East Devon District Council member for Seaton
- Devon County Council member for Seaton

## 8. Interpretive and Marketing Concepts

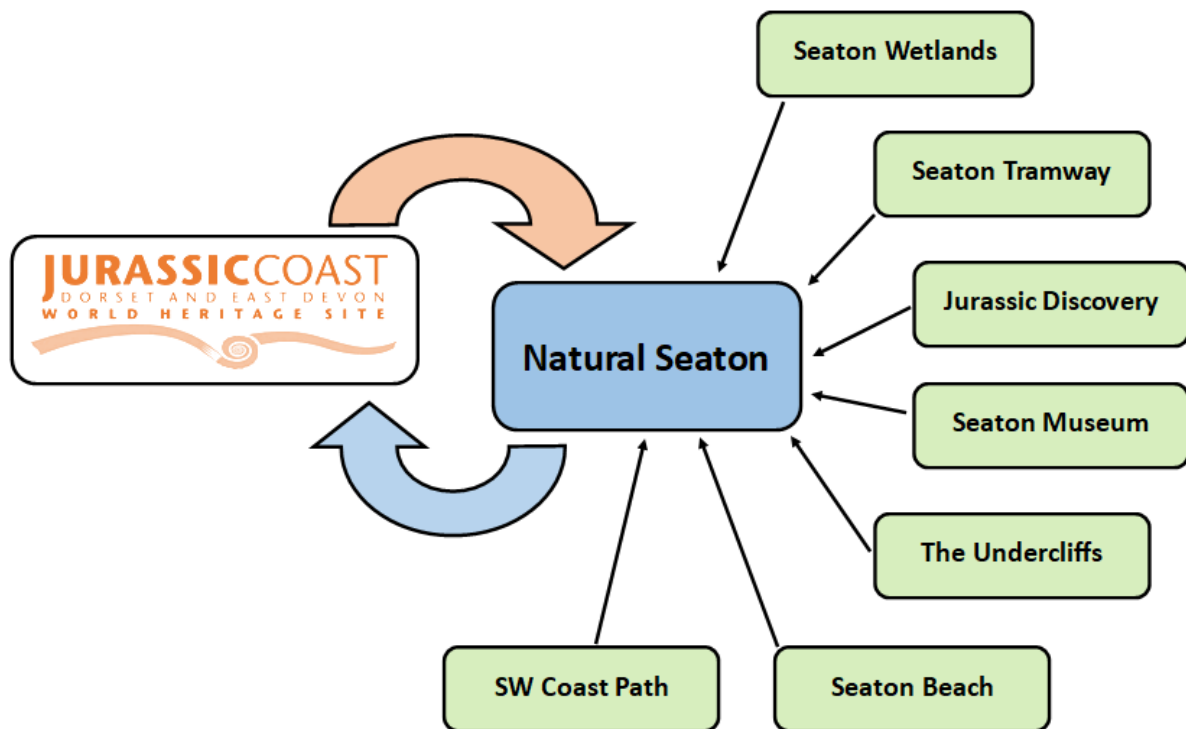
Natural Seaton has three closely related strands of activity: the first is to establish the right infrastructure to enable people to easily access the natural assets; the second is to inspire people to set out to explore those assets (marketing); and the third is to bring those assets to life when people arrive, or when they access them remotely (interpretation). This chapter describes how Natural Seaton could best be marketed and interpreted.

### 8.1 Marketing

Natural Seaton should become a portal to a menu of experiences, from which people can select according to their interests and capabilities. It should also be a hallmark that gives people confidence that these experiences will be of a high quality and will give them access to the best of Seaton's natural places and related heritage. Natural Seaton is also a golden thread running through a tapestry of places and stories, integrating them whilst respecting their individuality.

These functions all point towards the need to develop Natural Seaton as a brand, with its own strong identity. A strong logo and a dedicated web presence are essential elements of the brand. Natural Seaton can then be linked-to from partner websites and marketing channels, helping to build its profile and establish it as an organising principle. The brand should also appear on signage for the Natural Seaton Trail and on associated literature.

A key issue is the relationship of a Natural Seaton brand with the already well-established and widely used Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site brand. The two brands have some similar functions, including making the natural world more accessible, connecting disparate locations and generating a coherent story linking these locations. But Natural Seaton covers a limited portion of the Jurassic Coast and works at a finer scale as a result. It needs to be designed to be distinct from the Jurassic Coast brand whilst demonstrating that the two are complementary. Natural Seaton is a portal to discover the Jurassic Coast and the Jurassic Coast can also point people to Natural Seaton as one of its “string of pearls” along the length of the WHS coastline. Natural Seaton in turn provides a pathway to the individual businesses and brands that are its constituent parts.



Existing relationships between some natural assets and the Jurassic Coast will remain in place; for example, The Undercliffs have a very strong relationship as a major geological site and the South West Coast Path is the main artery connecting the WHS.

## 8.2 Interpretation

Interpretation – through events, leaflets, information panels, exhibitions, digital and other media – is the way we make Seaton’s natural assets and connected heritage meaningful and relevant to people. This section sets out the themes and messages suitable for Natural Seaton and makes some suggestions for the development of new interpretive media.

There are three main themes to Natural Seaton which represent a journey back through time:

- The wildlife that flourishes – or survives against the odds – in the landscape today
- How humans have benefited from and shaped the landscape – and how nature has impacted on us



- How the landscape was formed before humans emerged

**i) The wildlife that flourishes – or survives against the odds – in the landscape today**

Seaton Wetlands and the River Axe estuary form the year-round flagship locations for this theme, with the Undercliffs coming a close second, especially during the spring and summer when plants are in flower. The stories will follow naturally from the special habitats and species to be found, including their behaviour, lifecycles, conservation needs and prospects. Important messages relate to how people can support their conservation and get involved.

In person appreciation of this wildlife will be supported by extending the network of existing paths and hides to take in new areas. Guided walks, Guide in the Hide and canoe safaris will provide expert support to people. These need to be supplemented by good quality outdoor panels, leaflets and online resources, including photographs and films.

The Natural Seaton Festival is an opportunity to tell all of these stories and mention has already been made of other events being needed to develop greater engagement with Natural Seaton, including a Wetlands Week event in partnership with other parts of East Devon.

The Natural Seaton Trail is another vehicle to support interpretation. This should have a dedicated leaflet that not only acts as a guide to the route but also tells some of the stories to be encountered on the way. This should be supplemented by onsite interpretation panels and by an online virtual trail, providing an opportunity to share old photographs and paintings that show the landscape before more recent changes occurred.



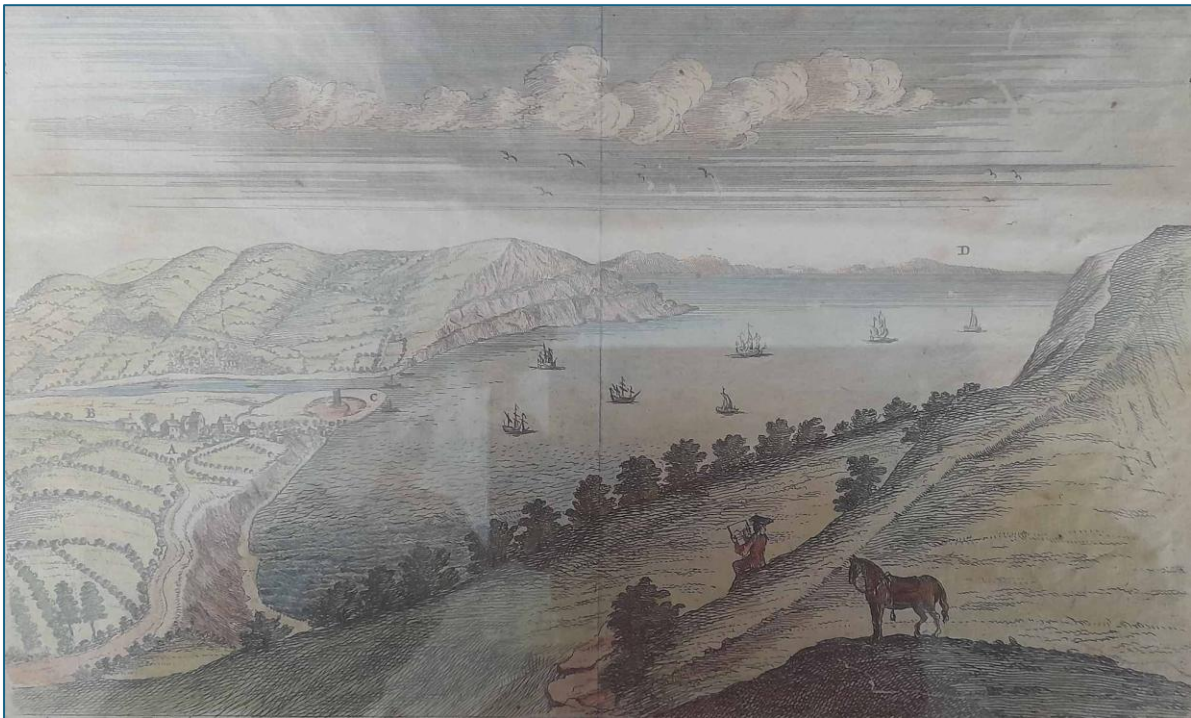
Figure 14 An example of trail signage combining interpretation

**ii) How humans have benefited from and shaped the landscape – and how nature has impacted on us**

There are many stories to be told around this theme, but the focus should be on human interactions with nature, including:

- The development of Seaton as an important south coast harbour from Roman times onwards
- The trade in Beer stone, fish and salt
- The silting up of the estuary leading to the gradual loss of the deepwater harbour
- The storms that destroyed attempts to re-establish a harbour on the beach
- The construction of the embankment and drainage of the marshes to create farmland
- The Undercliff collapse that boosted Seaton's emerging tourism industry
- The arrival of the railway along the embankment that brought mass tourism to Seaton
- The reversal of the drainage of the farmland to recreate marshes and the Seaton Wetlands.

Talks, guided walks, outdoor panels, leaflets and exhibitions can all tell these stories. Seaton Museum has good collections of old maps, photographs and paintings to illustrate them; and visualisations could be developed to help people imagine what the landscape would have looked like in Roman times.



*Figure 15 William Stukely's view over Seaton, c.1724*



Figure 16 Alfred Robert Quinton, 1920's postcard – copyright J Salmon Image Archive

### iii) How the landscape was formed before humans emerged

This theme is directly connected to the Jurassic Coast and the content developed in the Jurassic Coast Story Book. This proposes *The Walk Through Time* as “a site-wide concept that unites the hugely diverse geology and geomorphology of the Jurassic Coast into a single, compelling idea<sup>12</sup>”, setting a framework for local interpretation of “footsteps” along the Walk Through Time.

The Story Book goes on to suggest stories specific to the Seaton area and its geology; an example is shown below of Seaton to the east; a similar table exists for the stretch of coast to the west of Seaton.

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<sup>12</sup> [https://www.jurassiccoast.org/dbimgs/Jurassic%20Coast%20Story%20Book\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.jurassiccoast.org/dbimgs/Jurassic%20Coast%20Story%20Book_WEB.pdf)



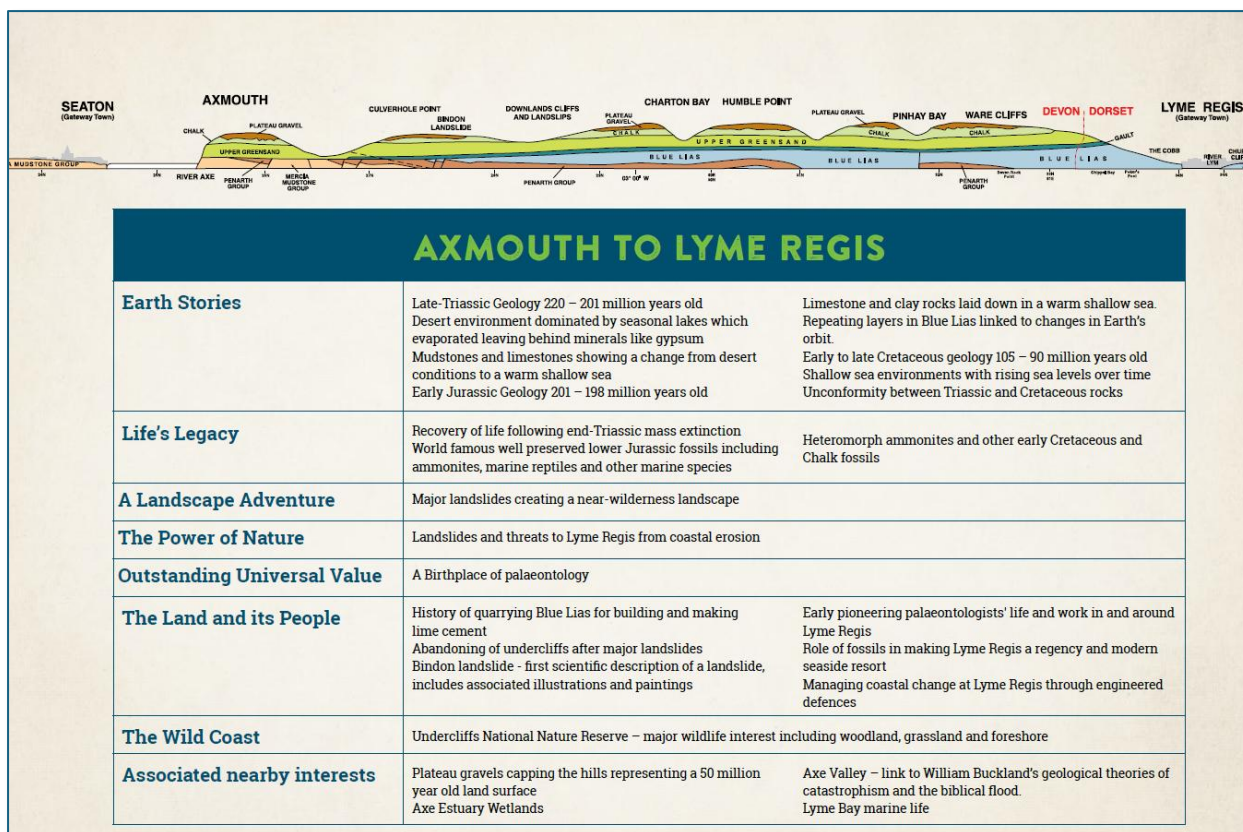


Figure 17 Extract from the Jurassic Coast Storybook

These tables pinpoint stories about the Triassic, Jurassic and Cretaceous periods including the desert and marine environments in which the geology was formed and the fossils to be found in the area. Added to these should be the impact of tectonic plate movements and sea level changes on the landscape and the formation of the Vale of the River Axe through erosion.

These stories can best be understood on site in the company of a skilled interpreter, supplemented by interpretive panels and leaflets. Boat trips from Beer or Axmouth Harbour will provide a completely different way of appreciating the coast. Fossils, displayed in Seaton Museum or travelling to events or temporary exhibitions, bring the stories to life.

## 9. Next Steps

As described above, this is a draft document that is designed to bring together partners and initiate discussions around the Natural Seaton concept, with a view to agreeing a final Masterplan that is seen to be deliverable, effective and fundable. To this end, the following steps are recommended:

- Share this document with key partners (those listed under the Natural Seaton Partnership).
- At the same time, invite partners to join the Natural Seaton Partnership and begin meeting on a regular basis to help shape the next steps.
- Subject to amendments suggested by partners, take a revised Masterplan out to an audience of local residents and businesses to gain initial responses from wider stakeholders.
- Implement a first phase of improvements to signage and the Discovery Points.
- Meanwhile, seek funding for delivery of the Masterplan from the Natural Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) and other relevant funders. An early Expression of Interest to the NLHF prior to the community consultation process will indicate if this channel had a chance of success.
- The two-stage NLHF process could provide funding for a Development Phase, during which the Masterplan would be tested and improved, ready for the Delivery Phase.
- An indicative timeline for this approach is:

	2025						2026												2027	2028	2029	2030
Key Steps	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec				
EOI to NLHF																						
Community consultation																						
Implement Phase 1 works																						
Submit NLHF application																						
NLHF decision																						
Development Phase (18 m)																						
Delivery Phase (3 yrs)																						

- In the meantime, the following phased outline budget indicates the potential costs of implementing the Natural Seaton Masterplan.

Name	Description	Estimated cost
<b>Phase 1</b>	<b>Signage and Discovery Point improvements</b>	
Old signage	Remove and replace signage which references Seaton Jurassic and replace with elements which tell the Natural Seaton story	£4,000
The Wave	New interpretation panel to better link the sculpture to the story	£3,000
The Prow	Repair and refresh the structure and interpretation at this key location	£5,000
Orientation point	Develop new interpretation to sit in this piece of public realm furniture, and allocate a responsible body to maintain it	£2,000
The Stargazer	Currently removed on safety grounds, replace with a wildlife-themed piece of substantial site furniture which is also wheelchair accessible	£8,000
The Portal	Repair the sculpture and relocate to the seafront. Renew interpretation panel.	£10,000

Natural Seaton Masterplan Draft March 2025

Field shelter	Replace a thatched basic shelter at Stafford Marsh with more purpose built structure with a locally-sourced wooden shingle roof	£10,000
	<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>£42,000</b>
<b>Phase 2</b>	<b>Development Phase 2026-27</b>	
Staff team	1.5 FTE Project Development Officer and Community Engagement Officer for 18 months	£110,000
Professional fees - capital	Specialists to develop plans for capital programme including visitor infrastructure and habitat creation, including preparing plans for all consents required	£80,000
Professional fees - activities	Specialists to support development of an Activity Plan, Interpretation Plan and Evaluation Plan	£25,000
Pilot Activities	Materials, marketing and other costs to run a programme of pilot events and activities to involve people	£30,000
	<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>£245,000</b>
<b>Phase 3</b>	<b>Delivery Phase 2028-31</b>	
Staff team	Project Officer and 0.5 Engagement Officer for 3 years	£330,000
Sheep's Marsh	Works to re-establish saltmarsh and estuarine habitats	£500,000
New footpaths	Around Sheep's Marsh and other key links	£80,000
Visitor welcome	New visitor reception point at the Underfleet car park	£100,000
Natural Seaton Trail	A waymarked and interpreted trail guiding people through various points of interest in and around Seaton as detailed in this masterplan.	£60,000
Field shelter	Replace a thatched basic shelter at Stafford Marsh with more purpose built structure with a locally-sourced wooden shingle roof	£10,000
Activity programme	Costs for an events and activities programme, including support for partner organisations	£120,000
Volunteers	Activities and support for volunteers	£30,000
Cyclepath interpretation	A series of information panels or similar, telling stories of Natural Seaton along its full route.	£20,000
The Natural Seaton Storybook	Create a marketing and interpretive handbook for partner use to guide the messaging of the new brand and establish logos etc	£10,000
Marketing / communications	Promotional materials, social media	£20,000
Evaluation	External evaluation specialist	£30,000
	<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>£1,310,000</b>