

Wolverton, Milton Keynes



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'Wolverton' includes the three linked communities of Wolverton, Greenleys and Old Wolverton.

Population: 8,884

Including hinterland: 11,605

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Introduction

This Victorian/Edwardian town sits on the edge of the major conurbation of Milton Keynes. The town was founded by the London & Birmingham Railway Company in 1838 as the stopping point between the two cities. It was the first purpose-built railway town to be developed on a green field site, to house new railway industry workers and, as such, was the 'Milton Keynes of its time'. The Grand Union Canal, which was vital to the development of the railway works, also runs through the town.

The town's heritage has been undermined over time by unsympathetic demolition and redevelopment. Local people are now keen to restore the distinctive features that remain, while embracing the significant redevelopment opportunities presented by brownfield land alongside the canal and railway sites.

Wolverton is a unique town in more ways than one:

- It has a very distinct sense of place and community. This stems in part from the town's physical lay out – a grid-like series of redbrick terraced houses and corner shops – which in itself promotes a sense of community. The tight geographical boundary and terraced streets enable face-to-face contact, so it is easier for people to be friendly, feel safer and have a common purpose. The town has an ethnically diverse population and enjoys a vibrant cultural and artistic mix.
- Sitting on the edge of the urban spread of Milton Keynes – which is a growth area that is set to double in size – Wolverton is a small town within a large city. Yet it also has a rural hinterland of villages, and a hinterland of estates in north Milton Keynes. Residents in the hinterland come to Wolverton to use the railway station, supermarket, shops, banks, building society,



The Grand Union Canal, which was vital to the development of the railway works, runs through the town.

restaurants and takeaways. They also visit for leisure and cultural activities, most especially the outdoor swimming pool. It is clear that given Wolverton's position near to large conurbations, including Milton Keynes and Northampton, there is strong competition as a centre for employment, shopping and other services. However, Wolverton's hinterland working group felt that with the right development and promotion, the town could extend its role as a centre by capitalising on its unique heritage and transport links.

How market towns function as service centres

The Countryside Agency thinks that rural settlement planning would be more effective if it were based on a sound understanding of how rural settlements actually function and of the impacts that new development has. This will allow policies to be tailored so that they guide the right types of new development to the locations where they can provide the greatest benefits for rural sustainability.

As part of its work in this area, the Agency has recently commissioned research into the roles market towns play as service centres for their own populations and surrounding villages. The research exposed the complexity of contemporary rural lives and the varied nature of the roles towns play in serving people from the rural hinterlands. It also revealed that many of the features of current settlement function and relationships – including increasing mobility, reduced localisation of service use and work, and the weakening attachment of villages to their local towns – go against policy aspirations for market towns. The Agency plans to publish the research, and to explore these initial findings further through demonstration projects.

The rural/urban divide: does it exist?

It is difficult to categorise some market towns as either urban or rural. And Wolverton is certainly a town that does not fit entirely within one category or the other.

In November 2003, Wolverton hosted a British Urban Regeneration Association (BURA) conference entitled, 'The rural/urban divide: does it exist?'. The conference identified that there are many areas where similar challenges are faced by both urban and rural communities, but that the way they are tackled may be different. What is clear is that the community engagement agenda is here to stay as a key element of sustainable development. A report of the conference can be viewed at www.buranet.com

The Countryside Agency is developing its understanding of the distinctions between rural and urban areas, focusing on:

- sustainable development;
- interactions and interdependencies;
- the way in which people and communities force a link; and
- how community plans and urban change can be beneficial to town and country.

For more information about the Agency's work on the rural/urban fringe, see page 111.

- This Beacon Town is notable for the way the community has come together to shape its destiny. Residents of the town have worked hard to develop a creative and supportive atmosphere, which is helping local people to feel they can embrace change. And the town has a remarkably strong and active partnership, including a relatively new and very supportive Town Council (with several young members). The community is willing to work in partnership with others, and to share its experience and learn from others.



The Agora – This much hated building, which was imposed from above, has been described as “being like a cancer” within the town. Its redevelopment will bring back new life to this central part of town.

Looking to the future, building on the past

Over several decades, while Milton Keynes grew and flourished, Wolverton declined economically. Founded on a declining railway industry, but on the edge of a settlement that is growing, Wolverton has managed to maintain a healthy and vital community.

The town has been subject to unsympathetic change over recent years and local people are very conscious of a number of negative experiences that were largely driven by outside agencies.

Just two examples will give a feel for the damaging impact that these changes have had on the town. In the late 1980s the fine station building, opened in 1882, was demolished, literally overnight, with local people having no say in the decision. Since then, the station has had only austere ticketing facilities. According to Wolverton's Civic Society, the old station building is still fondly remembered by many residents.

The Agora is a large indoor shopping centre, built in 1979 by Milton Keynes Development Corporation as a 'gift' to Wolverton. It is a solid, ugly building that splits the town in two. When local people were asked to list changes they would like to see in the town, getting rid of the Agora came top.

In spite of their experiences, local people have more recently come to see Wolverton's industrial and cultural history and its community spirit as offering great potential for a new era. This sense has gradually evolved as the town has gone through the SRB process, and also with the evolution and development of Wolverton's Civic Society and the Neighbourhood Council that preceded the establishment of the Town Council in 2000.

The town's relatively new Town Council, together with the catalyst that was the healthcheck process, has meant that the right partnerships have developed and Wolverton is ready to forge its own future.

“Wolverton was once a wonderful place in which to live – and it could be again.”



The 'overnight' demolition of the station in Wolverton came as a surprise to local people, and is bitterly regretted. The town is now planning to build new station buildings that will be much more welcoming.

'Dare to dream'

Wolverton carried out a very successful healthcheck in 2002. For more than six months over 500 people in Wolverton and the surrounding area discussed how their town should develop in the next 20 years. During the process, common and overlapping areas of agreement and principles on which the town's future should be built, emerged.

“It is thanks to the capacity building developed through the healthcheck that what has gone on here has been incredible.”

Why were the healthcheck and vision processes such a success?

- The Countryside Agency agreed with Wolverton that it should use local consultants, Living Archive and Paul Chaplin Company, to oversee the healthcheck and vision process. Although the consultants were clearly experienced, professional and practical people, using self-employed local people was a bold move by Agency staff, who to some extent took a risk by not going for the 'safe' option, ie employing a big, national consultancy company. But it was because this was a small consultancy, completely au fait with local issues and not parachuted in from outside that they were so well able to involve people and encourage 'blue sky' thinking. With their enthusiasm and commitment, the consultants also managed to overcome people's natural scepticism and consultation 'fatigue'.
- They employed seven local people as project officers to do much of the research and leg work – this allowed the working groups to concentrate on the strategy rather than fact finding, and this does seem to have had significant beneficial effects.
- Five working groups met 31 times, and 70 people were involved.
- The consultants made efforts to reach those who were not going to attend public meetings or working groups; they approached a diverse range of existing groups such as residents' associations, the bowls club, Wolverton Mosque and the Women's Institute. They also carried out individual meetings and interviews.
- A wide range of techniques including video, bulletin boards, questionnaires, a website and

newsletters were used to keep people informed and encourage them to get involved.

- People from Wolverton visited other towns to learn from their experiences in carrying out healthchecks and in trying to regenerate their towns. This reflects the community’s healthy attitude towards sharing – they are willing to work with others and exchange good practice.
- The consultants set a clear timescale and always did what they set out to do.

“It was very easy to get involved.”

After the event, people in the town felt that the healthcheck had helped to build local capacity and managed to dovetail into existing processes rather than duplicate them. The timing of the healthcheck, in terms of where the town was at that particular time, also seems to have been ‘right’ – perhaps if it had been two years earlier or later the response from the community might not have been so enthusiastic.

If the excellent level of community engagement is used in the right way, any initiatives that impact on the town are much more likely to be a success. It is therefore critical not to “do things at the town” that local people will be unhappy about, but to help local people to help themselves. Despite a good start, the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) Partnership failed to engage the local community in determining what happened to the town. As a result, the town felt that the process was dominated by a small group of organisations and individuals who were not accountable to the community.



A vision for Wolverton

Through the healthcheck, local people developed a 17 point vision for the town’s future. This set out how people would like Wolverton to be described in 20 years’ time. It became clear that local people were willing to embrace change, but that this time they wanted to be leading it.

Drafting the actual vision was a difficult exercise, because it needed to encapsulate the ideas and ambitions of all those who had taken part, and needed to be something they could own and take forward. The tenor of discussions in Wolverton had been ambitious and radical, and the consultants felt that it was important to reflect that ambition in an inspirational and visionary way. The consultants came across a vision statement on the internet for a town in North Carolina; this painted a picture of 18 aspects of how life would be in the town in 2020. This idea was taken forward to create the Wolverton vision. The vision can be seen at www.wolvertonunlimited.com

The outcomes of the healthcheck and Action Plan were then prioritised into the Future Wolverton Action Plan. Many projects in the plan are already underway; others are planned for the near future; some are much more long-term and visionary. They include “bringing the canal into the town” (developing a marina in the town centre) and creating a Royal Train Museum (Royal Trains have associations with Wolverton going back as far as 1868).



Wolverton’s real sense of community spirit finds expression in a number of events that are well attended by local people. ‘In the Square’ is an annual music and arts event that has run for three years over a weekend in the summer. During the Lantern Festival, which has been held each year since 1989, lavish home-made lanterns are paraded through the town’s streets.

Who controls the future?

Local people are now very anxious to ensure that the vision is recognised in current and future development of the town and that community input continues.

“This time, we want the town’s development to be planned differently.”

Wolverton has recently been allocated £7.3 million from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister’s (ODPM’s) Sustainable Communities Plan, as part of the Milton Keynes Growth Area. Three brownfield sites occupying central positions in the town are earmarked for redevelopment.

The success of the ODPM bid stems in part from the clarity and quality of the healthcheck and vision. The investment will bring new development for mixed use to what are at present large dilapidated Victorian buildings.

As a result of the incoming investment, the town has been the focus of attention for numerous consultants and developers.

“... they are already circling in their helicopters overhead”

The central issue the town now faces is how it can maintain ownership once the big money and big developers come in. To what extent can local people remain key influencers, with control and accountability?

Members of the community are adamant that they should be able to get what they want from the development – for example to ensure that links are made between new development and existing town buildings and communities, and that affordable housing is included.

Affordable housing

The issue of affordable housing and new development is the main theme in Newmarket, another Beacon Town. The town will be testing participatory approaches to local housing design and development, building on existing interests in eco-friendly design and local vernacular.

For more information see page 147.

It is clearly important for regeneration initiatives to involve local communities actively and continuously. Local people need to feel a real sense of ownership, and, once consulted, should be confident that their observations are being taken into account – otherwise they will become disenchanted and possibly disaffected with the process.

This is particularly true here in Wolverton as so much has been invested in the vision.

“Development must be genuinely sustainable for this community.”

For Wolverton, the key principles expressed in the vision need to be protected and honoured in implementing the town’s own action plan and, more fundamentally, in delivery of the Sustainable Communities Plan.

During the autumn of 2003, a Development Framework Plan (DFP) for Wolverton was drafted by consultants for Milton Keynes Council, English Partnerships, SEEDA and the Town Council. This Plan will be developed into supplementary planning guidance, and will therefore be taken into account



Wolverton Park is one of the three sites set for redevelopment in the town. The football stand shown here is over 100 years old; sadly it has now fallen into disrepair.

by Milton Keynes Council when making planning decisions in Wolverton for the next 20-25 years. It was essential that the Plan should reflect how people wanted the town to develop, and the Town Council played a key role in influencing the process.

The consultants held a number of ‘collaborative design workshops’ in order to elicit the community’s views. Local people were not entirely convinced that it was necessary to ask consultants in from outside, as they saw it, to reinvent the wheel, at great expense and with little benefit for the community. The vision already existed as a clear statement of the community’s desires, and local people had signed up to it.

The community was therefore very sceptical about the DFP, especially once they believed that the DFP would not realise the vision. Following the consultative exercise the draft DFP was published.

Happily for Wolverton it was clear that it was in fact based very much on the principles of the vision. The DFP is therefore a good and clear result for community influence.

Marie Osborne is a town councillor and member of the Steering Group of the town’s partnership. As she explains:

“If the consultants had walked into a vacuum they would have created something that may well not have been what local people wanted. But in fact they walked into a situation where the community was very clear and coherent about what it wanted – this made their job a great deal easier.”

In Wolverton we have an excellent example of why, and how, communities can be enabled to sit at the heart of – and even lead – the process.

Marie considers that the community’s successes so far stem very much from the willingness of local people to embrace change as a result of the healthcheck and vision processes:

“In many other places the scale of the development facing Wolverton could faze people. But because the thinking during the healthcheck was radical, it helped people to recognise that change was inevitable but that they had a choice as to whether or not to lead it.”



The ‘new vernacular’

To date, the Countryside Agency’s design initiatives have focused on the aesthetic of good design in the rural context. It is now expanding this to address broader sustainable design and construction principles for the countryside. It is investigating how best to promote sustainable design concepts and construction techniques in rural areas that respect local character and is modern and innovative – a new vernacular for the countryside.

The Agency wants to encourage design that is fresh and modern and reflects current circumstances, rather than copying past styles.

It plans to publish advice on the new vernacular, which will promote:

- sustainable practice in the materials that are used, assembly techniques and lifetime planning;
- sensitivity to landscape character, settlement pattern and existing form and function;
- modern, innovative design.

'Planning tomorrow's countryside' (CA 60) sets out the Countryside Agency's advice to local planning authorities, to the Government and to developers on how the planning system should operate and evolve. One of the key principles it puts forward is that planners should give a greater role to communities and community planning; these should be incorporated into the existing planning system, rather than being an additional layer.

Wolverton Unlimited

It was clear to the town that it needed to create the means to ensure that local people could take forward the development process. They decided that the most effective way to do this would be to create a new association, which they called Wolverton Unlimited (WUNLTD), made up of people from the community who were involved in the healthcheck and Action Plan in some shape or form. The aim is for WUNLTD to have over 500 members, and since its creation on 4 October 2003, over 340 people have signed up.

"The idea behind WUNLTD was to create a head of pressure such that the community voice could not be ignored."

WUNLTD is extremely active and inclusive, with a refreshing attitude towards working together and outstanding commitment to community involvement. It does not follow the classic partnership structure, as its members do not include strategic partners.

Wolverton Unlimited: Working with partners



It has a steering group that consists of a chair, vice chair, treasurer, secretary and five other members. The steering group appoints working groups that can contain representatives from statutory, voluntary or community organisations – providing they support the aims and objectives of WUNLTD.

WUNLTD has an extremely supportive Town Council. As a result, the 'power struggles' that can be so damaging to progress are, in the main, avoided. The good working relations appear to stem in part from the character of those involved and from the fact that the Town Council has been established relatively recently, so is not set in its ways (indeed, it is actively seeking to be open). The steering group meetings of WUNLTD are open meetings and often attended by the chair of the Town Council and other councillors and there is a clear and established overlap between the work of the Town Council and WUNLTD. Indeed, WUNLTD is taking on some specific tasks for the Town Council, such as developing an allotment management plan. There has been a need to ensure that other community-based organisations are kept in the loop, and some tension has arisen with existing organisations concerned that WUNLTD is trying to 'take over'.

However, generally WUNLTD is seen by the town as the right vehicle to sustain and develop the community's vision for the future of Wolverton by:

- working with partners at a strategic level to ensure that current and future development projects, including implementation of the Sustainable Communities Plan, are in line with the vision; and
- taking the lead on, and delivering, some aspects of the vision and Action Plan.

Working with partners at a strategic level

WUNLTD is now seeking to find a place at the table with the key strategic partners that will implement the ODPM Plan. The formal ODPM-led consultation closed on 1 March 2004. Amongst other things, this considered the local delivery vehicle (LDV) to take development forward in Wolverton. The LDV is seen as critical in determining the extent of community involvement.

The Milton Keynes Partnership Committee (MKPC) is to oversee ODPM spending across Milton Keynes and the South Midlands region. The MKPC was

established by ODPM, and decisions had already been taken about which type of representatives would sit on the Committee, and this did not include a specific place for the community as represented by WUNLTD. Although there was a place for a Local Strategic Partnership representative from the 'community sector', it was WUNLTD's view that this would not represent them sufficiently well.

While there was no direct place for WUNLTD on the MKPC, the local community was hopeful that it would find its voice through some kind of local implementation group that could feed directly into the wider Committee.

Through discussions with English Partnerships, which is taking forward local delivery, and other stakeholders, it was agreed that a sub level of structure, as part of the MKPC, should be set up to enable representation of the local community. Called the Wolverton Steering Group, members will be drawn from a wide range of Wolverton stakeholders. A member of the MKPC will be the chair.

Over the past few months members of the local community have been operating in a high level environment where strategic decisions are being taken. They have had to work very hard to influence key players, many of whom are not used to working with town councils and local partnerships. Although on occasion it is difficult for Wolverton to argue their case within these circles, they have succeeded in doing so – and both sides are learning from each other.

Victoria Westhorp of the Countryside Agency's South East region has worked closely with Wolverton for a number of years, and is a part of their success story to date. She has played her own part in helping to ensure that the community's voice is heard at this crucial next stage in the town's development:

“Wolverton are an empowered and articulate community who should have representation and control in a decision-making process which is, after all, going to determine their town's future.”

Delivering the Sustainable Communities Plan

Wolverton and its rural hinterland will be a Growth Area for the next 20 years and beyond, and is on the rural/urban fringe. These are both areas of research and action learning for the Countryside Agency, and the town offers great potential for the development of innovative approaches.

Wolverton has been chosen as a Countryside Agency Growth Area demonstration town, acting as a test case for how a town can be part of the delivery of the Sustainable Communities Plan. The Agency hopes that Wolverton will set a precedent for how towns should be involved with the range of delivery mechanisms that are appearing.

Involving the community: issues for agencies

Throughout the whole ODPM-led process, individuals from the community have been asked to comment at short notice on detailed draft proposals and consultation documents. They are not paid to do this and many of them are volunteers who have jobs, families, businesses to run and lives to lead. This places them under unsustainable pressure.

Although the partnership in Wolverton acknowledges the role of the Countryside Agency as an ally and facilitator, it says that it has never been asked by any other outside organisation what kind of support it might need.

It appears that officialdom has yet to recognise that if you are serious about community involvement, the processes you propose need to reflect the reality of voluntary bodies and individuals working for free, by, for example offering financial or other support. Small considerations – such as offering childcare, holding meetings in the evenings, and on the community's 'patch' – have far-reaching practical and morale-boosting effects.

Taking a lead on delivery

Wolverton is keen to employ local people to deliver their own vision and Action Plan, and to avoid the pitfalls that seem to be involved in employing one person to take forward a community's vision. It has seen the system fall down in other regeneration schemes that have employed one person to do everything.

By using local people where possible, and 'growing their own' they aim to:

- retain local ownership and accountability;
- make delivery as effective as possible; and
- foster genuine 'inward investment', build capacity locally and develop in a sustainable way.

Individuals within the local community possess many skills and talents, and where these are lacking the town can train people or call in outside specialists.

It is an important principle that local people are paid for what they do, so they do not end up feeling abused or resentful. Until now, all of the work that local people have carried out – and many have invested hundreds and hundreds of hours already – has been voluntary.

The Countryside Agency has agreed to fund a pilot project, running until April 2004, where local people will undertake a range of tasks to:

- develop WUNLTD as an organisation;
- support the town's working groups;
- enable outreach work within the community to promote the aims and objectives of WUNLTD and ensure effective communication with local people;
- progress a number of specific projects contained in the Action Plan.

The results from the pilot will be disseminated and used by the Countryside Agency as the basis for further development at national level.

Bringing the business community on board

It is generally acknowledged that the business network can be hard to reach. Businesses naturally have a more commercial attitude towards the way they spend their time and resources.

However, since Wolverton is a Growth Area businesses may be very interested to know what opportunities may be open to them. More specifically, a major retailer is situated in the middle of one of the town's key sites for redevelopment, so it is important for WUNLTD to be able to communicate effectively with them.

Business in the Community (BiTC) is working with Wolverton to help it achieve wider engagement with the business community. As part of this work, the town held a 'Seeing is Believing' visit in March 2004, when senior business people met local people, saw local initiatives and discussed how business can best get involved while at the same time achieving business benefits.

Another Beacon Town, Keswick, is testing the suitability of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) to contribute to the revitalisation of market towns. A BID is a partnership through which local authorities and the local business community can take forward schemes that will benefit the trading environment and the public realm. For more information contact Tina Smith: tinasmith@keswickap.fsnet.co.uk

Keeping people involved: how DOES Wolverton do it?

From the start, a great number of local people have given up a huge amount of time and energy to be involved in their town's development, and they continue to do so. The commitment shown by the community has been quite outstanding, with amazing levels of participation.

How has the town partnership managed to foster this enthusiasm? There is no single answer to this, but it clearly relates to the partnership's attributes which include:

- the atmosphere it has created, which is one of inclusivity, shared responsibility, trust and support;
- the partnership's openness – it has never claimed to have all of the right answers, but simply asks the community to join with it in trying to get the best for local people – this is very attractive to people and is perhaps relatively atypical;

- its excellent appreciation of the need for effective communication, and how to achieve that – of the shared objectives, the vision and the way forward;
- its leadership and input, as demonstrated most particularly by Marie Osborne and Mike Galloway, two town councillors;
- the enthusiasm and commitment of a core group of 15 or so committed volunteers.

Wolverton also appears to attract many people who want to live in a particular way (for example, walking their children to school and talking to their neighbours), and there is something very egalitarian about the terraced housing that is so much a part of the town's character.

And it is also about putting in place the small but important things that encourage people to get involved, like providing childcare and food at public meetings, and having fun together at social events.

Learning from their experience

Members of WUNLTD are very keen to learn from their experiences and to play a role in disseminating good practice in community participation and partnership working.

For example, representatives from the town often travel to other market towns to talk about their

experiences to date, and to share good practice. They have run several networking and information sharing events, including a workshop on town partnerships in February 2004.

An interesting project that WUNLTD is currently developing is the creation of a story about their experiences to date. Funded by the Countryside Agency, WUNLTD is working with local 'storytellers', Word in Edgeways, who are helping the community to turn their personal perceptions of events into metaphorical language. As many people as possible are being encouraged to describe and evaluate their experiences to create a story that will bring all of this together. The story will also be used by children in local primary schools as the basis for a song.



Children from a local school sing 'Regeneration', a song about Wolverton's experiences.

The Countryside Agency has been working for many years to unlock the potential of the rural/urban fringe. It has detailed insights into best practice in managing these areas, and believes that the rural/urban fringe can be a high-quality environment. As Terry Robinson, Countryside Agency Director for London, explains:

"We are keen to see more extensive and lasting improvements in the quality and use of the rural urban fringe. We see this as an important area, with enormous potential to contribute to sustainable development objectives and bring quality of life benefits to local communities."

With Groundwork UK, the Agency is currently consulting on a new vision for the rural urban fringe; one which captures its full environmental, social and economic potential. It plans to use its experience, including the successful Community Forests and Doorstep Greens programmes, to help to show how such a vision might be realised.

It will also use its planning expertise to show how planning tools can be used to achieve high-quality developments in attractive countryside settings. In particular, it is currently developing a 'toolkit' of sustainable development techniques and good practice in terms of the design and management of development in major growth areas.

For the latest on the Agency's work in this area, see www.countryside.gov.uk/countrysidefortowns/index.asp

Update: Wolverton

Introduction

Wolverton Unlimited, the community partnership that grew out of the singularly successful healthcheck and vision processes, goes from strength to strength. There is a sense now that the partnership is entering a new era – both in terms of its role in influencing the changes that are taking place in the town, and in its development as a truly representative and sustainable enterprise.

Wolverton Unlimited has an established record. Last year it influenced English Partnerships to agree to develop a Wolverton subgroup of the Milton Keynes Partnership Committee (MKPC), which is the Local Delivery Vehicle for the Growth Area work in Milton Keynes. This subgroup, called the Wolverton Steering Group, is now working with MKPC to take forward the Development Framework Plan and help implement the Sustainable Communities Plan. There are substantial sums of money being invested into Wolverton – £7.3 million for two sites and significant funding from English Partnerships for developing other sites – so the opportunities are huge.

At the same time, Wolverton Unlimited's working groups are pursuing various projects to fulfil the Wolverton Vision, and some 360 local people are now signed up members of Wolverton Unlimited. The town is also exploring exciting avenues into social enterprise.

In April 2004, visitors from Australia, Latvia, Georgia and Hungary spent four days in Wolverton as part of the Beacon Towns international exchange. They observed the outside pressures being brought on the community by the Growth Area. They recommended that Wolverton should consider a more outward facing approach to engage with the key players involved in the developments. This is now being reflected in the partnership's efforts to widen their membership and encourage businesses, young people and ethnic minority communities to come on board.

Influencing delivery at a time of great change

A number of key sites, identified by English Partnerships, are to provide a focus for the physical regeneration and development of the town. MKPC acknowledge the Wolverton Steering Group (WSG) as the principal forum for taking forward Wolverton's regeneration. The WSG's key role is to make sure that community involvement is maintained through the Local Delivery Vehicle and that the community are represented within the planning process for sites within the town.

In addition, in September 2004 the Wolverton Regeneration Strategy, Development Framework Plan and Design Guidance were adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance. (The healthcheck directly influenced the development and content of these documents.) This will have material weight in deciding any planning applications coming forward relating to design and use of redeveloped sites.

Wolverton Unlimited, in a relatively short time, has risen to the challenge of the essential role that they, as representatives of the community, have in contributing to planning and regeneration decisions. It is perhaps their greatest achievement that the Wolverton Steering Group operates in the way it does, with all of the main players at the table and an atmosphere of openness and honesty.

It is recognised by MKPC that major redevelopment of Wolverton cannot go ahead without the community, and that it is not worth anyone's while to attempt to do so. As they are provided with information in a very open way, Wolverton Unlimited feel strong as a group and equal in the decision making process. All stakeholders routinely consider Wolverton Unlimited's point of view, discussing the options before any decisions are made.

That said, it is important that Wolverton Unlimited continues to make sure that its voice is heard. Marie Osborne has been an active member of Wolverton Unlimited from the start. As she explains: "We are not simply here to say yes or no, but must be actively involved in any proposals from the start. We have an agenda of our own and this is a message we

must keep putting across. This is even more important given that there is time pressure to deliver the changes.”

“However, we have excellent representation on the Wolverton Steering Group, and there are a number of other mechanisms in place to ensure that our voice is heard, such as the fact that we have annual meetings held in public.”

Stuart Isaac is Vice Chairman of Wolverton Unlimited’s Executive. He has worked particularly hard to engage with the business community, carrying out a business survey and making direct personal contact with retailers and landowners who will be affected by development in the town. Developing a business voice will be particularly important as Tesco is currently planning to expand its presence in Wolverton.

The work of the Growth Advisor

Last year, with funding from the Countryside Agency and English Partnerships, a ‘Growth Advisor’ was appointed to support the community to influence the redevelopment of two of the main sites being redeveloped in the town centre – Glyn Square and The Agora. His role was to act as an ‘honest broker’ between the community and developers, planning authorities and MKPC. He was also to put in place appropriate capacity building and training for Wolverton Unlimited on issues such as planning legislation.

In particular, it was envisaged that the Growth Advisor would help the community in its dealings with the development management company which is overseeing much of the development on English Partnerships’ behalf. The idea was that this would prove to be a cost-effective way to minimise any conflict between the wider community and other stakeholders with an interest in the regeneration projects.

For a time the Growth Advisor did play a useful part in helping communication between Wolverton Unlimited, English Partnerships and other stakeholders. However, in the event the consultant appointed by the development management company itself has maintained excellent

communication with Wolverton Unlimited. He became the lynchpin between parties and has made sure that Wolverton Unlimited is kept abreast of what is happening. He gives impartial and helpful advice and makes sure that the community is capable of making informed decisions.

As a result, the Growth Advisor’s role has not been as useful as it would have been, had relations with the development management company not been so good. The Growth Advisor moved on to a different post in January 2005. After some discussion it was agreed by the Countryside Agency and English Partnerships that Wolverton Unlimited should be allowed to use the funds left by his absence to buy in a range of targeted consultancy, but as soon as possible to meet the development and planning agendas, rather than simply seeking to replace the Growth Advisor. In other words, Wolverton Unlimited will control the work and will make its own decisions about what expertise is needed. They will, for example, facilitate community-led design, promote techniques to achieve sustainable development, or purchase legal advice, training in how Development tariffs/section 106 planning gain decisions are made, or advice in property and retail development.

The decision to allow Wolverton Unlimited to manage this project is an example of the organic way in which things tend to evolve in Wolverton.

Case study

Wolverton Bowls Club

As part of the redevelopment in Wolverton, a move to a new site was inevitable for the Wolverton Bowls Club. Wolverton Unlimited liaised with members of the bowls club to make sure that they got as much as possible from the move. They convinced members that it was in their interests to enter into discussions at an early stage, and to be clear about what they wanted from the move. Wolverton Unlimited helped them to understand the options and supported any requests. As a result, the bowls club has come out well overall, with a new bowling green and good club facilities.



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Wolverton Unlimited is at the forefront of decision making about plans to redevelop these two key sites in the town – The Agora and Glyn Square.

Developing Wolverton Unlimited as a social enterprise

A significant issue for Wolverton Unlimited now is how it develops as an organisation itself. At present, Wolverton Unlimited is an association of around 360 members which is managed by an Executive Steering group of ten people. The Executive is conscious that Wolverton Unlimited needs to find its own sources of income for the longer term, rather than having to rely on outside sources such as grant funding for ongoing running and administration costs.

One option would be for Wolverton Unlimited to take ownership of a building which would be run as a social enterprise, with income from commercial facilities such as office space providing a revenue stream that supports Wolverton Unlimited and, where possible, community facilities. A proposal currently being discussed is that English Partnerships would

‘gift’ a building to Wolverton Unlimited as part of the redevelopment work that is taking place in the town.

At the moment discussions are at a very early stage. However, the Executive is aware that before any developments of this nature can take place, Wolverton Unlimited needs to have put in place the right legal structure and constitution. It is currently discussing the options and seeking legal advice on these matters. The Executive is concerned to ensure that association members would not be exposed to any liability. At the same time, they wish to maintain the openness and engagement that to date the association has allowed. As Stuart Isaac says:

“Whichever structure we eventually agree upon will need to be one that continues to allow local people to make informed decisions and play a part.”

In parallel with these discussions is an ongoing desire to recruit more people into Wolverton Unlimited. The Executive is conscious that it has a great weight of decision making, and that its workload is unsustainable in the long term. Added to this is the knowledge that any organisation must continually renew itself with fresh blood.

As a vehicle for local consultation, Wolverton Unlimited’s role is pivotal in deciding the shape and scope of the regeneration of the whole of Wolverton. This local consultative role is all the more critical under new planning legislation. Wolverton Unlimited is pushing hard for regeneration not to take place in a piecemeal fashion, but as part of a whole town vision.

Social enterprise work

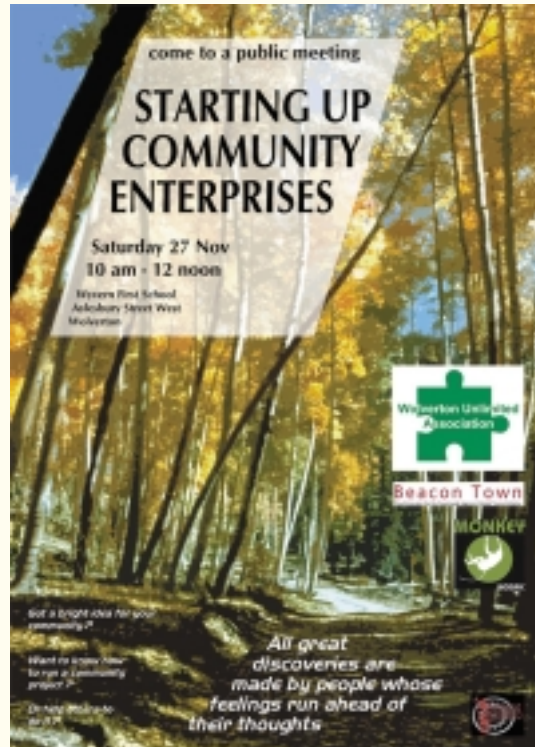
The theme of Wolverton’s Beacon Town status – how the local community can influence inward investment – means not only financial investment from outside but also the need to harness resources that already exist locally.

With this in mind, Wolverton Unlimited is developing a programme of support for its local entrepreneurs. The idea is to help lots of individuals to start social and community projects that will improve the quality of life for people in Wolverton and the surrounding area.

Successful applicants receive free support to meet their project goals, including: a personal adviser, business mentor, finance planning and fundraising guidance, and ongoing support from members of Wolverton Unlimited.

People with an idea for an enterprise talk about it with one or more members of a Social Advisory Group for Entrepreneurs (or SAGE as it is called). SAGE is made up of local people skilled at asking the right questions to support and challenge social entrepreneurs' ideas. Ideas that have been put forward include the Wolverton Community Market (see case study overleaf); Back to Earth which gives communities space to grow their food and for outdoor education; Community Repaint where surplus household paint is collected, sorted and reused by charities; community groups and voluntary organisations; cycling promotion; a café for Wolverton and a community newspaper.

The Countryside Agency has employed the Plunkett Foundation to work with a number of Beacon Towns to provide support and advice relating to organisational structures. For more information about the Plunkett Foundation's work see: www.plunkett.co.uk



© A Word in Edgeways

Local people are being encouraged to pursue social and community projects.

The role of social enterprises in rural areas

The Countryside Agency believes that social enterprises have a key role to play in tackling the strain on local economies and access to services in rural areas. Rural social enterprises are already operating in a variety of sectors, contributing to economic growth and providing goods and services in some of the UK's most isolated and underserved communities.

These enterprises may be part of mainstream business, enabling businesses to add value to their activities through, for example, marketing cooperatives or farmers' markets. They are often key parts of the tourism industry, for example operating in heritage, sport or environmental

management. They may promote enterprise creation and diversification by running managed workspaces, providing training or creating new sources of finance through community development finance institutions (see for example, the Bridport Community Property Trust, page 42).

The Countryside Agency is keen to help social enterprises become self-financing, overcome any weak management and gain financial skills. It will evaluate the self-support structure for social entrepreneurs that is currently being trialled in Wolverton.

For more information about the Agency's work in this area see www.countryside.gov.uk/NewEnterprise/Economies/Index.asp

Case study

A market for Wolverton



Bringing a regular fresh produce market back to Wolverton was felt by many to be a vital part of the 'Future Wolverton Vision'.

The first market in Wolverton was held in 1843 and a market in some shape or form has always been an integral part of life there. However, the market began to decline in the 1980s and since then, Wolverton has been a market town without a market! Last year, Wolverton Unlimited set out to re-establish the market and, in this way, help to regenerate the town and its local economy.

Lifelong Wolverton resident, Alissa Pemberton, is leading a working group to develop the market. The group first carried out a feasibility study then ran two pilot markets last year – a Harvest Market indoors then a Christmas market in the market place.

Both markets were resounding successes. People enjoyed being able to buy local produce, and the chance to meet up in a social way.



Local allotment holders have built a straw hut, which will eventually house a seed store/swap, tool share scheme, and salvage centre. It will also be open at weekends so that local people can buy or barter surplus produce.

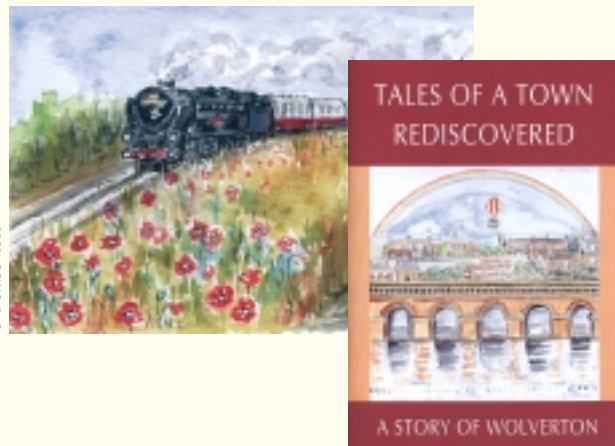
As Alissa says: "Markets are a really good way to connect people with local food and with each other. With this project we hope not just to be paying lip service but want to give local people access to decent food."

The group plans to set up a regular market, which it is hoped will finance itself. They also want to join up with another social enterprise in the town, 'Back to Earth', which covers food, education and learning. Much of this will take place from a straw hut which has recently been built.

Both projects are going forward as part of the town's social enterprise support project. Alissa acknowledges that the project "seems to give the market work greater legitimacy and helps me to articulate the group's proposals to others".

Telling the story

'Tales of a town rediscovered: A story of Wolverton' is a metaphorical story that represents people's feelings about the events that led to Wolverton Unlimited's formation. The story grew out of a real desire to use an innovative way to record and evaluate what was happening in the town, and to get people's reactions to the process. Local storytellers, Word in Edgeways, worked with members of Wolverton Unlimited and partner organisations to elicit stories, metaphors and lessons from the experience so far. Word in Edgeways is continuing to work with Wolverton Unlimited, using language and imagery to help communicate messages and make what is happening in the town more accessible to local people.



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