

Case Study: Wiveliscombe Area Partnership (WAP)



A look at the Wiveliscombe Area Partnership, one of Somerset's longest-standing and most successful Community Regeneration Partnerships

Background

In 2000, businessman John Harris called a breakfast meeting in Wiveliscombe to see if there were others in the town who wanted to think ahead to 2010 and imagine what would make a real and lasting difference to the town and the area's issues. A Steering Group was formed, called The Breakfast Group. Quite soon afterwards the decision was taken to incorporate the 'Wiveliscombe Area Partnership', a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee, since the core group believed that an incorporated organisation carries more weight in terms of credibility and accountability.

Initial efforts were focussed on developing a Strategy which resulted in their 'Vision for 2010', supported by 49 aims/objectives. Whilst this was underway, the opportunity arose to create one of the pillars of their Vision which was a central focus for the community; the then Lloyds bank ceased operations and the building was put on the market. They explored funding options from the Local Authorities but came up blank so John and his wife agreed to acquire the building and rent the two lower floors to WAP for use as a Community Office – a central hub of information and advice.



2001 brought the Foot-and-Mouth Epidemic which affected all rural communities but hit Wivey (as it is known locally) particularly hard, being surrounded by farm land and on the edge of the Exmoor National Park, where tourism also suffered.

In the same year Wivey was included, as part of the Market and Coastal Towns Initiative (MCTI).

Using the now incorporated WAP as the accountable body and the area now referred to as the '10 Parishes' they embarked on a large community consultation under the name of the Wiveliscombe Area Market Town Initiative (WAMTI) which had its own independent steering

group enabled by WAP; this was the first project to reflect the unique strategic role which WAP has sought to provide within its community.

MCTI was a community based approach to regenerating Market Towns together with their hinterlands and involved helping local communities plan for their future, build their skills and access the funding that would enable them to start tackling the projects that make a real difference to their area. WAMTI/WAP was the first Community Partnership (rather than Local Authority) in Somerset to be asked to manage an MCTI. The Partnership received support from Somerset County Council and Taunton Deane Borough Council throughout the process. The MCTI produced a high level of interest and engagement followed by a Community Strategy, which was posted to the Town's web-site 'www.wiveliscombe.com'.

Following the publication of the strategy, WAP decided to drop the name WAMTI in favour of the more meaningful '10 Parishes' which by then was becoming a 'Brand' for the area.

Structure and Membership

The Partnership is quite simple – it is a closed company and expressly stipulates in its articles who shall be Members/Directors; these were the de facto chairs of the Civic Society, Wiveliscombe Parish Council, the Wivey WI, and the Wivey Area Business group plus the two District Councillors. Provision was made for the co-option of up to four additional members. Presently the membership is nine, of which four are Wiveliscombe Parish Councillors; the Chair is from Fitzhead, the Treasurer from Bathealton and one District Councillor is from Chipstable, the remainder being from Wivey.

Though WAP believe this structure and membership has served WAP well so far, they believe that for the future sustainability of the organisation a revised and perhaps more open membership may be appropriate and, in concert with the Community Strategy Review, the Directors are studying this.

After the MCTI, a number of themed working groups were set up to address identified priorities, such as Housing. Over time these have been dissolved, some because they reached their goals. The current review of the Community Strategy has looked at what has happened since 2003 and what people still want to be done.

Community Engagement

WAP produces monthly reports for Wiveliscombe Parish Council, with which they have a Service Level Agreement, a copy of which is on the web site. The other 9 Parish Councils

are kept informed through the District Councillors and by letter and reports to the clerks. They have all contributed support for the Community Office with precept grants. Most WAP Directors are involved in all aspects of community life and the many groups which exist in the 10 Parishes.

WAP runs the Wiveliscombe Area Community Office and Wivey Link (the community transport enterprise) and they act strategically by enabling fledgling groups to form, develop to autonomy and deliver their projects. They also give out regular press releases. The review of the Community Strategy involved significant consultation which furthered community engagement opportunities.

Monitoring & Review

Until the Community Strategy Review, there was no formal monitoring of projects. However WAP has, since its inception, held fortnightly meetings so there have been very regular updates internally.

Successes

Projects and Influencing

- Community Office – the continuing development of this, which now houses drop-in surgeries by local politicians, welfare and housing benefits advisors, the Police, and CAB and offers information and advice on behalf of Taunton Deane Borough Council, Tourism and other agencies as well as local signposting.
- Wivey Link – this provides an accessible transport service to 25 Parishes using 3 vehicles with all volunteer drivers and makes some 5000 single passenger journeys a year on behalf of all those who do not have access to transport.
- Affordable Housing – 20 units built in 2007 through Magna Housing Association, with rented and shared ownership.
- Housing for Older People – 16 units built in 2006.
- Town Hall Trust formed – project under way to consider reuse of this disused building in the town centre.
- Western Somerset Local Action in Rural Communities – WAP played an active part in the successful bid process for £2.1m of funding from the RDA and remains part of the delivery team.

- WAP-Parish Council relationship – on the whole this has been good; great emphasis has been paid to keeping them informed and their support encouraged.
- Community Strategy Review – this is under way and both Taunton Deane Borough Council and Somerset County council have supported it and made links with the Local Area Agreement and the Local Development Framework.

Indirect successes that WAP has contributed to

- 10Radio – The Community Radio station came out of the Environment working group after the MCTI process. Recently granted a 5-year licence.
- Children’s Centre – lack of childminding was identified in 2003 Community Strategy and lobbying helped to secure this for Wivey.



Volunteers at 10Radio

Problems or Barriers encountered

1. Establishing and maintaining a public image of WAP – compared with Wivey Link’s profile, WAP has struggled to maintain a local image; people often ask ‘what is it for and what does it do?’ Getting the message to stick in people’s minds seems difficult.
2. 10 Parishes Centre – this project failed partly because of divided community support and partly because the funding required from the RDA and the Lottery was not forthcoming.
3. Business Park – land is allocated for this but in the current climate this may not be commercially viable.

Lessons Learnt – Advice for other Partnerships

1. Monitoring – WAP didn’t officially monitor community progress due to there being no paid worker to do this so they were pleasantly surprised when the Community Strategy Review flagged so many successes.

2. Finding 'the right people' for the Partnership was important from the outset – WAP's members were originally targeted as being the 'movers and shakers'. John Harris states "It should be noted that WAP is strategic so it needed strategic thinkers. Whilst single interest projects always attract people for the duration that is a very different animal from WAP. It is inevitable that most of these people were retired (as working-age people just don't have the time to commit) but it is a very worthwhile use of a significant community resource."



3. "Work hard on your community's image but above all network your organisation with the Agencies and throughout the Community and Voluntary sector. Key members of WAP spent enormous amounts of time and indeed personal money over many years attending seminars, in meetings and elsewhere promoting the 10 Parishes and WAP and building bridges with Local Authorities and Agencies – do not ever underestimate the importance to the community that this unseen aspect of WAP's work represents" said John.

4. Given the importance of communication is it relevant that, by the time WAP was incorporated, the Community, through its business group, had already put in place a web-site and business directory and funding was also secured to start 'The Messenger', the bi-monthly newspaper which reaches most households in the 10 Parishes.

5. "Grasp your opportunities – they do not come often!"

Any further comments?

John Harris – "All of WAP's members will tell you that, almost without exception, at the hundreds of seminars/meetings/steering groups that they have attended over the years, they were the only volunteers, the rest being paid professional staff from one or other organisation/agency. It's all about self-help."

Contacts

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