



REPORT 5

Engagement and Empowerment in Rural Areas: A Case Study



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A Report to the Empowering Communities Consortium

A Note about this Case Study

This case study was commissioned by the South West Regional Consortium of the National Empowerment Partnership. It forms part of a set of reports reflecting research and other activities undertaken through the South West Empowerment Development Project (October 2007 – March 2008). All the reports may be downloaded from the Creating Excellence website at:

www.creatingexcellence.org.uk

- Report 1** An Overview of the Learning from the South West Empowerment Development Project
- Report 2** Engagement and Empowerment among Black and Minority Ethnic Communities in the South West of England: A Case Study
- Report 3** Participation and Empowerment of Children and Young People in the South West of England: A Case Study
- Report 4** Engagement and Empowerment among Older People in the South West of England: A Case Study
- Report 5** Engagement and Empowerment in Rural Local Authorities in the South West of England: A Case Study
- Report 6** Engagement and Empowerment in an Urban Unitary Authority in the South West of England: A Case Study
- Report 7** No Boundaries: A Study of Networks and Empowerment
- Report 8** Engagement and Empowerment: Measurement and Indicators

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These reports, as with all research, reflect the views of those who took part and are a snapshot in time and there may be other perspectives that are not recorded.

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Although not all of this material could be referred to within the case study, it has informed the project's wider learning and will form part of a continuing regional resource on community empowerment.

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Introduction to the Rural Study

This section focuses on empowerment and rural issues. Many rural areas have three tiers of government, county, district and parish or town. It was not possible within the time scale of this research to fully cover all three tiers but we have been able to look at district level, town and villages.

The study first considers the Area Committee Structures of South Somerset at a distinct level and considers how this framework can help to enable engagement and empowerment.

The more local level of town and surrounding villages is covered in the Wiltshire case study of Malmesbury, which considers the Community Area Planning process and how people are engaged and involved in this process.

Following these two case studies is the write up of a Wiltshire focus group which consisted of members from parish council, district council, statutory services and voluntary and community sector organisations, expressing how current structures and processes are often experienced on the ground.

The Lyme Regis case study shows the headway that can be made within the empowerment agenda when town councils work with and through the local Voluntary and Community Sector, but it also re-affirms some of the frustrations for the community, of trying to find a way through very complex structures that exist within the current planning regimes. It also shows how fragile and vulnerable empowerment can be when not supported from above.

The final section is a snapshot look at housing associations. Affordable housing is an important issue in rural areas. Many of the housing associations in the South West have been working towards an agenda where they have been compelled for a number of years to engage and involve their residents in decision making. It argues that there may be lessons from the housing world that can be translated into the wider empowerment agenda.

Background to the Rural Context

The Rural White Paper in 2000 recognised that many rural communities were going through difficult changes. “Basic services have become overstretched. In traditional industries such as farming, incomes are falling and jobs are disappearing...over the past 20 years we have seen Post Offices disappearing, Council houses being sold off, rural schools closing, building on green fields and rural bus services cut.”(Rural White Paper 2000)ⁱ. The situation for rural areas has changed very little since the White Paper was published.

After decades when the main focus for tackling poverty and social exclusion has been within the urban areas, it is now accepted that poverty is also a major problem for significant numbers of people living in rural areas. The often attractive and affluent appearance of the countryside can mask the underlying difficulties that affect many people in rural areas. Poverty in rural areas is hidden within the statistics, which are based on mainly urban indicators.

“It should be recognised that poverty and social exclusion are more than mere numbers in tables and shadings on maps.”ⁱⁱ

Three of the major issue in rural areas are the lack of access to services, the aging population and the lack of access to affordable housing.

Poor accessibility to services in rural areas, compared to the more urban areas, is a frequently mentioned feature of the countryside. For people with additional needs, mobility problems or low incomes, this can be a major factor that influences their quality of lives and their ability to ‘take part’ in their communities. *“People in rural areas cannot get many services that are available in cities, including support and job training opportunities* (South West ERDP Regional Chapter; MAFF).ⁱⁱⁱ

77% of rural communities do not have access to a daily bus service
83% do not have access to a local doctor
38% do not have access to a local Post Office
26% do not have access to a pub
46% do not have access to a local school
36% do not have access to a local shop
22% do not have access to a village hall.
(Sources MAFF 2000)^{iv}

The lack of services provides decreasing opportunities for people in rural areas to meet up and connect with their community. It also leads to a lack of opportunity for networking and the sharing of information and experiences. This also increases the need for good accessible provision of information and advice.

An added factor in the South West Region is the number of people who come to the area to retire. 34.1% of the population of the South West Region live in rural areas compared with 19.3% in England as a whole 33.1% of the population in the South West are economically inactive, 52% of these are retired.^v

“Communities with an ageing population and insufficient young people to continue the tradition of community spirit may yet come to experience their rural idyll as a rural hell” (Naaji and Griffiths 1999).^{vi}

Housing

The Industrial Revolution heralded the start of a long period of rural depopulation of the rural areas which continued up to the Second War. However, since the War there has been a gradual move back to the countryside. The desirability of the countryside as a place to live has led to a sharp increase in the price of rural houses. Social housing is not in such abundant supply as in the towns. Only 12% of housing in rural areas is social housing, compared with 25% in the urban areas.^{vii} The move for people to purchase second homes and holiday homes within the rural areas, market and coastal towns, has led to a sharp increase in house prices in these areas, taking the cost of owning a home beyond many of the younger people and essential workers in the rural areas in the region.

The cost of providing service in rural areas is higher than in the urban areas. It is estimated that £1.00 per head is spent on service provision for people in the rural areas while £1.60 per head is spent on service provision for people in the urban areas.^{viii} This is despite the fact that services are more expensive to deliver in rural areas. It is against this background that these case studies have been drawn. We would emphasise that the case studies are a moment in time and, while informative, are from the perspective of those providing the evidence.

South Somerset Case Study: The Area Committee Structure

Context

South Somerset was selected for this case study because of its mix of market towns and sparse rural areas. South Somerset is also noted for its interesting approach to community structures and its close involvement of its elected members in its governance. South Somerset Council is also a Beacon Authority, winning three Beacon Awards in three consecutive years. It has won Beacon Awards for its work in getting closer to communities; improving rural services and empowering communities; and the most recent award was for its Neighbourhood and Community Champions: the role of elected members.

Following telephone interviews at the start of this research project it was clear that South Somerset has some unusual approaches to service delivery, planning and governance, alongside interesting structures that are specifically designed to bring decision making and governance closer to communities. This seemed an area that was worth exploring further. The Area Committee structure of South Somerset also appears to be closely connected to the agenda for empowering communities and community members.

The case study draws on face to face and telephone interviews with elected members, council staff and local residents alongside available documented evidence.

What is a Beacon Authority?

The Beacon Scheme identifies 'excellence and innovation in local government'^{ix}. The scheme exists to 'share good practice so that local authorities can learn from each other and deliver high quality services to all'^x. The Government's Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) runs the Beacon Scheme, awarding authorities that demonstrate outstanding practice in a specific theme through rounds of awards.

Background to South Somerset

South Somerset is largely a rural area described temptingly on the District Council's website as having '*endless countryside and quaint villages to explore, delicious local produce to savour, historic houses and classic gardens, bustling market towns and tranquil vistas*'.^{xi} The main market towns are Bruton, Castle Cary, Chard, Crewkerne, Ilchester, Langport, Martock, Somerton and Wincanton. Yeovil, the largest town in South Somerset, is the main centre of activity with two theatres, swimming pools adventure playground, cinema and ten pin bowling. It is described as having the 'heart of the country with the mind of a city'.

South Somerset forms much of the eastern side of the County of Somerset. It comprises nearly a third of the County and covers an area of 370 square miles. Taking both population and area together, South Somerset is the largest District in England.

South Somerset is one of the 5 district and borough councils that make up the county of Somerset. The others are Mendip, Sedgemoor, West Somerset and Taunton Deane Borough Council. Somerset has as its bordering authorities Bath and North East Somerset, North Somerset and Wiltshire. The District has 121 parishes with 102 parish and town councils.^{xii}

Statistics and the rural dimension

South Somerset has a population of 156,700. 90,000 of the population are of working age. 17.3% of the population are economically inactive. South Somerset does not score highly within the indices of deprivation. On average score it ranks 230 within the index and as such is the most affluent of all Somerset Districts. Numbers of key benefit claimants are below the national average. South Somerset has lower levels of wealth per capita and per worker than the average for the region and economic growth in South Somerset is expected to lag behind average for the south west over the next few years.^{xiii}

As far as living accommodation goes, 74% of households are owner occupiers 14% rent from social landlords. The average house price is £179,000, significantly lower than house prices for the South West but comparable to the national average. House price affordability in South Somerset is felt not to be a significant problem but average pay in South Somerset is lower than the national average and access to services and facilities in much of rural South Somerset is difficult for many.

In terms of access to services, our rural areas are amongst some of the most deprived parts of the country. This is measured in terms of road distance to GP premises^{xiv}

One of the issues combined with lack of access to services in South Somerset is the age of the population. Compared to the national and regional averages, South Somerset has a relatively old population with a higher concentration of people in the over 65 age group. In South Somerset this age group makes up one fifth of the population. This has implications for service agencies, especially as access to services for many in the rural areas is said to be poor. A third of the population lives in the principal town of Yeovil, yet 40% live in settlements of fewer than 2,500 people. Population density is only 1.6 people per hectare, compared to the England and Wales average of 3.4.^{xv} This presents a real challenge in providing equity of service across such a diverse area.

The lack of identifiable deprivation in South Somerset has meant that it has not qualified for any significant additional investment from Central Government such as Neighbourhood Renewal or New Deal for Communities money, which some other areas in the region have attracted. While South Somerset has not been able to undertake major new projects in communities with the backing of this type of major funding, it has however meant that there has been a certain consistency in approach to development and structure.

History of Engagement and Empowerment

The Liberal Democrats have been in power in South Somerset since at least 1996. The move to bring communities closer to governance of the District has had large political support and political support has been the driving force behind the current structure of the four Area Committees. The elected members have become central to the work of the District Council.

The Elected Members

A great deal is expected of the elected members in South Somerset. A great deal of support is also provided by the staff of the Council. They have provided a host of training opportunities for their elected members including training in planning, IdeA Leadership Academy training, a professional award in local governance, scrutiny awareness, housing and dealing with difficult behaviour. The Council have a policy of using their own staff to deliver the training where appropriate, which leads to stronger relationship between the elected members and the staff.

The elected members are individuals who have been elected by their communities as community leaders. The Council encourages the elected members to go into their communities and offers opportunities such as visits to schools to raise awareness of democracy. They arrange an annual speed dating event between students and councillors where councillors are scrutinised by the students. This is proving a great success.

Area Committees

Under the structure established in 1996, South Somerset has four Area Committees where elected councillors meet to represent the community and support the delivery of the Area Development Plans. In order to fulfil this central role the elected members need an infrastructure that is able to support them. This has meant training for the elected members. That training has to almost mirror the management training received by staff so that the elected members are well versed in all things pertaining to the council business. Members also require access to the IT information system that supports the work of the Area Development Team.

The Council has high expectations of its elected members who have to spend 20 hours week on average on their constituency related work and attend many meetings and committees. A Staff Member

The Area Committees meet monthly in local venues such as village halls. Each Area Committee has an Area Development Plan developed by the local forums and the committees. The business of the Area Committees is divided between planning applications and other business including community issues, allocation of funding to support local projects and presentations from local partners. The Area Committees have responsibility for support for community and parish planning, community safety, small businesses and voluntary and community groups. Other services are managed centrally by area heads of service.

The portfolio of the Area Committees includes the following:

- Local regeneration, street scene and community safety
- Local consultation and community engagement
- The Area Development(service)plan
- Community Plans
- Quality of the local built environment and Development
- Parish Liaison
- Local partnership
- Discretionary grants and local projects

Each Area Committee has its own delegated budget. The Area Committee meetings are well attended by the public, as well as representatives from the local town and parish councils, who are able to address the meeting on any agenda item including planning.

The Area Committees and local forums that South Somerset has established have enabled local people to get involved. Many people have come forward who would not have come forward as leaders if they had only been able to link into the Parish Council - at first a bit reluctant to join in but now very engaged. An Elected Member

The Area Committees provide an accountable, accessible structure whilst facilitating active participation by members of the public, partners and the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS).

A real strength is elected members being apolitical in this arena, prepared to do the best for the neighbourhood, the Area and the Council as whole. Staff Member

Again the role of the elected members is crucial to the process. Through having the Area Committees it is felt that this has brought the decision making processes closer to the community. The local community can now have a certain confidence that the local perspective will be brought to bear on decisions and plans, and that the people sitting on the decision making committees are well aware of issues in the locality. The Area Committees also have control over certain budgets such as the Community Grants and can decide how these budgets are allocated.

There are four area offices that operate in each of the four areas covered by the Area Committees. These are based in Langport, Chard, Wincanton and Yeovil. This brings the staff and the elected members in closer contact and it gives district hubs for services which is always an issue in rural areas.

This is a structure that has been in place in Somerset for a number of years now and is well embedded. When looking at the empowerment agenda the staff feel that this is nothing new for South Somerset and is inherent in the way they have been working for a number of years.

The Council staff feel that the whole ethos of South Somerset is around community engagement and empowerment.

There is no one champion for empowerment....it is too important to be in the hands of one champion...it is embedded everywhere...but it can be difficult to understand.
Staff Member

Bringing Services Closer to Communities - The Lengthsman Scheme

Through having the Area Committees, some parts of South Somerset have been able to establish the 'Lengthsman Scheme' which gives local people a say in what services and repairs are needed in their Parish. The Lengthsman Scheme is, in essence, the re-incarnation of an old concept; a local person contracted to maintain roadside verges and drainage, public open space and pathways. (The 'lengthsman' is a traditional name). Local People ask the Parish Council for work that needs to be undertaken in their neighborhoods. Tasks such as keeping areas clean and tidy, minor repairs, drainage and fly tipping. The 'Lengthsman' then undertakes that work no matter whether it's the responsibility of the Parish, District Council or County Council. The cost of this is shared by all three authorities and the work undertaken is the responsibility of each of the three. This scheme avoids red tape, delays and work not being undertaken for weeks due to the process. Local people can report issues that are of concern to them and the work can be undertaken almost immediately, giving a real sense that the authorities are listening and responding. This is felt to be empowerment at a very local level.

People need to feel that they are listened to. If it does not work at this level then it is less likely that people will feel inclined to give their views on wider issues.

An Elected Member

It is part of the quick wins that can be offered to get people motivated to becoming engaged. It is also an economic use of resources. The worker involved can benefit from training from the County Council. The project has had very real results such as enabling drains etc to be cleared more quickly and diminish risk of repeated flooding.

The Parish Council has control of the work and through them local people. It makes local people feel empowered and listened to They know there is a high satisfaction because they feed this back at Local Parish Council meetings. An Elected Member

The staff at South Somerset are clear that the aim of the Council is focussed on communities. Their focus is

Working with all communities, geographical and communities of interest, to help them to overcome barriers to achieving their goals. Staff member

Gypsies and Travellers

South Somerset is the only district council to employ their own Gypsy and Traveller liaison worker. They feel that this empowers the members of the traveling community who are amongst the most 'marginalised and economically and educationally deprived people in communities'. By liaising with local people and working with local people, the Council has been able to set up two sites for the travelling communities in South Somerset. Their own worker is often at odds with people within the Council, as the worker acts as an advocate for the gypsies and travellers. By working with Gypsies and Travellers in this way they feel they have minimised the problems and issues and enabled the Council to deliver services and support to individuals from these communities.

Community Development

South Somerset does have a history of investment in community development. Each area team has a Community Development Officer and a Regeneration Officer. These Community Development Officers network on a monthly basis with each other, as well as networking with workers outside of the Council. Having a belief in the value of community development and investing in it at a time when a number of other councils, such as North Somerset are said to be disbanding their Community Development Unit, shows the commitment that South Somerset District Council have to the community approach.

The Community Development Officers work with the Voluntary and Community Sector in the area to help and encourage organisations with their development, as well as being able to offer some financial investment. One organisation that the Council has been working closely with is the Balsam Centre in Wincanton. The Community Development Officer at South Somerset has worked with the Balsam Centre to support outreach development work in Wincanton. There has not been any outreach in the area from the Council for Voluntary Services (CVS) which is based in Yeovil some 19 miles away, and it has not been possible for them to run an outreach project in Wincanton. Having the Community Development Officer based in Wincanton working alongside the Balsam Centre has enabled community development to take place. The former manager of the Balsam Centre has now been appointed as the Chief Officer at the CVS in Yeovil and it is hoped that the partnership and relationship between the two agencies will continue.

The Balsam Centre

The Balsam Centre is based in the centre of Wincanton. The Balsam Centre is a multi-use, community-owned building which was formerly the Memorial Hospital and is now home to a range of projects and services including a learning centre, playgroup, mental health project and toy library.

The Balsam Centre is a thriving Healthy Living Centre for Wincanton and the surrounding area. Acting as a community anchor organisation there is a broad range of health, social and education services and it is the principal venue locally for community and interest groups. An integral part of the Balsam Centre, the Balsam Project is a lottery funded healthy living initiative providing opportunities for anyone wanting to make changes in their lives to improve their health and well-being. It offers a wide range of activities and services - from health walks and a toy library to volunteering for all, counselling and emotional support, healthy cooking and eating and many different types of learning and training. Most are available free of charge.

The Balsam Project's sister project - The Growing Space - is a community and therapeutic horticulture project which runs a productive market garden adjacent to the Balsam Centre and is responsible for creating and maintaining the community gardens around it. The Centre also has in recent years extended facilities including a new Children's Centre.

As well as providing the opportunity for groups to develop the Balsam Centre also provide a range of volunteering opportunities for local people to increase their skills knowledge and confidence.

Bryony, who is 22 and from Stourton Caundle in Dorset, spent 200 hours over four months working as a millennium volunteer at the Balsam Centre in Wincanton. Bryony, who worked at the centre's therapeutic community garden, known as The Growing Space, went on to enrol in a two year degree course at Bristol University studying wildlife biology.

"It really was my volunteering that made me take a fresh look at my career plans. During my time at the Balsam Centre I got a real sense of belonging and satisfaction, being able to help people with mental health problems and learning difficulties...The Balsam Centre is such a fantastic place. It is through my work at the Balsam Centre that I have developed my sense of confidence and have made some lovely friends."

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Local Strategic Partnership

Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) are non-statutory, multi-agency partnerships, which match local authority boundaries. LSPs bring together at a local level the different parts of the public, private, community and voluntary sectors; allowing different initiatives and services to support one another so that they can work together more effectively. The Local Strategic Partnership for South Somerset, South Somerset Together, has representation from statutory agencies, local employers and the Voluntary and Community Sector. The current aim of the Local Strategic Partnership is to engage in developing a 20 year sustainable community strategy that sets long term goals and a delivery plan.

South Somerset Together has been working with Yeovil Vision. Yeovil Vision is the delivery vehicle for a whole range of regeneration activities that will take place in the Yeovil area over the next 25 years.

The challenge is to make a step change in the quality of the town centre, think big and be ambitious for the future. ...the strategy relates to - the whole of Yeovil and its surrounding hinterland; and not just the town centre. (Yeovil Vision Draft Town Centre Strategy)^{xvii}

As well as working with Yeovil Vision, South Somerset Together commissioned a 'Planning for Real' consultation in the Westfield area of South Somerset. This exercise was aimed at engaging the local community in looking at ways to address issues that were important for people living in the area. One of the issues that came to light was the concern that residents of the area had about young people congregating in large groups and the noise and disturbance that people in the area felt that this was causing.

As a result of the 'Planning for Real' exercise the following actions were identified and the residents supported to take these forward.

- A local action group was set up
- A dispersal order was sought which resulted in reducing Anti Social Behaviour on the estate
- A youth cafe was created running in the evenings at the local church run by volunteers. The cafe provided such activities as a rock school, drop in sessions where young people can take part in a variety of activities.
- Improvements made to the hall, partly to enable the cafe to take place, also meant that other groups started to make use of the hall such as a parent and toddler group.

One of the other benefits of the LSP is its ability to bring partners from different agencies together round the table. This has led to the development of the Health and Well Being Partnership which has been controlling the two healthy living centres, including the Balsam Centre and a number of other community projects.

The view of the staff is that the LSP has a very specific role to help move people on to do things in new ways but its reliance on its powers of influence with no direct powers is frustrating.

The LSP has a cross cutting role but one of the main issues is that the district LSP has very little power. All the resources and power rest with the County LSP. A Staff Member

Measuring Empowerment

South Somerset is a winner of the Beacon Awards for three successive years. The Beacon Awards however do not prevent the Council from being under close scrutiny from the Audit Commission in the same way that other authorities are under scrutiny. The Council admit that it can be difficult to show the real value of their empowering approach and how this approach had led to a number of improvements in their service. For example the Council did receive positive comments from the Audit Commission for its good customer service.

“The Council has a strategic approach to customer access and care...customer satisfaction levels with the Council and many of its services are high and the community recognises improvements made when services are delivered on a localised area basis.”^{xviii}

This may well have been due, at least in part, to the Council’s structure but within the current measures it is difficult to show how one activity can lead to benefit another. The current structure of South Somerset, with its heavy investment in the four Areas Committees, local offices and elected members, can look an ‘expensive’ investment if it is difficult to show how it links to the benefits and measures, and yet those involved are convinced of its benefits.

Within the Best Value Performance Indicators, South Somerset District Council scores well in the area of people feeling able to influence decisions compared to other areas in Somerset with 27% of the resident saying they are very or fairly well satisfied with opportunities for participation in local decision making.

There is however a strong frustration in the lack of qualitative measures for measuring what Councils achieve, and a strong feeling that the current measures ‘do not tell you very much’. The suggestion is that better measures would involve a series of interviews with people in communities, with longer term measures, looking at the longer term outputs and outcomes. Also, surveys tell you very little about the people who respond.

Each activity has ripples going out from it. You can only capture this in a qualitative way...surveys don’t say who is answering the questions...they tell you very little. Staff Member

The Learning

South Somerset has an unusual local structure which is bringing the Council and decision making closer to communities.

The benefits of this structure are:

- elected members are better informed about and involved in their local communities
- elected members are better informed about and involved in Council business.
- decisions affecting communities are brought much closer to those communities
- community members can have a much closer say in budgeting for local activities
- services are improved through partnership working and by taking services out to the rural areas
- the LSP brings people together to form partnerships that they might not have formed. But at a district level the LSP has very little power
- the current imposed way of measuring the achievements of the Council is inadequate. There needs to be longer term measures and the opportunity for more qualitative measures, otherwise the measures will be meaningless
- this type of structure adopted by South Somerset does require a great deal of investment by both the Council and the elected members. It is therefore vital that there is a framework for linking the benefits to the process and showing how the structure and process are in fact good value for money and help to lead to the empowerment of the community and to the better delivery of services.

Wiltshire Case Study: Community Area Planning in Malmesbury and Villages

Introduction to the Study

In launching the Action Plan for Community Empowerment in October 2007, Hazel Blears named Wiltshire as one of a new national network of 18 'Empowering Authorities' (2 per region). It was therefore decided to focus on an aspect of the planning activities that are being undertaken in Wiltshire at a local level as part of the rural case study for the Empowerment Development Project.

Discussions with staff within Wiltshire County Council led to Community Area Planning in the Malmesbury area being identified as a potentially useful study. The staff felt that the Community Area Planning process, and the way engagement and empowerment take place within this structure, linked well into the empowerment agenda. As part of the study interviews took place with members of the County Council, District Council, Town Council, Voluntary and Community Sector and members of the Malmesbury and Villages Community Area Partnership.

Despite some positive aspects of the local planning process being identified, there was certain negativity about the input from the next tier of government, and the actual 'teeth' that any planning at a parish or town level has to influence decisions at a higher level.

To test the findings of this case study out further, a focus group was held to the South of the County. Members of this focus group included representatives from Parish Councils, District Council, service users groups, Voluntary and Community Sector groups and a county wide planning group. The issues raised by this focus group are outlined through their own words at the end of this study.

1. Background

Wiltshire is made up of the four districts, of North Wiltshire, West Wiltshire, South Wiltshire and Kennet. 432,973 people live in Wiltshire. Wiltshire does not rank highly in the indices of deprivation but like South Somerset it has areas of sparse population alongside market towns, areas of outstanding beauty and areas of historic interest. Wiltshire also struggles with the same rural issues of access to services, elderly population and affordable housing. To the North, Wiltshire borders on the more urban area of Swindon which has left behind its history of involvement in the railways and moved on to its new industries of mobile phone companies, banking and information technology^{xix}.

The Malmesbury Area and surrounding villages, which is the geographical focus of this case study, is a rural area covering 23,731 hectares. There are 18 Parishes (Parish Council areas) in the Malmesbury Area Partnership, ranging in size and make up. Malmesbury is based within the District of North Wiltshire, which is said to be the only District Council that was not considering taking the County Council to judicial review over its decision to become a unitary authority.

There are many indications that Malmesbury, as an area, far from scoring highly in the index of deprivation, is among some of the most affluent areas in the Country. In the index of deprivation out of 8414 wards nationally Malmesbury ranks 6335.^{xx} It is in the 20% of the least deprived wards in the country. Only 9.8% of the population of the Malmesbury area have no car, compared to 16.10% County wide. The area also fares well in terms of long term health issues, with only 12.8% of the population in North Wilts suffering from long term limiting illness, compared with 17.9% of the population in England as a whole. Malmesbury has slightly higher percentage of people over 65 than the rest of Wiltshire at 19.35%.^{xxi}

The Malmesbury area is one in which “people like to live” (*Profile of Malmesbury CA and its villages*)^{xxii}. 51% of those surveyed through the People’s Voice Survey (Wilts CC) in 2002 reported that “it was a good place to live” and 64% of people living in the Malmesbury Community Area said they had a ‘strong sense of belonging.’

Community Area Planning

The focus of this case study is the Community Area Planning structure in Wiltshire. Community Area Planning in Wiltshire has a history of over 10 years, and is now embedded in the “Stronger Communities” block of the Local Area Agreement. There are 20 “Community Areas” in Wiltshire identified and established through research into the “natural communities” in Wiltshire. They are generally based around one market town and its rural hinterland. The Community Areas have become the focus for the Community Planning in the county.

Community Plans are an attempt to stimulate and broaden current local government consultation processes, within a ‘manageable geographic area’. They aim to draw on information about the “future social, economic and environmental aspirations and needs of those who live in the towns and villages within each of Wiltshire’s 20 community areas.” The information to inform the Community Plans is gathered from a wide range of sources and agencies including Town and Parish Councils, local

businesses, service providers, agencies, voluntary organisations and members of the public. (*MVCAP Plan*)^{xxiii}

Wiltshire's community planning approach contributed to the County being recognised as a Beacon Council for 'listening to communities' in 2005.

Community Area Partnerships:

The body that is charged with putting the Community Area Plan together is the Community Area Partnership. Community Area Partnerships are not legal entities and each has its own terms of reference. Their core roles are closely aligned with engagement and empowerment and are to:

- Provide a community led focus
- Engage with local people at a local level
- Encourage and support local projects
- Build community engagement locally
- Prepare, deliver and monitor the Community Area Plan.

The Malmesbury Community Area:

This case study started with a focus on the Malmesbury & Villages Community Area Partnership (MVCAP).

There is no fixed membership of the MVCAP. It is open to anyone who wishes to attend, and there is no election process. In practice, membership is made up predominantly by representatives from Parish Councils. The MVCAP is successful in attracting participation from most of the Parishes – usually Parish Councillors (some of whom are also District or County Councillors). There are also 2 local activists, one of whom is a tenant from the local Housing Association. There are no representatives of voluntary or community organisations in the MVCAP.

Several interviewees commented that the membership of MVCAP (as with other Community Area Partners) is from a small and somewhat limited pool of potential members. One person described it as “an island on its own”, with little or no relationship to any wider membership. There is no membership from local voluntary or community organisations. Some interviewees commented that membership is open to all, and it is the responsibility of each person in the Community Area to decide their own level of engagement.

Resourcing the Community Area Partnership:

All those actively involved with the MVCAP described it as poorly resourced: “on a wing and a prayer” was one description. There is no money for expenses, so everything, including travel and child care, is paid for from “members’ own pockets”. This in itself could make it difficult for certain people to take part. Wiltshire County Council does provide a small amount of money, for stationery and room hire. Meetings are held in the Library, for which the Partnership is not charged, but the issue of the lack of adequate resources to support the functioning of the Area Partnership was one that was seen to be a deterrent to people engaging and taking part.

MVCAP is supported by 2 Officers, one from the District Council, and the other from the County Council. Some of the MVCAP members described their role as being to “drive” the Partnership. Both of the officers expressed concern about the level of their input, and whether this impacts negatively on the Partnership, by removing too much responsibility from its members. However, with no other core resource, this staff input, and the connections it brings to mainstream service delivery and local authority decision making, is arguably a very enabling factor. It contributes positively to the impact and sustainability of the partnership.

Progress towards the new unitary authority for Wiltshire has led to a discussion about the role of the Community Area Partnerships, and how they will feed into the new governance structures. The hope is that this might result in an increase in resources but as yet there is no indication that this will be the case.

2. Successes

Interviewees were asked how they defined “success” in relation to the MVCAP, in order to understand what would enable continued or increased engagement. Responses mainly highlighted practical actions developed or promoted by the Partnership. People identified the development of a Transport Hub in Malmesbury: this is a practical project that delivers a real and needed transport service in a rural area. They also identified the development of the Community Arts Project in Malmesbury: this involved training local people to use their own creativity to work with schools and others in the community. It brought groups of people together, encouraged and supported their participation in actions to improve the town, promoted the town (for example, work was displayed at WOMAD). Some of the work was used in the Malmesbury Carnival procession. This led to increase in civic pride. MVCAP felt that they had a genuine role in enabling these projects to develop in response to an identified local need.

Some interviewees described the Plan itself as a real success, particularly because of the extent of engagement by all the Parishes in the Malmesbury Community Area, and because of the practical measures it proposed. This makes the Malmesbury Community Area Plan measurable. It was noted that demonstrating achievements can promote further engagement: “success breeds empowerment.”

Several interviewees expressed the view that Community Area Plans are as much about civic pride, civic life and the quality of life as about contributing to local authority led planning. They aim to lower the barriers to participation, and “to meet the needs of local people to have fun” and so, simply, to connect with each other. In this way, some of the most successful actions by Community Area Plans (in Malmesbury and elsewhere) are “simple things that bring people together” in their towns or villages, and that generate a sense of civic pride. Examples are street carnivals, the “River of Lights” procession in Calne, or the Bradford-on-Avon Woolley Festival.

3. Obstacles to empowerment

Interviewees discussed the obstacles to empowerment inherent in the Community Area Plan structure in Wiltshire. The obstacles raised by the interviewees, and the possible remedies, are outlined below.

Lack of clarity about role and representation : None of the Community Area Partnerships have set or formally agreed Terms of Reference, although this was the intention. This means that there can be a lack of clarity about their role, and about the extent of their responsibilities. There can also be conflicts of interest for members themselves, particular those who are County or District Councillors as well as members of the Partnership (possibly as a Parish Councillor). Questions were also asked about whether a small, self-selected group can claim to “represent the community,” particularly when voluntary and community sector organisations are so often not present.

Relationship to wider decision making structures: There can be confusion about the extent of the decision making powers of the Partnerships, and about how decisions taken within the Community Area Plan is fed into the local authority decision making structures. A challenge for the future will be how to mainstream the aspirations of the Community Area Plans. There is evidence that decision making without authority can powerfully undermine empowerment.

Further, it was noted that many of the decisions that affect Community Area Plans are determined by decisions made even further away from communities: at regional or national levels. There are examples of decisions stemming from the Regional Spatial Strategy, for example, overturning the aspirations of communities expressed through Community Planning. It is unrealistic to change this situation. However, this issue could be mitigated through clear and realistic Terms of Reference, including levels of authority, for the Community Area Partnerships.

Capacity and resources: As mentioned previously the Community Area Partnerships have few resources to support them. The lack of payment of expenses limits participation. The time input to develop a community plan (usually on top of commitments in members’ individual parishes) is enormous, and this needs to be recognised. There is not always the capacity to take Community Area Partnership decisions further, without the support of Local Authority or Community Development staff. There is also a need to support partnerships through better communication. For this empowerment structure to deliver to its potential, their resourcing and capacity needs to be addressed.

Tension between participatory and representative democracy: Interviewees commented on the tension that can arise between the voluntary role of the Community Area Partnerships and the elected role of Councillors. There is a view that Councillors are elected to represent their communities, while Partnership members are self-selecting. Yet the Community Area Partnership structure aims to place the community voice at the heart of community planning. At the same time, local authority councillors are being asked to play an increased role in community leadership. They are also required to be accountable within standards required of

elected government. This can result in challenges to the status of the Community Area Partnerships, and can limit the level of participation in them.

Representation of cross-Community Area interests: In general, Voluntary and Community Organisations are not members of the Community Area Partnerships. Arguably, very small, local community organisations are represented through their Parish Councils. On a broader level, Voluntary and Community Sector Organisation representatives discussed their lack of participation in terms of a lack of capacity, and sometimes relevance. The capacity issues are also partly rooted in the fact that a number of Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations do not operate on a community area basis, but tend to be district or county wide. Therefore, attending all the Community Area Partnerships in their area of operation exceeds their staff resources. Some of the Partnerships based in the urban centres in Wiltshire (e.g. Trowbridge, Chippenham, etc.) have better participation of members of Voluntary and Community Organisations based in those centres. County wide infrastructure organisations would need a dedicated member of staff to attend all the Community Area Partnerships, and there is a question about the relevance of this attendance.

4. Lessons

This section highlights some of the process issues that help or hinder empowerment, gathered through this analysis of the Community Area Partnership structure.

Clarifying roles and responsibilities: developing appropriate decision making structures:

Some interviewees stated that there is a reluctance to attend, or spend time on, bodies that “have no teeth.” As stated above, it is important to be clear about what *decisions* and *actions* the Community Area Partnerships can take themselves, and what they can *recommend* to be acted upon by others. There can also be a need to support Community Area Partnerships to understand who/which bodies make what decisions. Community Area Partnerships are concerned with a range of very local matters, whose solutions are outside their authority. The Community Area Partnership structure, on paper, enables a high level of involvement with the issues that affect people’s lives at a local level. However, members become disempowered, disenchanting and so disengaged when these local concerns are talked about locally but nothing happens. This core issue requires a realistic approach, rooted in the principles of best practice in partnership working: clarity, trust and openness.

Relevance, realism and consultation fatigue

One element of enabling engagement is to work towards realistic agendas that deal with issues the Community Area Partnerships can influence. There is significant evidence that Community Area Partnerships work on items and areas over which they can have no influence.

Another is addressing consultation fatigue. Interviewees’ comments on the amount of consultations they are asked to respond to, often at the same time, the size of the consultation documents, and the (usually very short) time-scales for responses. It

was described as overwhelming, and a cause of disengagement. Solutions mentioned were co-ordinating consultation time-tables, and producing more accessible documents for communities to respond to. This was seen as an issue for local, regional and, primarily, central governments.

Promoting the work of Community Area Partnerships – better communications strategies

Effective communication is essential to good engagement. Because there are no formal Terms of Reference, an overall lack of structures, and limited resources, it is up to individual Partnership members to use the information they gather from the Partnerships as they see fit. While some members see it as their duty to report back, others do not; and some do not have a formed constituency through which to report back. Some people use Parish Magazines, or notice boards. Some Community Area Partnership members discussed the issue of responsibility: what is the balance between role of the Partnership to provide information [how much, where how etc.] and the responsibility of citizens to use this information to inform themselves.

Several of the Community Area Partnerships in Wiltshire do have websites. Some simply act as electronic notice boards; some also have Partnership Minutes and reports. Some produce annual updates on the Village Plan and place update reports on their websites. The Malmesbury and Villages Community Area Partnership does not have a newsletter, although it could be that a Community Area is too large for such a newsletter to be of general interest: on a Community Area basis, this form of communication would need a careful assessment. It was suggested that Community Area Partnerships should establish regular information links with the local press, as a way to reach the widest number of people.

Widening Participation:

People outside the Partnerships discussed some of the reasons they are not involved. These include:

- The limited power of the Partnerships
- The limited approaches to involving people: there tends to be a single mechanism of meetings
- There is no peer support: getting through the door for the first time can be daunting for new members
- The structure of meetings is formal: this can be off-putting for new members, especially those not used to meetings and their protocols

Ways in which the Partnerships could widen participation, apart from the structural issues about their roles and responsibilities, were suggested:

- Use a larger range of approaches, e.g. surveys, open events, using existing local groups, etc.
- Draw on the expertise of, and a range of methods used by, other organisations. Westlea Housing Association based in North Wiltshire is very successful in resident involvement. Links could be established to find out what can they offer to the partnership, which would enable widening participation.
- Use a wider range of ways to share information

- Promote successes: “success breeds empowerment”
- See the importance of members having fun, so that they get something out of it. “If it’s not fun, people won’t do it – it is voluntary after all!” Allowing informal time would help people to get to know each other, and so get to know other people in their area
- Deal with relevant issues: “People will participate on issues that concern them, rather than being whipped into participation”
- Provide Community Area Partnerships with enough capacity and resources to put these ideas into practice. This might mean
 - dedicated staff time
 - expenses for participation at the core meetings (as a minimum)
 - training to increase skills

5. Summary: Lessons for the future: what will enable better engagement/greater sense of empowerment

- Structurally: there should be clear (and possibly standard or common) Terms of Reference for all the Community Area Partnerships.
- They should draw from a wider pool of membership
- Clearer and shared definitions of “community” would help to clarify the remit of the Community Area Partnerships
- Consultation timetables need to be realistic – dates for meetings need to fit with Parish time-tables
- Consultations need to be co-ordinated
- Draw from Parish Plans, rather than re-invent them
- Participation needs to be resourced
- It is important to be realistic about the capacity, capability and roles of the different partners.
- Resourcing communication from the Community Area Partnerships – both financial support but possibly more importantly, support with capacity and links (e.g. to local papers)
- More creative approaches, and a wider range of approaches
- Active steps to engage with VCISO’s, on their terms, taking account of their barriers to participation. Consider payment to enable participation without damaging the capacity of community organisations to continue to deliver their core services
- Be clear about the differences in roles and interests of the range of members and potential members of each partnership: e.g. role of LA Councillors, Parish Councillors, voluntary organisations working with paid staff, community organisations with no paid staff, members of the community, etc.
- Reduce the burden – e.g. better linkages between thematic and area partnerships
- Offer very practical support to enable participation – tools, workshops, resources, etc
- Acknowledge and value “soft indicators” related to engagement – e.g. increase in community spirit
- Monitoring/evaluation that is not too burdensome for participants

In summary, this case study has found that empowerment requires that the bodies that are charged with engagement have

- Sufficient resources
- Sufficient decision making power
- Channels from which they can feed their decisions – that will mainstream it.

6. Measures:

Wiltshire are developing measures for the Stronger/More Resilient Communities block of the LAA. These are not yet available. However, we gathered a range of views about issues in measuring empowerment, and what measures might be appropriate. The tables below represent an amalgam of the views expressed through the interviews.

Interviewees commented on the difference between community planning and service specific measures, e.g. road maintenance measures. In relation to the service specific issues, some of the considerations are: ability to raise them, and get action, speed of response etc.

Community First has developed a monitoring form for Parish Plan Grants, which contains some clear measures for this form of planning (available from Community First), and Wiltshire County Council has developed a self assessment evaluation model for the Community Area Plans (available on CD from WCC).

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APPENDIX 1: Evidence of engagement in South Somerset

Best Value Performance Indicators for South Somerset

Results from the 2006/07 Best Value General survey revealed:

Resident satisfaction with opportunities for participation¹

- 27% of residents said they are very or fairly well satisfied with the opportunities for participation in local decision-making provided by their Council. This is higher than the Somerset County (25%) and South Region (25%) averages but slightly lower than the England average (28%).
- Compared to other districts in Somerset County, South Somerset is among the highest, just below Taunton Deane (28%) but above Mendip (26%), Sedgemoor (24%) and West Somerset (20%).

Resident desire to be more involved²

- 25% of residents said they would like to be more involved in the decisions their Council makes that affect their local area. This is lower than the Somerset County (27%) and South Region (28%) average and about the same as the England average (26%).
- Compared to other districts in Somerset County, South Somerset has the lowest reported % of residents stating they would like to be more involved compared to Taunton Deane (28%), Mendip (28%), West Somerset (28%) and Sedgemoor (26%)

According to Census 2001, the largest BME (black/minority/ethnic) groups in South Somerset are Chinese (0.28%) and Asian (0.23%).

Local Election Turnout

- In the 2007 local elections South Somerset District saw an average turnout of 42.7%. This is slightly lower than the Somerset County average of 43.6% and the South West Regional average of 44.2% but higher than the England average of 39.8%.
- The district average masks considerable variability across wards with 31% difference between the wards with highest (54.6%) and lowest (23.2%) turnout.
- Average turnout in top 10 wards was 50% compared to 32% in bottom 10 wards.
- South Somerset is mid way between the other districts in Somerset County, with higher average turnout than both Sedgemoor (37.8%) and Mendip (39.4%) but lower than Taunton Deane (45.3) and West Somerset (52.8).

¹ “% residents very of fairly well satisfied with the opportunities for participation in local decision-making provided by their Council”

² “% residents who say that they would like to be more involved in the decisions their Council makes that affect their local area”

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Appendix 2

Wiltshire Focus Group

To test out the findings of the Wiltshire case study further, a focus group was held to the South of the County. Members of this focus group included representatives from parish councils, District Council, service users groups, Voluntary and Community Sector groups and a county wide planning group.

Issues raised in the focus group

The Funding Issues

The Wiltshire Compact is a lovely document sitting on the shelf. Wiltshire have signed up - we have lift - off but the statutory services all the time dictate the pace at which the Compact is developed and implemented- this needs to stop they need to let the Voluntary and Community Sector be equal partners.

A member of the Wiltshire Compact group

Learning Disabled People have funding from Valuing People. But the organisations concerned do not know at the beginning of March 2008 whether they will have any allocation in April for 2008/9 or what that allocation might be. How can you take part? How can you plan?

Service User Group

People are also set objectives by funders such as European funding with unrealistic objectives that you can never achieve what they ask of you.- this is disempowering-they pay no attention to what service users are saying about how services are-what their views are.

Service User Group

When it comes to contracting for services service users themselves are never consulted....A classic example of this is what has happened at a horticultural project for people with learning disabilities in Wiltshire. The initial charity running the training into work scheme ran the scheme well from the perspective of the service users, but they were unable to hit the targets set by the funders for getting individuals into work. The charity lost the management of the project when it went out to tender.

The service users are about to go onto their third management group due to the work going out to tender. The service users had no say in this process and it has affected them quite badly-constantly changing managers. It does not matter what the end users feel. The tendering process is disempowering because it does not take into account users views.

Group for learning disabled people

There is a Funding Compact for Wiltshire. If people abided by this compact then the issues over funding might be resolved, but this is not the case. It's not just at a local level - Government also does not adhere to the principles of a compact. The disenchantment with all of this goes on...despite the Compact.

Statutory services focus group member

Consultation of Service Users

Mental health service users at the Centre have clearly said time and time again that what they want is the day care that our service offers. They have filled in questionnaires telling the authorities what services they want.. but because the authorities do not want day care, they do not want to hear what the service users are saying and ignore it. They pretend to consult with us but really they pay no attention to what service users say. In all of the consultation exercises they undertake with us, there never is a real choice.- people are just paying lip service to consultation.

Service user group

Valuing the Voluntary and Community Sector- The Sector not being treated as equals

Many comments were made about Voluntary and Community Sector bodies not being treated as equals or statutory bodies understanding their value. These are just a selection.

The statutory sector asks the Voluntary and Community Sector to deliver services because we are good at it, but then they want to tell us how to do it. They need to trust us and respect our skills. It is disempowering to have your credibility questioned all the time. We deliver good services. The statutory services often deliver services that are lacking in quality and yet for them there is not the same accountability.

Service user organisation

Small charities are the last in line in all of these processes- we work with over 2,000 each year and yet no-one pays us any attention- they are just not interested-this is disempowering.

Voluntary and Community Sector Organisation

There was recently meeting of the new LINK initiative- It was in a lovely setting- As soon as we arrived the speaker said; 'Let's all walk in here and leave our agendas behind'. It was a real joke. The people there presenting were all the usual suspects. They were there because of the agenda they were set to deliver...they had not left their agendas behind, why should we be told to leave ours behind?

Service User Group

Why don't the statutory authorities truly recognise our expertise? It's really disempowering when you run a large communityscheme You've been doing this since 1996 and funded by the Council only to be told when you phone up that they've never heard of you. It makes you feel undervalued. Why don't people use our expertise? Within the Voluntary and Community Sector we have all sorts of expertise and it's never recognised, never used.

Large Voluntary and Community Sector Organisation

The County did have a budget setting public meeting but it was at County Hall and our District Council did not even receive an invitation...or that is the perception.

Voluntary Sector Representative

We need to have people we can relate to who understand the agenda- we need to have a good interface with the statutory organisations.

Large Voluntary and Community Sector Organisation

There are good examples of people getting involved at a local level for example in their local plans. We get a good 'turn out' of people and the events go well at a parish level. We don't understand why what happens on the ground does not translate up.

Agency working with Parish and Town Councils

Questionnaires are not a good way of getting people's opinions.

They have a Beacon Award but it's easy to get a Beacon Award. I was involved, I know. You just say what people want to hear.

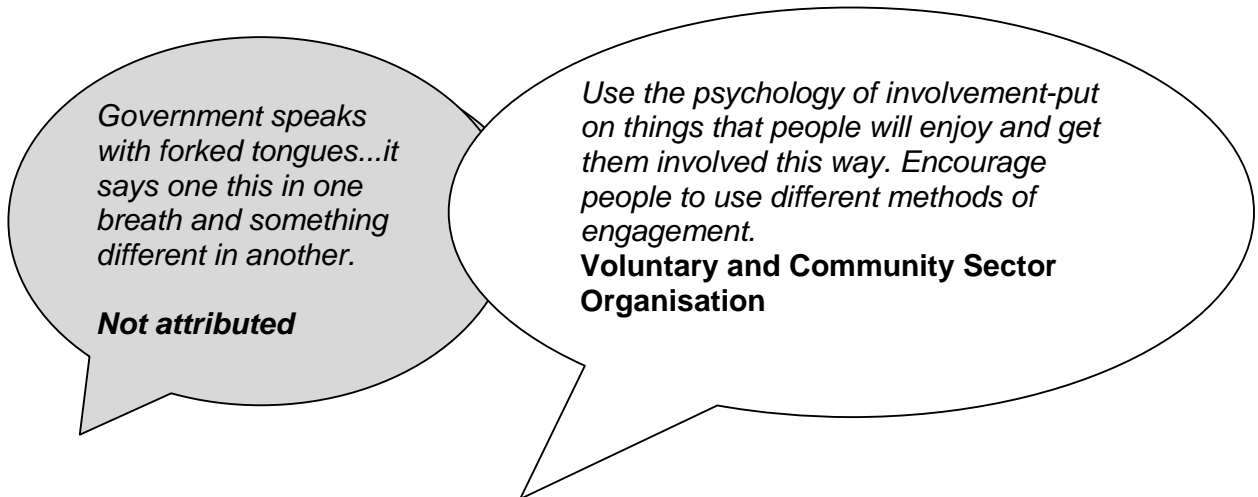
Voluntary and Community Sector Representative

There are so many different layers and structures in government it is very difficult to know where to go, who to talk to where you can have input. There are 20 community areas in Wiltshire. They tend to be very large areas that they are covering for example 40,000 people in one area.-it is difficult to get .community involvement. The structure is confusing people cannot unravel this.

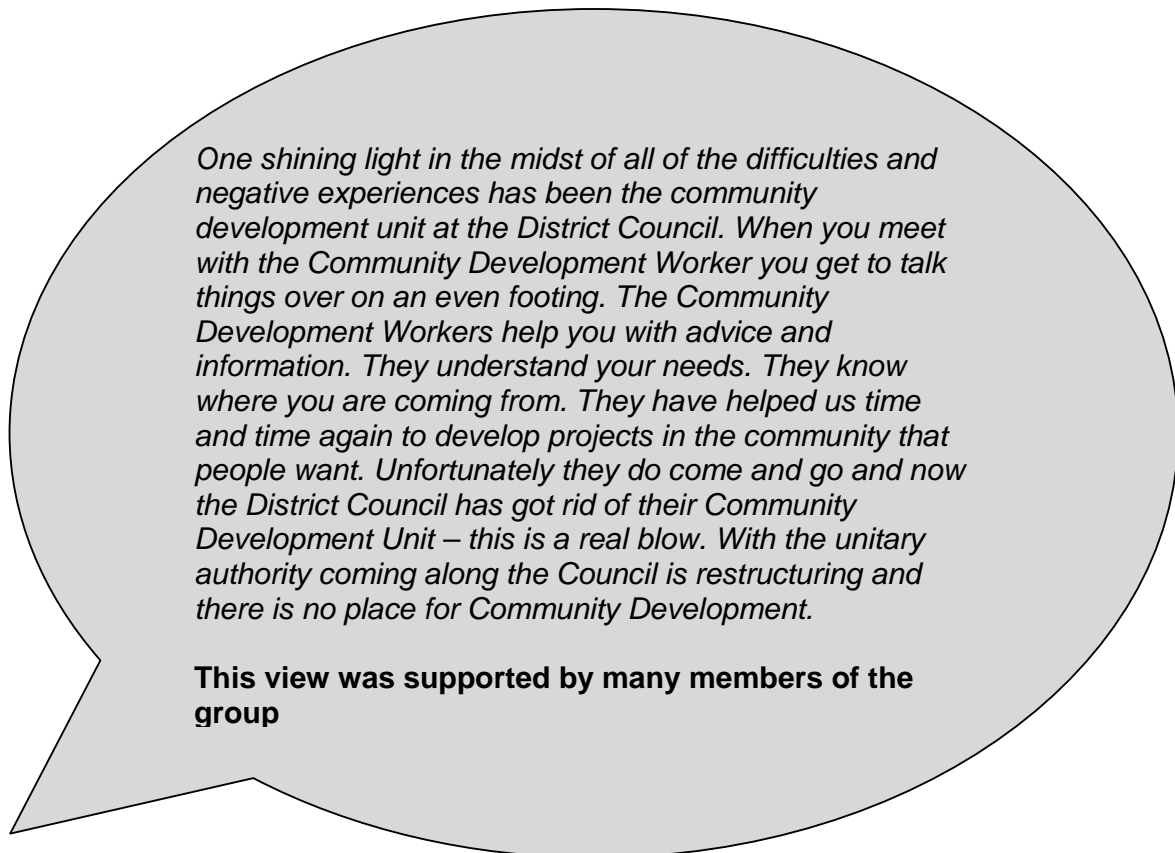
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At a very local level people have input into the parish plans but these don't feed in properly to the higher levels.

Parish Council



The Role of Community Development-Positive Input



We built up our expertise within the District but now those in charge of the new unitary authority do not value community development, they do not understand it. I fear for the future and am moving on.

Former District Council Staff

Hopefully things will get better under a unitary authority but it is difficult to see how

One member of the focus group summed up the issues raised as follows:

- The tendering process is a problem for the voluntary sector
- There is a lack of continuity with officers not staying in post long enough
- Wiltshire County Council consults with the voluntary sector on issues where they have no real influence – this feels like paying lip service
- Wiltshire County Council has double standards – asking voluntary organisations to provide information which Wiltshire County Council in turn don't provide
- The number of meetings makes it difficult to be clear about which meetings to attend – too confusing
- Politics between District Councils and Wiltshire County Council get in the way
- Silo mentality in statutory organisations is hard for voluntary sector to deal with
- Voluntary organisations are worried about the democratic deficit under a new unitary authority

Appendix 3

Housing Associations: A History of Engagement - A snapshot

Background

Overall, the total housing stock in England stands at 21.8 million, Seventy per cent (15.4 million) of all dwellings are owner-occupied, and eighteen per cent (4 million) are rented from a local authority or registered social landlord. The remainder - 2.5 million - is rented privately.^{xxiv}

One of the major issues in rural areas is affordable housing. Rural areas, as mentioned previously have far less access to social housing than their urban counter parts. The majority of social housing in the region is managed and delivered by housing associations.

Housing associations are non profit making organisations committed to meeting specific housing needs. Because there is a shortage of affordable housing, associations let their properties to people in the greatest need. Any money they make is ploughed back into maintaining the houses they have, or providing more. There are 1,800 Registered Social Landlords in England. Most own less than 250 properties. 13% have more than 2,500 homes and between them own over 80% of the stock.^{xxv}

Housing associations, as registered social landlords, providing affordable housing of a good standard, are an important asset to communities. The South West Regional Office of the Housing Federation offers support to social landlords throughout the region. It now has well over 500 members in the Region. Three years ago the Housing Federation launched its 'iN Business for Neighbourhoods Agenda' to encourage more housing associations of all sizes to act as community builders. Housing Associations are well placed, often in communities of greatest need, to offer not just housing of good quality but other forms of investments to assist communities. Recent research from the South West Foundation^{xxvi} has shown that housing associations in the South West are currently investing well over five million pounds each year in wider community activities.

The Housing Corporation last year launched its Strategy for Neighbourhoods and Communities highlighting the important role that housing associations can play within the wider community.^{xxvii}

The Housing Corporation is committed to delivering affordable homes, within strong and thriving neighbourhoods, and communities. The aim of the strategy of the Housing Corporation is to promote the active engagement of housing associations in the development and delivery of local and neighbourhood strategies, to encourage housing associations to contribute further to the sustainability of the communities they work within, extending beyond their core housing role. Within the strategy the Housing Corporation is also looking to housing associations to develop greater community and resident involvement in the work of housing associations and in decision making.

Housing Associations as Community Anchors

Recently the Government has recognised the importance of Housing Associations as community anchors and hubs for neighbourhood activities. The National Housing Association and HACT^{xxviii} are urging the Government and the Housing Corporation to look at ways of supporting relationships between associations and other Third Sector organisations. HACT last year published a document looking at the 'inspirational partnerships' between housing associations and the Voluntary and Community Organisations and considers how these examples might provide a model for sustainable communities of the future.(HACT: An Opportunity Waiting to Happen:2007) The benefits to the wider community of Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations working together with providers of social housing are clear, but there are difficulties and barriers affecting both sectors, not least cultural barriers that are making close working relationships in many areas difficult to achieve.

Housing Associations and Resident Involvement

Most housing associations are registered with the Housing Corporation as Registered Social Landlords (RSLs). Although not technically in the public sector, housing associations are heavily regulated by the Housing Corporation. Increasingly Housing Associations are viewing themselves as businesses. While they are 'not for profit' organisations they tend to operate outside of most of the other Third Sector structures.

The Regulatory Code and Guidance produced by the Housing Corporation has been established and used since 2002. ^{xxix}The Code lays out the framework under which Housing Associations are expected to operate. It sets out the fundamental obligations of Housing Associations to meet the Corporation's regulatory requirements. The Housing Corporation has the task of ensuring that Housing Associations are well managed, financially sustainable and efficient businesses providing responsive services.

As part of the Regulatory Code and the Housing Corporation's commitment to effective and appropriate governance, Housing associations are required to 'seek and be responsive to resident's views'.

They are required to give residents and other stakeholders opportunities to comment on their performance; enable residents to play their part in decision making and to providing opportunities for residents to explore, and play their part, in how services are managed. Much of this terminology ties in with the current definition of empowerment and the view of government that communities should not just be consulted in decision making that affects services, but that they should also be 'involved'.

For some years now Housing Associations have been compelled not just to consult their residents but to actively engage and involve their residents in decisions that affect their services. For some Housing Associations, this has meant no more than getting their residents to complete residents' satisfaction surveys and enabling the housing association to tick its involvement box, but for more enlightened housing

associations, resident involvement has become part of their core activity. There are resident involvement officers and a number of housing associations have developed and delivered interesting and useful models of engagement, enabling their residents to have a voice. Much could be learnt around engaging service users from the more 'successful' of the housing associations who, after all, have been undertaking this activity, albeit because they have been compelled to do so, for a number of years.

Model of Engagement-“Am I Bovered?”

In May 2006 Sarsen Housing Association, a member of the Aster group, put on an event called “**Am I Bovered?**”^{xxx}. This was part of their resident involvement campaign. The event was made up of five workshops based on five key themes. The workshops gave local residents an opportunity to consider key issues in their communities and how they could be resolved. 60 residents attended the event. Residents were invited to identify what was 'bovering' them. As a result the Housing Association was able to identify 'hot spot neighbourhoods' which needed more investment. In response to the views of their residents they profiled a selection of neighbourhoods and their priorities for change. They worked with the Tidworth Neighbourhood Regeneration Project and set up a youth activities website. Among the benefits of the 'Are You Bovered?' Campaign were:

- three residents joined the Board of the Housing Association
- local residents groups were established
- staff were more aware of the issues in the neighbourhoods in which they worked
- a small grant pot/community chest was established to support neighbourhood activity
- a database of over 400 residents who would like to take part in future consultations was established along with a residents panel.

The campaign contained fun events to bring the residents together and gather their views. Sarsen then acted on the issues raised. They used the event to increase resident involvement through residents being on the board and established a database of those who would like to take place in the future. Sarsen also communicated to their residents what actions they were undertaking as a result of this consultation.

Other housing associations in the West have developed and tried a range of different activities to encourage their residents to become engaged in decision making within the housing association, and to put forward their views on services and the development of services.

Measuring Resident Involvement

Westlea Housing Association, based in Chippenham, covering both market towns and rural areas, invests over half a million each year on wider activities such as resident involvement. Their Resident Involvement Programme has grown and strengthened and now includes an effective District Forum, Disability Forum, Older Pensioners Forum and a design panel. They run workshops for their residents, along with a whole host of other support activities. Last year through their involvement

activity they have managed to increase resident engagement by 110% over an eight month period.

In their 2007 Impact report Westlea^{xxx} looked at outcomes of their Resident Involvement Programme by comparing what they said would do, with what they actually did. For example, following feedback from the Older Person's Forum, Westlea allocated £50,000 for walk-in showers. For residents to see the results of issues raised with the landlord is essential. If issues cannot be resolved, then informing residents why this is the case is equally important.

Westlea also put on a host of activities of interest to their residents. Some of these activities are aimed at attracting residents to attend consultations and forums. The Older People's Forum for example has speakers attend that are of interest to the older people. The Chief Executive of Westlea Housing Association personally attended a number of the Older People's Forum meetings. Having a staff member of this stature attend consultation meetings gives the Forum credibility and the members a belief that the issues they raised are taken seriously. This Forum itself almost doubled in size.

Involving Residents in high level decisions

Sovereign Housing Association has over 20,000 properties spread over a wide geographical area including properties in the South West Region. In partnership with residents and local authorities they are developing new approaches for turning unpopular estates into sustainable communities. Sovereign has a Resident Involvement Officer and uses residents on scrutiny panels to consider the future activities and budgets of the association.

They are also investing in the local residents' futures by enabling them to access opportunities for training and employment related to the construction programme. As well as their bricks and mortar projects, Sovereign are putting emphasis on creating more sustainable communities by supporting local neighbourhood renewal initiatives and making a contribution to meeting the government's 'liveability' agenda, in helping to make the communities they serve cleaner, safer and greener.

Sovereign's investment in their estates has been based on three years of careful research and intensive resident consultation, including 'Planning for Real' and other community involvement techniques.

A recent move by Sovereign to purchase 850 additional properties was put before the resident's scrutiny panel for their consideration before the tender was put forward. The tender was successful.

While it cannot be argued that all housing associations in the region successfully engage with their residents, there are many examples of innovative, interesting and successful engagement techniques within the world of housing associations that would translate themselves to the wider agenda of engagement and empowerment, particularly when looking at getting people to take part in the decisions that affect their lives. The main messages where this is working well within the housing association world seem to be:

- to make sure that the initial activity is of interest to the residents or make it fun
- make sure you consult on issues where residents views can be taken into account
- if you follow on and take action on the residents' views make your action public - communicate what action you have taken
- if you cannot act - also make it clear why you cannot
- skill and support your residents so that they can actively take part in the decisions and the scrutiny of decisions
- invest both financial resources and staff resources in these activities-the investment will 'pay off' in the long run

Appendix 4 The 'VIVID' Case Study

Lyme Regis and the Lyme Regis Development Trust



Background

Lyme Regis sits on the Dorset and Devon border. A fishing port of 3,700 residents, Lyme is famed for its ancient Cobb harbour, its geology and is the gateway town to the 95 mile Jurassic coastline World and Heritage Site and Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. However, as with many coastal towns in the South West Region, Lyme depends heavily on the tourist industry. Few year round employers exist and the choice of careers for all, especially the young, is limited in the area. Wage levels are low at 17% below the national average while house prices are high, currently 40% above the national average. 30% of houses are second homes or holiday homes and 43.5% of the population are over 60 (against the figure of 29% for Dorset as a whole). In the Index of Deprivation 2000 for Dorset, Lyme Regis was amongst the nine worst wards for Child Poverty.^{xxxii}

Child poverty and the considerable displacement of young people due to lack of affordable housing and opportunity is a significant issue in the area.

Enabling Engagement to Happen



Lyme Regis as an area does not have a long history of community development or investment in the infrastructure of the Voluntary and Community Sector. Its geography, being on the edge of the county boundary, bordered by the sea in a community affected by the seasonal tourist industry has not, in the past, provided an encouraging environment. However, people in the town now talk of Lyme Regis as 'buzzing' with community activity. The main enabling force

behind this is the Lyme Regis Development Trust. Lyme Regis Development Trust has the aim of delivering community driven consultation and planning.

Since its inception in 1998 the Trust has organised many rounds of consultation with the local community with great success. One of their recent consultations attracted over 200 people. They manage to get people to engage and take part through the

work of their Local Area Partnership Co-ordinator and their track record for delivering on projects.

People need to see things happening. It is not good to constantly make plans and then find that there are not the resources to deliver. Quick wins are important if people are to be able to feel that their input is valued and they can make a difference

Managing to influence

One of the issues that the Development Trust has highlighted as being essential to engagement and getting people to take part is what they call 'quick wins'. The local community identifies an issue that they would like to see tackled on their behalf by the Trust. The Trust uses its skills, knowledge and influence to access the resources and permissions required to achieve the activity.

I see them as representing the people....they are ambitious, proactive and get things done

Their ability to influence has extended to both policy makers and funders alike. The effect of accessing funding on empowerment should not be overlooked. Over the last 10 years the Trust has brought in or mobilised over £895,000 into Lyme Regis for community projects. The Development Trust has used its skills, knowledge and contacts to take forward the issues that the community has asked it to. As one community member said:

The Development Trust is the only mechanism to link with the community's aspirations...

Giving Young People a Voice



Among the examples of the outcomes of this linkage is the Young Person's Café 'InSPARation'. Working with young people in the area to identify what their needs and aspirations are, the Development Trust sought funders and resources to back the young people's plans. Obtaining funding from the Regional Development Agency and others, the Café opened in 2004 and provides services and advice to young people, aged 13–25, from Lyme and the surrounding area, and acts as a platform for outreach activities in the town.

Young people are on the management committee, and are integral to all aspects of running the café. The young people have now also become involved in the wider community agenda, meeting with the local MP, getting involved in the setting up of the Youth Forum and feeding into West Dorset Youth Bank and Youth Council. The young people have been actively involved in the production of the Lyme Forward Community Plan and have been able to influence the drafting of this plan.

Other achievements include the Trust's work to establish the under 12's Forum which has led to the building of a children's centre in the town; obtaining funding

from Living Spaces to work on the Mill Path across the river, making the environment better for both visitors and tourists alike.

The latest Initiative 'Lyme Goes Green' has taken forward the community's desire for environmental sustainability and ensuring that Lyme is a plastic bag free zone by involving the Town Council in the production and distribution of the 'green' shopping bag.

Influencing the Community Plan

The Town and District Council in Lyme have funded the Lyme Regis Development Trust to consult with local people and to draw up the local community plan. Using the Market and Coastal Towns Initiative to involve the community, this plan now feeds into the wider plan for West Dorset and then into the County Plan and ensures that the people of Lyme have had a say, and influence on the priorities of the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). It is sometimes



difficult to find mention of Lyme Regis in County documents but the priorities within the District Plan and the County Plan clearly link in with a number of the priorities identified by the community members of Lyme. The need for affordable homes for local people, transport and access to services, particularly for younger and older residents and the need to safeguard the environment have all been fed up from the Town Plan to the District Plan and then on to the County Plan. Having the plan for Lyme Regis gives the Development Trust solid evidence upon which to base their views on funding and policy priorities when attending the Local Strategic Partnership meetings.

Ingredients needed for the involvement of the Community and the Ability To Influence



What has made Lyme Regis Development Trust able to engage the local community and ensure that they take forward their agenda? The Trust are clear that meaningful consultation with the local community is essential and must be ongoing. All of the activities that come under the umbrella of the Trust are led and run by people who live or work within the Lyme Regis area. The Trust is often able to get large numbers of the community involved in consultation events.

They have seven working groups all looking at different issues within the plan so that people can link into the areas in which they have their prime interest. Their latest event involved over 200 residents of Lyme.

The Role of the Town Council

Another important aspect has been the involvement and support of the local Town Council and the elected members. The Town Council have supported many of the Trust's initiatives. They have had the foresight to financially support the Trust to undertake the development of the Lyme Regis Community Plan. The Development Trust feel that they have the authority, knowledge and evidence to support activity, influence policy and to some degree influence where funding is allocated.

Community Anchors- the importance of having a central focal point in a building



One of the great successes of the Trust is the fact that it has been able to access a building for community activity to take place. The Trust feels that they were two years ahead of the Quirke Review. West Dorset District Council were looking to sell off their interest in the old school building from which the Trust now operates. The building provides a meeting point, a place where activities such as advice and information provision can happen, and a place where people can call in to look at plans and make their views heard. The building also adds to the visibility and sustainability of the Trust and is a learning centre for the community.

Skills of People within the Trust

- The Development Manager

The lead member of staff in the Trust comes from a background in the dot.com industry. Inspirational and dedicated leadership from individuals coupled with a strong belief that the community members can make a difference and have a voice all add to the ingredients needed to take empowerment forward in Lyme Regis.

- The Local Area Partnership Co-ordinator

The Trust has access to a part-time Local Area Partnership Co-ordinator whose role is dedicated to bringing people together and ensuring that they feel able and are able to get involved. She also acts as link between the various committees. The community development input has been essential in getting the wider community involved.

- Unpaid Help

The Trust has access to a number of highly skilled volunteers. Some of these are retired individuals. One volunteer for example has come from a background in the railways, has good project management skills and perhaps seeks solutions that may not always be obvious. He is currently working on a system based on his railway days where there will be a relational database which will store information on all of the projects, those in development and those that the local community would like to see developed. From this the Trust will have an overview of the activities within each of the projects.

Issues with Community Empowerment

Despite the successes of the Development Trust, bringing about meaningful community empowerment is not easy. The Trust often has to struggle to get messages from the community through Byzantine layers into the arena of the LSP. The views of the Trust reflect a certain disenchantment that the sector has with the ability of statutory agencies and Government alike to listen to the voice of the people and take action on those views, despite the current rhetoric and intention to ensure community engagement and involvement. For community empowerment to be meaningful and appropriate, the Trust has identified the really important issue of 'buy in' from other agencies and sectors. As a Trust member states

At present many people that I work with feel they are just being used and don't believe that local authorities, statutory bodies, regional or national government actually cares what local communities think. They just consult and plan because they now have to tick the box along with other politically correct awareness issues such as disability and ethnicity.

Until recently the Trust would have deemed its relationship with the Sure Start initiative to be one of its successes. Consulting with local people, they identified the need for 'wrap around' day care provision in Lyme Regis to enable parents to return to employment. The Trust successfully supported the Under 12s Forum to be established. £250,000 funding through Sure Start and a partnership with a local landowner has led to the building of a new Children's Centre in Lyme. However, now the Centre is almost ready to open the initial idea of a base for day care provision no longer seems a possibility. The Centre instead is to be used to undertake initiatives, not led and identified by local people, but governed by a national Sure Start agenda. The Trust fear that it will be underused and feel that the community members who put time and effort into getting the centre up and running will feel 'let down' by recent developments. As one member of the Under 12s Forum said:

You only get real empowerment if you give real powers. Those who have power have to devolve these powers. Local people have to have the resources and they have to have the power set their own agendas.

Measuring the Effect of the Engagement

While the Development Trust have not had much opportunity to measure the effectiveness of their engagement and consultation other than through community feedback and the visible outcomes of their activity, there is the opportunity within the community plan and the Trust have designed a way of measuring each of the projects that it hopes will be delivered through the community plan. The measures focus on

- Reaction: What was the immediate impact of the project?
- Learning: What can the local area now do that it could not do before the project was delivered and how has its capacity increased?
- Development: How has this increased capacity been applied?
- Change: What is the longer-term effect or impact of the activity likely to be?

Ingredients for Empowerment and Engagement in Lyme Regis

- Consultation should be ongoing, not just one off.
- People must be able to make a difference. Consulting on issues that people cannot influence is disempowering and should never take place.
- Making sure there are some quick wins-issues that people can influence and make happen are important to people getting involved and wanting to engage.
- The presence of a community development worker is essential to bringing people together and getting them to take part in the discussion about issues that affect them. Without the input of the community development worker it is difficult to make this happen.
- Having a plan that is backed by evidence from the community gives the tool to ensure that resources are argued for in the right place.
- The involvement of elected members, whether this is the Town District or County Councillors, assists to take the agenda forward.

Resources

- Empowerment needs appropriate funding behind it.
- Community anchors in the form of buildings and resource centres gives engagement and empowerment a visible base.
- For true empowerment to take place those organising and arranging the consultation should be independent and not have a vested interest in the outcome.



Photos by Peter Wiles: peter@lymescares.co.uk www.lymescares.co.uk

Appendix 5

Draft suggested scheme for measuring the involvement process

After discussion with interviewees in Malmesbury, the following rough scheme was developed to measure involvement.

Measures: fit for purpose:

Measures have to be fit for their purpose. Empowerment measures might be more appropriate for one purpose than for another. It is important to be clear about whether the measure is for:

- Broad strategic issues
- A wide geographic area
- A small geographic area
- A particular set of interests or interest group
- Local Authority structures and interests
- Community structures and interests

Measures for the assessment of empowerment need to be realistic and achievable. Interviewees discussed this issue. They identified a set of measures that we analysed in relation to the stages of the involvement process. In some cases, they also identified ways in which the measures can be demonstrated.

Stage 1: Identifying needs and bringing people together to find ways to meet the identified needs

Measures	Measurements
The extent of input from the community	Who is involved? How often? Levels of input etc
Engaging with local area challenges	Communication with people not part of this group
Working with issues and organisations	Linkages beyond the group
Range of people involved	
Building local capacity	
People knowing about this group	

Stage 2: Making changes happen locally

Measures	Measurements
seeing the difference you are making/ Seeing a service improvement	Elements of the plan actually being delivered <i>Also, the service specific changes</i>

Going on to join something else	Patterns of membership
Adding value locally	
Adding to local capacity to make things happen	
More local networks and groups	Being able to demonstrate an increase in involvement

Stage 3: Increased sense of civic pride

Measures	Measurements
Increased local participation	Patterns and numbers of memberships
Better channels of local communication	Formal and informal channels
Increased community spirit	<i>Subjective assessments</i>
Increased channels for local connection	<i>Opportunities to “have fun”/for social activities. Social capital measures and indicators</i>

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