

No limits to Wolverton's regeneration!

Report on a social enterprise demonstration project

Monkey Mosaic for the Commission for Rural Communities



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BACKGROUND

Coming to Milton Keynes for the first time is an odd experience. When you come out of the station and head up one of the boulevards (for which read dual carriageways) this one time 'city of the future' feels old fashioned – planned and therefore stuck. Discovering Wolverton when you've been to Milton Keynes a few times is even more of a surprise. Milton Keynes feels out of time; a red-brick Victorian town of terraces and back alleys seems out of place – a northern town in the south of England. Yet Wolverton is part of the city and just 4 minutes by train from Central Milton Keynes.

Wolverton was largely built in the 19th century as a home for the employees of the vast sprawling complex known locally as 'The Works' – a railway carriage-building factory that gives the town a proud manufacturing history. At one time almost everyone in the town was employed in the works or ancillary businesses. Following restructuring and consequent job losses in the 1980s The Works now employs only a tenth of its previous 3000 employees, though the town retains a pride in its manufacturing past and prowess.



Regeneration in Wolverton is carried out against a background of decline for many of England's market towns. In Wolverton the situation is even more complex because of its industrial past and geographical position: it sits at the urban-rural fringe, overshadowed by booming Milton Keynes to the south and separated from rural Northamptonshire by the Railway Works.

Earlier regeneration programmes had brought some improvements to physical aspects of the town – a remodelled square, new street furniture and a new shopping centre. However these changes were not seen as entirely positive. The shopping centre in particular comes in for criticism as it was sold into private hands and is not seen as meeting local needs. Many people in the community felt excluded from the planning process, which they saw as controlled by remote and uncommunicative organisations.

Wolverton must now find a new and more diverse future for itself; one that turns its physical position into an opportunity, drawing from the hinterland, providing a safe, vibrant and welcoming community for those that live and work in the town

and ensuring that new ODPM funded housing developments do not leave it as a dormitory for Milton Keynes and London. This time round the community is more actively involved, working on the principle that this better future cannot be planned from afar; rather it must be discovered by the inhabitants of Wolverton through a process of organic growth, trial and error.

Market Town Healthcheck and Formation of Wolverton Unlimited

Happily Wolverton has the main ingredients: local people who want to make positive changes and external interest and support. Wolverton is one of the Countryside Agency's Beacon Towns. The programme of Beacon Towns forms part of the Countryside Agency's Market and Coastal Towns Initiative.

The initiative is a response to the decline in many of England's market towns. The impact of out-of town shopping centres, closure of livestock markets and increased mobility for many people have reduced the viability of high street businesses, social cohesiveness and the quality and diversity of services. These issues affect people both in towns and the surrounding countryside. The initiative is based on the principles that:

- Market towns should be the basis of sustainable rural communities
- Local communities in market towns and their surrounding countryside should have a say in the future of their market towns
- The revitalisation of market towns should improve people's quality of life, provide access to the essential services, jobs and goods, and improve the diversity and vitality of rural economies.

Beacon Towns are not the best, but have been chosen for their potential to contribute to learning that can be used to help other towns: testing new ideas and demonstrating solutions.

The Countryside Agency has also lead the development of the Healthcheck, which allows local people to identify the economic, environmental and social strengths and weaknesses of a market town and its surrounding countryside. It helps create a vision for the future as a sound basis for preparing and action plan. The successful Healthcheck in Wolverton in 2002 involved 10% of the population. Community consultations rarely achieve such dizzy heights, more usually involving only 2 or 3%.

The immediate result of the Healthcheck was that the 'Future Wolverton' vision was created (Attached at Annex I.). The Vision set challenging goals. More importantly it engaged local people in the process. Wolverton was lucky in that many individuals and groups decided to invest in the Healthcheck, giving up hours of their spare time to create a shared vision for Wolverton's future. This commitment led to a community organisation, Wolverton Unlimited, being formed in 2003 as a vehicle to take forward the Action Plan.

The Social Enterprise Project

Wolverton's Beacon Town status focuses on how the local community can influence inward investment. This not only means financial investment from outside, but also harnessing resources that already exist locally. By 2004 the town was ready to consider its options for a social enterprise structure to implement the community's vision for the future by unlocking and enabling local resources, time, people, money and expertise.

So the Social Enterprise Project was started, again with the support of the Countryside Agency, to develop a social enterprise organisational structure and provide an action research demonstration in a market town. The consultancy was put out to tender. Monkey Mosaic's response to the tender stressed the need to find and support real people delivering real projects, since structures and plans do not by themselves create change:

“Too many consultancy projects focus on a paper plan and ignore the people. Consequently they end up on shelves or at the bottom of in-trays. We will deliver not only a structure, but also real people with real social, community and business projects they wish to pursue with the support of that structure. Our experience in communities throughout the UK from inner-city Glasgow to the Ardoyne in Belfast to rural Devon shows they can always be found.”

This proposal resonated with the panel – members of the Executive Committee of Wolverton Unlimited as well as Countryside Agency officers – and Monkey Mosaic were hired in August 2004. We worked closely with Wolverton Unlimited over the next seven months.

OPPORTUNITIES CREATED AND ISSUES ARISING

Activities

The programme of activities organised for the demonstration had two main purposes:

1. Organisational development of Wolverton Unlimited
2. Recruitment and support of social entrepreneurs

The programme incorporated the following elements:

- Individual discussions with members of the Executive Committee;
- 'Away days' with the Executive Committee to discuss aspects of organisational purpose and structure;
- Public meetings including external speakers from other community and social enterprise organisations;
- Visits to relevant organisations in other towns;

- A developing relationship with Community Links, based in Newham in East London and one of the UK's most successful community development organisations. It has a strong focus on social enterprise;
- Recruitment of individual social entrepreneurs with a project idea they wish to take forward;
- Workshops for social entrepreneurs led by Community Links staff members;
- Development of SAGE - the Social Advisory Group for Entrepreneurs – local volunteers offering to provide a variety of support and learning opportunities to social entrepreneurs.

1. Development of Wolverton Unlimited

The first 'Awayday' was organised for the Wolverton Unlimited Executive Committee in October 2004. Participants' views on the purpose, previous activities and future priorities of Wolverton Unlimited were collected through a variety of exercises including each individual giving their view on what Wolverton Unlimited would be if it were a meal, an item of clothing and a vehicle. Monkey Mosaic wrote up the discussions as a draft outline business plan, having first removed references to stew, overcoats and charabancs!

What quickly became clear was that the workstreams described were unlikely to lead to sustainability for the organisation. Rather, they would create dependency on grant-funding since initial planning at the Awayday suggested the activities would create resource requirements in the order of £100,000 per annum, with little generated income.

So the search was on. What could Wolverton Unlimited do to create sustainable revenue streams?

The late Michael Young (Lord Young of Dartington), Britain's most prolific social entrepreneur of the 20th Century, used to talk about 'moments of crystallisation' in the development of any organisation. The study visit to Bridport in December was one such moment. Members of the Wolverton Unlimited Executive Committee, town Councillors and a local social entrepreneur met the Founder, staff and trustees of the West Dorset Food and Land Trust, which runs a variety of projects in the town, all themed around food, from its base the Bridport Centre for Local Food. They use this over-arching theme to address an amazing range of social problems – from the obvious such as healthy eating, to support for a lively and entrepreneurial local economy and even education for disaffected teenagers.

"What impressed us about our visit to the West Dorset Food and Land Trust in Bridport was that they'd acquired a building. We were impressed, for the first time, that acquiring property wasn't out of the question...another group had done it. Suddenly it became do-able for us. Since then there's been a sea-change in the way we see ourselves as an organisation..."
- Mike Bloor, Wolverton Unlimited Executive Committee

We discussed the development of the Centre and other projects carried out by the Trust, including their current project to develop a Community Property Trust. On the Saturday morning we visited their monthly farmers' market. 'Download sessions' were held on Friday evening and over lunch on Saturday to analyse what we had seen and discuss what could be replicated in Wolverton.

At a second Awayday in January 2005 the Executive Committee agreed on acquisition of a building as the highest priority of six workstreams. This course was seen as advancing several important possibilities: income generation through rents; office space to support new social enterprises and community projects, but more importantly perhaps, a significant and lasting stake in regeneration in the town which was controlled by a community organisation and could therefore be run for the benefit of the local community, rather than for private profit for people living outside Wolverton.

Working groups were established for each workstream, with the agenda for the first meeting of each group to focus on an appropriate organisational structure. Wolverton Unlimited had initially been established as an unincorporated association with a constitution ensuring accountability back to the organisations 360 members. The prime movers had considered a variety of options and decided that an unincorporated association was most appropriate for the early stages of the work.

The desire to own property changed things and the protection of limited liability was then seen as a necessity. The Building Acquisition group agreed that Wolverton Unlimited ought to become a 'Development Trust', which would necessitate setting up a new organisation, in order that there is a suitable structure for property ownership.

A study visit to Community Links in March allowed Executive Committee members a further opportunity to consider the implications of building acquisition and management, as well as service provision on contract to the local authority. Unfortunately some of the key members of the Committee were unable to take part in the visit. Download discussions over a curry back in Wolverton that evening focused on issues of leadership.

When the proposal to establish a new organisation was discussed at a full Executive Committee meeting there was some disagreement as to the best way forward. Some people felt that the original association should be retained as it would provide accountability to the community. There were also concerns that members may not wish to transfer their membership to a new organisation, particularly if it was a company as that might suggest greater responsibility and risks. The meeting reached the conclusion that neither the Executive Committee nor Monkey Mosaic had sufficient knowledge of the legal implications of the possible combinations of structures being discussed.

A seminar was therefore set up, with charity lawyers Bates, Wells and Braithwaite brought in to explain the differences between the possible organisational structures. Following that seminar the Executive Committee agreed to propose to the membership that a company limited by guarantee with

charitable objects should be set up as this would provide appropriate protections from any potential personal financial liability.

The committee agreed that this structure would be the most appropriate vehicle for asset ownership. But of course it wouldn't ensure that Wolverton Unlimited ended up owning anything. A parallel consultancy to the social enterprise demonstration had seen the appointment of a Growth Advisor, whose brief was initially to advise Wolverton Unlimited on how to ensure they played a significant role in planning future physical regeneration in the town.

The emerging interest in building acquisition presented the Growth Advisor with a clear challenge: how to ensure Wolverton Unlimited benefits from section 106 planning gain from any new commercial or housing developments. Wolverton Unlimited has current opportunities in this respect because Milton Keynes is one of the Government's designated areas for housing growth in the South East. Significant ODPM money will be spent in the town and English Partnerships are also investigating the potential for redeveloping several sites. Wolverton Unlimited differs from some development trusts in that it is responding more to these opportunities and the desire for local control and influence over the planning processes, rather than to a specific lack of services locally.

2. Recruitment and support of social entrepreneurs

A key concern from the start was to mobilize local action. The demonstration project aimed to deliver not only a structure, but also real people with real social, community and business projects they wish to pursue with the support of that structure. They were to act as proof of the need for a support structure, assist in future fundraising and, most importantly, ensure that any proposal is embedded in local need.

Entrepreneurship can be described as 'pursuing opportunities without regard to resources currently under your control'. In other words, if you are simply choosing how to spend your resources, you are acting as a manager; if, however, you do not have the resources required, but decide you're going to make something happen anyway and that you will beg, borrow or blag the resources from somewhere, you are an entrepreneur. Adding 'social' means that those opportunities are primarily for community or social benefit, rather than private profit.

The social enterprise demonstration was introduced to the community at Wolverton Unlimited's public meeting in September. The first thing that Monkey Mosaic started to do was to gather project ideas from potential social entrepreneurs as well as expressions of interest from people who were prepared to support the social entrepreneurs through circulation of a questionnaire.

In social enterprise there are no 'sure things'. Risks must be taken. Some projects will not succeed. You must start many so enough have a chance to flourish. Our previous experience (particularly through the School for Social Entrepreneurs, www.sse.org.uk) demonstrates that with appropriate support structures, the benefits from those that do succeed will vastly outweigh the efforts and resources lost on those that don't. In November we carried out the first pilot SAGE Circle (SAGE Circles are described fully in Case Study 3 '*Support for Social Entrepreneurs*').

A public meeting specifically for Wolverton Unlimited Community Enterprises (WUCE) took place in November. This was the main event around which communication and advertising for the recruitment of social entrepreneurs took place. Posters were put up around town and flyers were circulated to every household. Tom Bulman was interviewed on local radio. Some examples of publicity materials used to advertise this meeting are given at Annex IV.

Project proposals started to roll in. Targets had been set to collect 20 or more possible social enterprises, to identify a dozen for initial feasibility assessment from which six live projects would be in development by March. 39 project ideas were received from 24 different people. At the outset we believed that some of these would correspond with projects suggested as part of the original action plan; others would be new ideas. As discussed further in Case Study 2 '*Social Entrepreneurs choose their own projects*' at Annex II, the reality was somewhat different! Only one project directly matched up to a proposal in the action plan.

This raises a potentially difficult question for Wolverton Unlimited and other community development organisations: if an action plan reflects the expressed wishes of 'the community', should the community organisation support individuals with project ideas outside the action plan, or should it focus its attention and resources on the plan?

The first point to make is that any community organisation needs to be mindful of the diversity of views it encompasses before claiming to speak on behalf of 'the community'. As mentioned earlier, Wolverton's healthcheck involved 10% of the population of the town, which is much greater than most community consultations, but still a small minority. Even those 10% hold a variety of different views which have been filtered to create the action plan.

Secondly, unless the individual social entrepreneur's activities pose a threat to those of the community organisation (for which it has significant demonstrated support) it clearly should not stand in her way. The success of a social enterprise or community project will depend largely on whether it finds a market or audience. That should act as sufficient proof that 'the community' wants it.

But should a community organisation actually use its precious resources – perhaps money, but primarily the time and energy of its active members – to support people and ideas that have not collected the support of the community through a formal process? This question is, at root, a political and philosophical one. Should the views and efforts of those who put their time into changing society count for more than those who merely express their view, then expect

others to act? The reality is that people who are active do carry greater influence than those who are inactive. Are there any truly 'empty vessels' who do not add nuance (at the very least) when passing on the views of others? *Someone* decided how to filter people's views to create the action plan, right? So perhaps the real question for the community organisation is to what extent it should put its resources into attempting to ensure parity of influence for members who express a view but are not active.

In a wider context that is a large part of what community organisations exist for – ensuring greater influence for local people who are not active in the circles where decisions affecting their welfare are taken. When deciding between competing interests at the level of community politics it's a balancing act on which each organisation must take its own decision.

A pragmatic factor in that decision is the likely impact of a particular course of action. An argument can be made for supporting social entrepreneurs relying on the principle of gearing. If the community organisation has limited resources in terms of the time of active members, money and access to other resources such as free use of community rooms, it is likely to have a greater impact if it uses those resources in a way which support other people. As well as Monkey Mosaic, two members of Wolverton Unlimited's Executive Committee have been actively involved in SAGE. In so doing they have encouraged the participation of two dozen others and aided in the set-up of projects which will potentially have ongoing positive impact in Wolverton.

SAGE

Three workshops were organised on various aspects of social entrepreneurship. The first was held in December and looked at *You and Your Project*. We explained ideas for SAGE and asked social entrepreneurs to begin focusing their projects. This is a key stage as people generally start with a problem they wish to tackle and very broad ideas for how to go about it. It was an opportunity to start to build a sense of a supportive 'club' of social entrepreneurs. The second and third workshops were held in February, looking at Fundraising and Presenting your project. Both of them were facilitated by Community Links as part of a developing relationship between that organisation and Wolverton Unlimited.

From the start of January 2005 SAGE Circles became a regular weekly event. Social entrepreneurs were asked to sign up to present and receive a grilling; people who had completed SAGE questionnaires were invited to sign up as Circle members. After a couple of months one of the Circle members had graduated to acting as facilitator for sessions.

The use of mentors was piloted during this period, but not adequately supported and could not yet be claimed to provide useful support by the end of the project. All eleven project presenters were asked to identify a suitable mentor, either one from outside Wolverton or from a list of signed-up SAGE members. Six people were formally invited and agreed to act as a mentor, with the mentee

(social entrepreneur) tasked with contacting him/her independently. Yet only three mentor meetings are known to have taken place. Case Study 3 contains further analysis of the reasons for this.

The final public meeting on 12th March was called 'W-Factor' and shamelessly stole its ideas from the TV shows 'Dragon's Den' and 'X-Factor'. Social entrepreneurs presented their projects (hence the presentation workshop two weeks earlier) and competed for a first prize of an all expenses paid trip to a social enterprise conference in the US, courtesy of SEEDA. The second prize was attendance at a relevant conference of the social entrepreneurs choice in the UK and all entrants were given a copy of the latest edition of the Directory of Social Change Guide to Grant-making Trusts. A high-quality judging panel including representatives of the Countryside Agency and SEEDA, the Director of the Milton Keynes Enterprise Hub, a local social entrepreneur and a member of the Wolverton Unlimited Executive Committee all gave up a Saturday morning to cast their eyes over the entrants.

As well as the SAGE Circles, workshops and mentors, other methods of support are envisaged. The various different roles for SAGE members are described below:

The Different Roles in SAGE (the Social Advisory Group for Entrepreneurs)

1. SAGE Co-ordinator

An overall Co-ordinator oversees operations and ensures SAGE is functioning correctly. Specific tasks include: matching social entrepreneurs with mentors, advisors and volunteers; organising workshops; ensuring SAGE Circles take place regularly; publicising SAGE events; replenishing the supply of volunteers as necessary; maintaining the database; liaising with Wunltd Executive Committee; providing advice and guidance to all SAGE members on their role.

Three workshops for social entrepreneurs took place during the project, covering issues such as defining and focusing your project, fundraising, gaining community support and presentation skills. These proved successful and SAGE aims to run workshops on a regular basis in the future. The Co-ordinator organises the workshops and supports learning. Specific tasks around the workshops include: liaising with social entrepreneurs to assess learning needs and plan appropriate workshops; booking and liaising with 'experts' (other SAGE members or external advisors) as required; publicise workshops; booking venue; facilitating the workshop to ensure a supportive yet challenging environment conducive to learning; enforcing ground-rules.

This is the only paid role within SAGE. During the social enterprise demonstration project it was carried out by Tom Bulman of Monkey Mosaic. Wolverton Unlimited is now making fundraising applications to allow them to employ a part-time Co-ordinator on an ongoing basis.

2. SAGE Circle Facilitator

The purpose of a SAGE Circle is to give a social entrepreneur a sounding board for his idea and help him work out the best way forward. The social entrepreneur presents his idea to a Circle of 4-8 who will then ask questions on what they have heard. It's very tempting to tell someone what you think they should do, but it is far less effective as a method of learning. The primary job of the facilitator is to ensure that the members of the Circle ask questions, rather than offering advice.

3. SAGE Circle Member

The role of a Circle member is to listen carefully to the social entrepreneur and ask intelligent questions to help elicit issues he has not dealt with sufficiently or to help him see the project from a different perspective. More than 20 people acted as Circle members during the first three months of operation.

4. Mentor

The role of a mentor is that of a 'critical friend', who meets the social entrepreneur regularly (say, once every two months), listens to her current issues or problems, asks tough questions and offers alternative perspectives. As with the SAGE Circle, mentors are not expected to tell the social entrepreneur what she should be doing, rather to help her to work out the best way forward for herself and to ensure she learns from her experience. Mentors do not, therefore, need to be an expert in the field. Experience of developing projects or organisations is useful, but the main skill required is effective listening.

5. Advisor

Social entrepreneurs can't be experts in everything that is needed to move their project forward. It's tremendously useful if they have access to advice from people with the right experience when they need it. Advisors meet with a social entrepreneur, listen to his or her specific issue or situation, and offer advice on how best to tackle it. This is an occasional requirement rather than a regular commitment. Relevant skills include financial management and accounting, law and organisational structures, contracting, negotiation, community consultation, IT, etc. Alternatively, the social entrepreneur might be looking for knowledge on a particular field, e.g. housing, transport, sports, horticulture, etc.

6. Fundraising Team

Most, if not all, social entrepreneurs wish to raise funds at some point in the development of their project. The fundraising team is envisaged as a panel to assist social entrepreneurs and Wolverton Unlimited itself in this task by considering and commenting on fundraising applications that have been drawn up.

7. Volunteer

Social projects that do not involve other members of the community are doomed to failure! Volunteers are listed on the SAGE database offering time to help social entrepreneurs with manual labour (e.g. building the straw bale house for the Allotments Association), with IT or administrative tasks, a specific skill such as photography, or just stuffing envelopes for a mailout. You never know what will be needed...

CONCLUSIONS

Wolverton's regeneration is still in its early days – the Wolverton Vision sets a 20-year goal! This demonstration project and report cover but one stage in the journey and the points below should be read with that in mind. In particular it remains to be seen whether or not Wolverton Unlimited can acquire a building and whether this significantly helps with sustainability; which (if any) of the projects prove to be successful; and whether SAGE remains viable as a support structure once the efforts of consultants are withdrawn.

In addition to the lessons learned and recommendations below four of the key learning themes that have wider resonance for anyone working in community regeneration are discussed in the case studies attached as Annex II to this report. Please do not hesitate to contact James Smith at Monkey Mosaic if you would like to discuss any of these conclusions further.

Lessons Learned	Recommendations
1 Acquisition of assets appears an attractive option to community organisations when they are considering sustainability.	Funders should regard expenses for overnight stays and attendant subsistence costs as money well spent.
2 Visits to other organisations in different places give community leaders the opportunity to see their own situation from a different perspective. They provide a particularly effective learning opportunity if the visit incorporates an overnight stay with informal/social activities in the evening – people <i>will</i> talk shop and will be somewhat freed from the usual constraints of committee structures, agendas and set relationships and patterns of behaviour.	Present the community organisation with a learning opportunity around the issues and facilitate their own decision-making process
3 If an external agent attempts to rush a community organisation into important decisions they will meet resistance.	
4 People become attached to structures/organisations if they feel ownership. There are positive and negative consequences of this.	
5 Relationships between people and organisations are key. If handled badly they can dampen enthusiasm and discourage people from taking leadership roles.	Local authorities and other official agencies that wish to support community development must accept the attendant decrease in their own power and view it as a positive conclusion.
6 Community development and community-led regeneration is about <i>power</i> .	

Wolverton social enterprise demonstration project

Lessons Learned	Recommendations
7 Leadership succession is a key issue for all organisations. This is no less true in community organisations, in fact potentially more so if no-one is being paid to be the leader.	Funders should support more training and support opportunities on social entrepreneurship.
8 Potential or latent social entrepreneurs exist in <u>every</u> community. They often just need encouragement (“permission”) to get started.	
9 But don’t expect everyone who comes forward to carry their project through to completion. Drop-out and failure is a natural part of innovation. Business accepts this – social enterprise must also. A relatively small number of successes will make the overall effort worthwhile.	
10 Community-led regeneration must be an organic process, with individuals engaged on issues and in ways that spark their passion. Social entrepreneurs are driven by their own ideas. Don’t attempt to plan everything down to the last detail.	
11 In many cases it doesn’t matter so much what is done, as the fact that something is done. People doing things together turns a town into a community. It quickly became clear that it was not only important to support new social enterprise projects, but also any social or community project.	
12 Much can be done to encourage and support social entrepreneurs with limited resources. It’s fun to hear about new projects and to help by questioning, and it doesn’t require any specific prior experience.	
13 Relationships can be affected if you are paid to carry out work in your community.	

The Future

As we said at the start of this report, regeneration in Wolverton is proceeding on the principle that the future for a community cannot be planned successfully



from afar; rather it must be discovered through a process of organic growth, trial and error, actively involving local people. This is participative democracy in action. For the experiment to work those involved must not only be prepared to disagree with what someone believes yet support their right to believe it; they must be prepared to disagree with what someone does for the

community, yet support their right to do it. The way ahead will encompass both success and failure; there will be a lot of hard work and stress; there will be disagreements. But as long as local people are actively engaged in the questions of how they live together there will be community, and that is a good start.

Annex I. Future Wolverton vision

Annex II. Wolverton Case Studies:

- 1. Regeneration Monopoly**
- 2. Social Entrepreneurs choose their own projects**
- 3. Support for Social Entrepreneurs (SAGE)**
- 4. The experience of being a paid local person working alongside volunteers**

Annex III. Wolverton Market Report

Annex IV. WUCE Publicity materials