

Marlborough Community Area Plan: Initial Review Report Jan 31st, 2011.

The first Local Community Area Plan for the Marlborough Community Area (MCA) was published in February 2004 and was intended to provide the vision for Community Planning for 10 years to 2014. This document was written by Officers of the Former Kennet District and Wiltshire County Councils after a series of consultations including a 2000 household survey, exhibitions in 5 different locations, Focus Group discussions and a desktop Needs Analysis. The document was to be a plan of action based on the needs and aspirations of the community.

Rather than being a driving force for community development, there is a perception, within the voluntary sector at least, that the 2004-14 Plan has been largely sidelined, leaving a legacy of mostly unachievable targets and issues rather than achievable, or achieved, actions. This perception has been exacerbated by the demise of Kennet District Council who was the driving force of community development and the Community Plan through strategic policy and financial support for community development. It is fair to say however, that the new Unitary Authority is making moves in the same direction.

Marlborough Area Development Trust has been commissioned to review and update the existing plan. The first phase of this process is to evaluate what has actually been achieved in the community area under the 8 Headline Issues. This will provide the basis for starting the consultation process to develop an exciting, new and relevant Community Plan to be released in January 2012.

Summary of Audit Findings:

Headline Issue 1: The Economy

The Marlborough Community Area has a population just under 18 000 (17 802 in 2007). 57.6% of this total is of working age (16-59/64 yrs) which is broadly in line with Wiltshire (59.6%). 2.4% of the working age population is currently receiving Job Seeker's Allowance (March, 2009), Wiltshire =2.6%. Using this as a reflection of employment status, the Marlborough Community Area economy is showing resilience in the face of the current recession. This is in spite of the fact that the Marlborough Area has a higher than average percentage of its workforce based in agricultural, crop and other related services at 4.8% compared to 2.4% South West & 1.2% nationally.

A number of the specific Targets from 2004 have been broadly achieved; Business Networking events are now regular and offered by a range of organisers, including MADT, Chamber of Commerce and WiRE; employment opportunities have been created at the Marlborough Business Park and Broadband is widely available. Other targets were not SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant or Trackable/time-bound): there is no evidence available that out-commuting had been reduced, 2 new B&Bs per annum have not been opened or that a Sustainable Farming and Food Strategy has been followed. Small Business support services have been identified as an area of significant under-development since 2004.

Headline Issue 2: Education and Lifelong Learning

One of the difficulties in achieving meaningful educational targets in the Marlborough Community Area is the trend for funding to be targeted in those areas ranking highly in the Indices of Deprivation (IOD) Index. MCA has one location falling within Wiltshire's most deprived 10% in terms of working age adults with little or no qualifications; Marlborough East-north, and this is ranked 25/28 areas within Wiltshire. Despite this financial barrier, MCA has performed reasonably well in achieving the 2004 Targets: a new (privately funded) secondary school, still unfinished however and seeking £400 000 to complete; a Transport Plan for MCA was completed in 2006; two separate Youth Consultation Events completed by MADT 2004 and MaVCAP 2010, highlighting the need for accessible transport for young people. Lifelong Learning and the provision of adult education, has been hindered by the closure of the Swindon College Outreach centre and the current threat to the Library Service. It is difficult to cite clearly the skills gap as being due to lack of available courses or lack of demand. Take-up of the vocationally focussed Diploma Courses at St John's has been relatively low, although 60 x 15-16 year olds attended Swindon College during 2009 for either one day or ½ day per week vocational courses.

Headline Issue 3: Crime and Community Safety

In 2004, although 80% of respondents to WC surveys said that they perceive MCA to be a safe or fairly safe place to live, there was clearly a perception that crime was a serious issue. The Police responded positively, working in collaborative ways with community groups such as the Community Safety Partnership and the NHS to achieve some admirable targets: drug use amongst young people is down 50%; burglaries from dwellings down 51.6%; and violence against persons down 26.5%. The Emergency Services have been proactive in developing strategies to reduce not only reported crime incidents, but also the perception of community safety. The collapse of the Community Safety Partnership has left a gap in community liaison that the Area Board is yet to fill.

Headline Issue 4: The Environment

Maintaining and enhancing the distinctive character of the local countryside was a strong theme in the 2004 document, with targets focussing on the River Kennet, landscape protection and waste disposal taking prominence. The Marlborough River Partnership, led by Action for the River Kennet (ARK) was formed in 2005/06 and has been enormously successful in not only improving the ecology of the River Kennet, but also in raising the profile of the amenity value of the valley itself. Keynote projects at Manton, Cooper's Meadow and Stonebridge Lane highlight the power of collaboration between statutory organisations and the voluntary sector. In 2005, kerbside recycling collections began across the whole MCA. Fortnightly collections began in 2006 and a fully integrated household recycling centre is due to open at the Marlborough Business Park in the Spring of 2011. Achieving targets focussing on land based and countryside issues was an area of strength in the 2004 Plan.

Headline Issue 5: Transport

Despite being an extremely rural area with a relatively sparse and dispersed population, (population density = 0.64 people per square kilometre), nearly 14% of households in the MCA do not have access to a car. Public transport is therefore a vital lifeline to many villages

within the MCA, providing access to employment, education, medical and retail opportunities. The Third Wiltshire Council Passenger Transport Plan (2011) is to be released in Spring, 2011. The previous two Plans were to address a number of Targets within the 2004 document: improving public transport provision; reduce peak time congestion; address HGV access; improve community transport provision to and from smaller settlements and provide better access to essential services for the non-car user. Marlborough Town Council is leading the way on developing strategies to promote alternative HGV routes and is fighting increasing parking charges in the MCA. There have been some developments; minibus transport options are being explored for young people, dedicated taxi ranks now exist in Marlborough and improvements to road quality can be seen in some areas. The overall perception however, is that the road network is more congested since 2004, parking is more restricted and more expensive and public transport alternatives are less accessible for inadequate timetable and pricing reasons.

Headline Issue 6: Social Care and Health

Many of the Targets in this category were not SMART- meeting the targets in the National Service Framework for Older People required leadership from the Wiltshire NHS and collaboration from relevant stakeholders, for example. Similarly, achieving sufficient responsive respite services to meet local need is an admirable goal for organisations working with people with disabilities and their carers, but is not a recognisable or achievable target within the Community Area Plan. Establishing a MCA Health Forum to identify these needs and to identify ways of achieving them would be a SMART Target.

Like other regions across the country, the MCA has been greatly affected by national cuts in health care provision, losing not only services, but also an MIU Hospital in Savernake in 2007. 97.36% of patients at Great Western Hospital now experience less than 4 hours waiting time, although it is difficult to categorically say that being an issue identified in the 2004 Plan led to this achievement. The NHS may have decided to head down this route without taking the MCA Plan into account. The trend for 'care in the community' over the period since the writing of the last Plan has ultimately resulted in less demand for beds, which may be addressing some of the Targets in this Headline Issue.

Headline Issue 7: Housing and the Built Environment

In 2008, the average house price in the MCA was £332 050, the second highest in all the Wiltshire Community Areas. This is 7.5x the average wage in Wiltshire and highlights an issue that a significant proportion of the local population are unable to access suitable accommodation since the writing of the existing Plan. The Regional Spatial Strategy for the South West (RSS) allocated 250 properties for development in the Marlborough Community Area. 850 houses are expected to be built between 2006 - 2026, of these 350 have to be allocated in the Core Strategy. Overall, delivery of affordable housing remains high with 31% of new homes being affordable across the County. Wiltshire Council encourages energy efficient homes, providing Grants and advice and guidance. Of the 12 Parish's in the MCA, only Fyfield, Lockeridge & West Overton, Ramsbury, The Ogbournes & Rockley have registered Village Design Statements, suggesting this was a target not pursued strongly.

Headline Issue 8: Culture

The targets in this area of the Plan have broadly since 2004, been exceeded. New venues, such as the Theatre on the Hill, the Rabley Contemporary Drawing Centre and Nataraj Art Space have generated a variety of popular and well used performance and exhibition spaces. A host of voluntary groups have led the development of the MCA cultural experience; Open Studios now has 40 resident artists and is growing, the Christmas Lights Association ensures the principle High Street in the MCA is well lit and a more integrated approach to art, crafts and performance is being seen through the We Love Marlborough initiative which successfully stages and enables funding for events for all sectors of the community. The young people's consultation event, 'Dreams and Wishes' highlighted demand for a cinema in the MCA. Marlborough Downs Movies has grown from this demand.

Some of the 2004 Targets however, have not been met or are no longer so relevant. The closure of a dedicated, 7 day per week Tourist Information Centre has hampered growth in this sector, the future of the KVAT Theatre on the Downs project remains uncertain, Marlborough Carnival has ended, but has been replaced with a popular daytime event on the Common and there is little evidence that the target of increasing disabled participation in cultural events by 5% per annum has been achieved.

Conclusions

The Headline Issues of 2004 remained relevant throughout the period of the Plan up to and including the present day. Finding evidence to fully audit the effectiveness of the existing Plan as a strategic document was made difficult by a combination of factors: the demise of Kennet District Council meant a number of targets could not be met or projects would not reach fruition; the formation of Area Boards and Area Partnerships caused (temporary?) confusion within the statutory and voluntary sectors of the MCA, weakening the status of the existing Community Area Plan; the MCA size was significantly reduced when the Bedwyns, Graftons and Shalbourne parishes moved into the Pewsey Community Area and the prevailing economic climate during most of the period of the existing plan has shifted focus for many sectors of the local community.

Despite these barriers, there have been definite improvements made in each of the headline Issue areas since 2004, to a lesser or greater degree. A frequent comment to MADT during this process has been the recognition that a structured, visionary statement setting out SMART targets for future development would be welcomed throughout the whole of the Marlborough Community Area.

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