

## Refreshing Community Plans

This guidance note is for communities wanting to refresh an existing Plan in a Market Town or large village; refreshes should be done at least every three years to keep the Plan relevant.

Those undertaking a new Community Plan may also find this advice useful.

At a basic level, you should consider the following;

- What in particular do you want to achieve from this refresh? Getting updated information on the communities' changing needs, making a stronger case for a particular intervention or project, giving stronger evidence for Local Authorities to act on, flagging up successes (and/or difficulties) to date, a higher profile for the Regeneration Group or a mix of these – all are valid reasons.
- What resources do you have at your disposal, or rather want to use on this refresh? Major funding for Plans may have disappeared, but undertaking surveys and writing an updated Plan doesn't require a lot of funding. Human resources may be more difficult, especially as most members of Regeneration Groups are busy people with several hats. Perhaps you have one or several volunteers who enjoys survey writing and collation?
- What will the process entail? As this is Community Planning, it cannot be a purely desk-based piece of work! Some form of consultation – event(s), survey or feedback forms or other – will need to be included. Wiveliscombe Area Partnership's refresh started with a well designed booklet which showed what had happened since their last Community Plan and included a feedback form for general comments. These then informed the rest of the refresh process. If you achieved a poor response when producing your Community Plan from a specific group, for instance young people, try to think of innovative ways to engage with them, for instance allowing mobile phone texting or using social networking tools like Facebook. Talk to the specialists who work with that group in your community, they will know how to engage them.
- There is a consensus view that, while all Community Plans will all be different, the way the information regarding objectives (and projects to address these) should be presented in a standard way, to make the 'Bridging' process simpler and clearer for Officers at District and County Councils. Martock's M3 Community Partnerships' Action Plan is a good example of concise and clear information. Linkages with the LAA, the Somerset Sustainable Community Strategy and District-level SCS's should be made clear, and if a project has a spatial planning dimension, Local Development Framework's.
- The work that Martock M3 Community Partnership are doing by reviewing and updating their Community Plan may guide other Somerset communities when doing similar. See the News item on the SMTF website for more information on this.

### Learning from recent initiatives

It is important we learn from the Community Planning initiatives that have taken place since the mid-1990's.

The Market and Coastal Towns Initiative (MCTi) was the South West's take on the national Market Town Initiative, started by DEFRA in 2000. In the South West it was managed and initially delivered by the Regional Development Agency, who formed the MCTA to deliver it from 2004.

Approx £2.5m was spent in almost 70 towns between 2001 and 2007.

The positives included;

- Towns had the opportunity to plan for their future by producing a Community Plan, develop the necessary skills and create local organisations which could drive the plan forward.
- They were supported by an MCTA advisor, who provided professional information, guidance and training, access to best practice and learning resources and a gateway route to funding opportunities.
- MCTA Funding could be used to support Capacity Building, Training, Consultation and Publicity and Promotion activities.
- There is a legacy of many Market Town Partnerships, Development Trusts and Regeneration Groups across the South-West (10 in Somerset) that were created from towns taking part in the MCTi.

The elements that didn't work so well included;

- The concept of the Market Town Partnership (Town, District and County Councils with other agencies and local stakeholders all working together). This has proved difficult to sustain, and the 'Brokering Table' process did not work effectively.
- There was no core funding after MCTA left a town which was an issue for some MTP's (especially those who took on staff).
- The Consultants and MCTA Advisors often raised expectations locally that the Plan would have more influence than it proved to have, both with local Councils and in influencing Planning issues.
- Some towns thought that MCTi status meant they were 'in the fast lane' for RDA investment – sadly this has proved not to be the case.
- Community Plans have no 'formal' status, even when adopted by Town Councils and endorsed by District Councils – it is really down to how well the local Councillors feel they 'own' the Plan as to how much influence the Plan will have.
- Often monitoring and reporting progress on the Plan to partners broke down, and/or tensions were created between Town Councils and MTP's over the role of the latter.
- Partnerships sometimes got into a mindset of holding the Local Authority to account for local actions, rather than working with and influencing them.
- There was arguably too much focus on 'strategic influencing' and not enough focus on the solutions the community can drive forwards itself.

Parish Plans have been around longer than Market Town Community Plans, again funded by DEFRA though originally by the Countryside Agency. Their smaller scope – less ‘strategic’ and more practical – have led to a generally acknowledged positive response. Limitations include the fact that Local Authorities find them too small and too many of them; they form part of the evidence base of Sustainable Community Strategies but the common needs are often ignored at a strategic level when Local Authorities are doing service planning.

### Somerset Partnerships’ Experiences

Somerset’s Market Town Partnerships are all quite different in structure and approach. The two most successful Partnerships, Shepton 21 and Wiveliscombe Area Partnership operate differently; S21 has a ‘classic’ structure of Management Committee with subgroups who deliver projects, whereas WAP function as a facilitating body, supporting other organisations to deliver projects. Both report to their Local Councils regularly, and maintain good working relations with them.

Vision for Frome operate in a town with a population of 27,000 and many existing groups. There is a clear role for them in monitoring and reporting progress on the Community Plan and in helping the groups to liaise, but they have also begun to facilitate public meetings on key issues that arise.

Martock’s M3CP are an occasional Partnership, in that they meet when there is a need that requires wider community action than the Parish Council alone can deliver. They are also very good at producing clear information on progress of the Plan.

Action for Chard Town disbanded after a lack of interest from the wider community which meant their Steering Group wasn’t large enough and took on delivery of several ambitious and complex projects. Their Action Plan was also poor and the group didn’t show its value to the community with quick-win projects.

Burnham & Highbridge Regeneration Partnership decided to finish in part due to burnt-out volunteers who had been dealing with SWERDA for 6 years on the Civic Pride project. Yet they had achieved a huge amount on other projects without realising their worth.

What is clear is that local solutions will vary on local circumstances; SMTF cannot recommend any particular model. However, given some of the difficulties Partnerships have experienced, one option to explore is in not having a standing Partnership but just a review group, which monitors and reports on the Plan and engages with the community; projects in the Plan are delivered by others, whether existing organisations or groups, new ones, or partnerships of these.

### Resources

[ACRE 9 step Community Plan](#)

[Countryside Agency Market Town Healthcheck Handbook](#)



[www.somersetmarkettowns.co.uk](http://www.somersetmarkettowns.co.uk)