

Refreshing the Vision for Wolverton: Summary of feedback

By Claire Nichols and Gordon Morris
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Wolverton

Victorian houses line the streets
Community parks where people meet
and mothers sit to have a chat
about their lives and this and that.

A secret garden tucked away
with concerts held on summers days.
Community Orchard to explore
that has a cheery dinosaur.

Great firework shows in cold November,
are something that we'll all remember.
And if you want to dance, act, sing
The Madcap it has everything.

The farmers' market's close to hand
We even have our own Brass band
who tutor absolutely free,
to budding musicians like you and me.

In Summer time it's in the square
Our local artists perform there.
Musicians, singers and some chancers
and lovely buxom belly dancers.

There's more to do than in the hub
with tennis lessons, and cricket club
if all the towns were put to test
Our Wolverton would come out best.

Introduction: the ‘refreshing the vision’ process

The refreshing the vision process was prompted by a feeling that regeneration work had lost momentum and focus, and that the best way to get this back would be to ask local people for guidance on what should happen next.

The initial stage of the process (Phase 1) consisted of three weeks of consultation that took place in March 2010. This report forms part of Phase 2, during which the information gathered during Phase 1 is analysed.

The aim of the process is to encourage residents from Wolverton, Greenleys, Old Wolverton and Wolverton Park to update and share their hopes and aspirations for the town, and to use these as the basis for the refreshed vision. Part of this involves looking again at the original vision, created in 2002-03, in order to identify aspects that:

- have now been achieved;
- were included in the original vision but have not yet been achieved;
- were not included in the original vision but have become important to residents since then;
- are no longer considered a priority by local people.

The opportunity is also being taken to review and reassess the partnership and governance arrangements in place for delivering the vision.

About this summary

The report authors were commissioned by the ‘Vision Group’ to review the feedback from Phase 1. We were asked to provide a short report summarising the main findings from the feedback, based on the following evidence:

- 54 completed written questionnaires and responses from on-line surveys;
- recordings on CD from a selection of the expert panel meetings (23 CDs in total);
- typed up notes from the focus group meetings and feedback from sessions held at a local school and at Railcare;
- flip charts from the expert panel discussions; and
- written submissions from members of the public and representatives of organisations in Wolverton.

It should be noted that this report provides an overview only of the key themes, concerns and initial priorities for action identified by local people and those who provided evidence or sat on the expert panels/focus groups. The analysis is not in any sense 'scientific'; however, it is based on a careful review of the evidence undertaken by the report authors.

Some limitations arise from uncertainties in the evidence as gathered and presented. For example, it is not possible to know how many – if any – people contributed their thoughts and ideas more than once. In addition, with the benefit of hindsight, information about the age and sex of participants may have been helpful in informing the analysis. That said, the quantity and detailed nature of the information gathered are sufficient to enable useful general trends to be derived and to capture the sense and extent of people's views.

The following sections consider each theme and identify the main points raised by participants.

ENVIRONMENT

There have been some noticeable successes since 2003, including the Secret Garden and the 'Urb Farm', of which the community is genuinely proud.

Respondents said they very much value living near the countryside, although it was also noted that links to the countryside could be better used than they are currently – with marked routes and signage.

There is also an aspiration that all of the towns' greenspaces and parks should be developed so that they are used more widely (this point is further discussed in the Family, Community and Sport section).

Much of the negative feedback about the environment – what people don't like about living in Wolverton – relates to aspects of the public realm. A view very commonly expressed was that Wolverton looks down at heel. Many people mentioned litter, dog mess, the poor state of backways, chewing gum, graffiti, a general feeling of neglect and scruffiness, the poor quality of roads and pavements, and unreliable or insufficient rubbish collection. Some of these day-to-day council issues clearly influence very strongly people's feelings about where they live and, it can be assumed, would have a similar effect on visitors' first impressions of the town.

Other points raised included that:

- gateways to the town are important but at the moment do not reflect well on Wolverton¹;
- the Agora is an eyesore that breaks up the town, and “it needs to go!”;
- more could be made of the enthusiasm and potential for local people to grow their own food (this builds on the success of the allotments and community orchard);
- a maintenance trust and/or community payback scheme could be considered to address some of the public realm issues; and
- Wolverton deserves, and should demand, high-quality design (in its buildings and its public art).

TRANSPORT

Along with the environment, transport came out as one of the topics that people felt most strongly about. There were clear concerns that cars and other motorised vehicles dominate the town and that movement as a pedestrian or cyclist is difficult and – at times – dangerous.

Many of these issues were in the original vision and concern ease of movement and the best use of space. Key points raised included:

- movement of cars, buses, people and bikes around Wolverton;
- access to public transport – bus routes and siting of bus stops, cycle route to the railway station, and parking at the station etc;
- managing the streets – there is not enough space for the number of cars, lack of parking and poor enforcement of parking/traffic regulations, commercial vehicles parking in residential streets etc;
- access and road layout/design generally, roundabouts etc;
- the shared use of back ways;
- links around the town, eg route to station and Wolverton Park bridge;
- concerns about safety when walking and cycling, particularly access to the station and Stratford Road generally .

¹ For interest, see Carluke Town Gateways Project.

To properly address these issues, it was noted, would require fundamental changes to the design of the town itself, perhaps, along the lines of Home Zone schemes which have been introduced successfully elsewhere.²

Participants suggested other solutions that would help relieve the current problems, some of which are 'quick wins'. They include: travel plans (specifically a station travel plan and revisiting the school travel plans); introduction of small electric buses, traffic calming measures (such as 20 mile an hour zones and zebra crossings); development of walking to school/safe routes; communal car parks, marked bays, stricter enforcement of parking, and limits to commercial vehicles; introduction of residents-only parking areas/rights; better use of one-way systems; better signage at the station; and reviewing current bus routes and positioning of bus stops – to make it easier to use buses.

It was noted that the alleyways are a wasted resource; they could be used to segregate cyclists and motorists from cars. It was suggested too that 'Redways' should penetrate more into the town centre.

ENERGY

Interestingly although energy was hardly mentioned in the original vision, it was felt that this topic was increasingly relevant locally and nationally, and therefore appropriate for inclusion in the refreshed vision. It should be noted, however, that the interest came largely from the expert panel and focus group rather from the general public.

Wolverton could set some ambitious aspirations (eg to be low or zero carbon) – as it is believed that the townspeople/partnership have the potential to deliver them. There are a number of government schemes that may be relevant here, and interest in sustainability-related subjects chimes well with current government priorities.³

Initiatives should build on the 'Transition Towns' work in Wolverton and could perhaps focus on public and commercial buildings. Another suggestion was for street competitions or to consider setting up demonstration houses to show people what the alternatives are and how they work (as has been done in Oxford⁴).

² For further information see www.homezones.org/index.html

³ And could well fit with the interest of the Open University and Milton Keynes (see <http://www.thinkagain.co.uk/mk/past-projects.htm>) and work in other small towns, such as Faringdon, the winner of the Action for Market Towns National Award 2009 for its environmental work.

⁴ For further information see <http://climatex.org/ecorenovation/>

There was some discussion about the potential for bio-energy, with local parks providing fuel sources. Other projects such as Amazing Waste and anaerobic digestion at the Urb Farm were mentioned. The potential role in encouraging behavioural change of lifestyle guides and/or community-mobiliser was discussed.

It should be noted that mention was made of innate tensions that exist – or can be perceived to exist – between the pressures and desires to ensure that areas are conserved/preserved, and the introduction of new technologies.

FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND SPORT

Almost all of those who took part in the consultation were very positive about living in Wolverton. There appears to be a strong sense of community in the town, and a matching sense and commitment to its clubs and groups. To judge from some comments this stems in large part from the town's industrial and commercial past, and from the town's essentially Victorian character and physical layout. The diversity of Wolverton's communities was frequently mentioned as being one of the town's strong points.

A number of people said that one of the good things about Wolverton is that you can walk everywhere (although not always easily or, according to some, safely – see above) and, in doing so, connect with other people.

There was a sense that, generally, Wolverton offers good opportunities for families but that young people and older people are less well catered for (particularly as far as housing and activities are concerned).

Another clear message is that events such as 'It's in the Square' and the Lantern Parade are very well liked. People really enjoy these opportunities to come together. That said, concerns were raised about the fact that some sections of Wolverton do not get involved in planning, running or attending such events.

Some of the questionnaires also included comments that run counter to the notion of a strong community, with references to violence, drugs and a general feeling that the town itself was unsafe at times.

Although the strong sense of community is evident from the findings, and might well be common amongst those who did not participate in the consultation, it cannot be assumed that this view is proportionately held by non-participants.

There are hints of harder-to-reach constituencies whose views are not always heard (and which may not have been sufficiently well captured during this phase 1 process). It appears that

engaging with young people requires particular attention. This also applies to Asian members of the community. Concerns were also expressed about the extent to which the various communities are integrated with each other.

It was argued that in refreshing the vision it would be important to do so in a way that is very personal to the people who live here. Importantly – and challengingly – if the new vision is to be representative and inclusive it needs to be relevant to those who haven't engaged with this process. There are sections of Wolverton's society who may be, or may feel, excluded – because of cultural, financial or other barriers – from enjoying the benefits that achieving the vision may provide. That said, approaches were mentioned that can help to overcome such barriers (ie by 'selling' opportunities), and this is something that could be incorporated into the refreshed vision. It was also suggested that Wolverton's schools and faith groups have a useful role to play as catalysts/enablers/introducers in this regard.

A suggestion that emerged was that individual groups in Wolverton would benefit if a single body were able to act as an 'aspirin of community activity' (that is, to cure/soothe administrative headaches), providing support on issues such as insurance and other administrative matters and acting as a conduit for money/grants.

Wolverton has a long tradition of sport and there are a number of active sports clubs, although there are some problems with the existing facilities (for example, the cricket club house itself is considered to be unfit for purpose). Wolverton's population is growing and steps should be taken to ensure adequate provision for sports. There may be potential to accommodate this (ie land/sites are currently or will shortly become available). A more general point concerns the role clubs have in engaging with the wider community in Wolverton (which some people felt is relatively limited at present).

There appear to be good opportunities for encouraging Wolverton's residents to become healthier and fitter. There were suggestions that more could be done in relation to preventative care and general health/wellbeing (particularly through the health centre and information provided there). Similarly, there is great potential to make more of Wolverton's open spaces (for example, for trim trails, green gyms, healthy walks along the canal towpath etc). At present the opportunities that already exist are not well publicised. It was suggested that an audit should first be carried out to establish what open space there is and how this could be better used – the aim being to encourage greater participation by Wolverton's residents, along with better information, signposting and branding.

A general point that was raised not only during the family, community and sport sessions but in all of the other theme discussions concerned the information that is available in/about Wolverton. Suggestions for addressing this area included:

- developing a one-stop-shop website (domain name 'We love Wolverton), to include links to all of the groups and activities available;
- providing a welcome pack to new residents;
- publishing a local guide about what's on;
- publicising events on a what's on board at Madcap and/or at the Tesco store; and
- putting in place a system to ensure closer coordination between groups and events.

The wider point in this regard is the need to consider how the 'Wolverton offer' can be better marketed. What is Wolverton's USP – for existing and potential businesses, for visitors, and for existing and new residents?

ECONOMY, HOUSING AND LEARNING

A key issue that was identified during these sessions was the need to listen to and explore the needs of the elderly, young people (particularly 14-19 year olds), and the business community. Young people in particular need to be more engaged not only with the visioning process but also with its delivery and the future development of Wolverton. There are a number of ways in which this could be done, for example involving the Youth Chamber and Radcliffe school.

There were discussions concerning how the school experience might be developed so that it keeps pace with young people's changing expectations. It may be that connections with businesses can be used, with younger people working alongside older people to gain skills. Other ideas such as apprenticeships were discussed.

It was suggested that opportunities to bring public sector investment into the town – either through lifelong learning or health services – should be explored, in order to support the town centre's regeneration. There is also the possibility that the proposed Engineering Academy could be brought to Wolverton.

Some participants commented that more could be done to support local businesses in the town, and to help them engage with schemes and ideas in the vision. Participants believe that there is a stronger role for a business association/chamber of trade and town council here. Similarly, it was felt that there are opportunities to develop further the dialogue between Wolverton's learning institutions and local businesses.

A common view was expressed that the appearance of the town's shops is unattractive, especially in the evening when the shutters are down and the exterior goods displays are

empty. This lets Wolverton down and gives the wrong impression. It may be possible to involve young people, Wolverton artists and conservation interests in painting the shutters. There are also some good examples of more attractive, yet still secure, frontages/shutters.⁵

Ideas were put forward about how to attract and retain businesses to Wolverton. One suggestion was for a business weekend, to invite business people to come to Wolverton and find out about business in the town. A common theme was the need for Wolverton to attract and retain the right type of shops in order to offer something for people who have come to shop at Tesco's. People also come to Wolverton because it is a 'transport spine' – again, there is a need to ensure that the town offers something to encourage people to go into and stay in the town, not just pass through. It is likely that a priority in the vision continues to be to encourage small firms to start and stay here.

The relationship with Milton Keynes was also explored during these sessions. There may be opportunities here for businesses that complement those in Milton Keynes (for example, by bringing in industries that support the industries of logistics and warehousing that are expanding in Milton Keynes). A related discussion concerning Wolverton's relationship with Milton Keynes identified that a balance needs to be struck between retaining what is special about Wolverton ("small is beautiful") and embracing the opportunities that being a part of 'greater' Milton Keynes presents.

Some participants think that it will be important, pragmatically, for the town to develop a constructive relationship with Tesco now that the store's further development has been given the go-ahead. This is not only in terms of any financial commitment from the store but also in terms of its wider corporate social responsibilities⁶. Research will be required to identify the best way forward in this regard.

The size of the new store will place pressures on the existing shops and services in Wolverton. A radical approach would be to shift the town's centre so that it is closer to Tesco, to encourage people to use shops and services that Tesco does not provide. Certainly efforts could be made to improve pedestrian links between Tesco and the rest of the town.

Some people expressed the view that it was important that Wolverton did not become 'twee' and that it continues to support a diverse range of shops and services. At the moment, for example, it offers cheap food, quality local produce (for example at the farmers' market etc), ethnic food and a handful of interesting/specialist shops. The role of speciality shops in

⁵ See, for example, 'Shop Front Design Supplementary Planning Document', adopted December 2008, Chesterfield Borough Council.

⁶ The Greenhouse Community in Sheringham may provide a relevant model in this regard, see <http://www.greenhousecommunityproject.com>.

attracting people from Milton Keynes (and those who have come for Tesco) may be a key strength that could be built upon.

In terms of housing, there was a clear call – supported by the witnesses to the expert panels and in the questionnaires – for more bungalows and residential/care homes for older residents and for affordable housing for young people. Wolverton needs a good mix of housing, including social housing and rented accommodation. Older people who wish to stay in the area but can no longer run a large family home or are less mobile have little choice because of the shortage of accommodation. Yet many of them are loyal to Wolverton and do not wish to leave. One suggestion to overcome this was a house swap scheme.

ARTS, HERITAGE AND CULTURE

There are a relatively large number of artistic people in Wolverton and a number of cultural and heritage organisations/groups, including Milton Keynes museum, Madcap and the Living Archive. They are already doing interesting, well-supported things (some on a national scale), and have their own plans for development. Wolverton’s industrial heritage, and the physical elements of this that remain such as the canal towpath, is also a great asset.

Discussions centred on how these strengths could be built upon by pooling resources (eg through joint marketing), by forging closer partnerships, by showcasing what is already available more widely, and by ‘selling’ more effectively what Wolverton has to offer.

A number of ideas were put forward that require further exploration. They include suggestions for bringing artists and heritage/cultural groups together (for example, via the curious and creative/mingle type events), proposals for a Heritage Trail (Cosgrove – Wolverton – Milton Keynes museum), and ideas for the development of a ‘creative campus’.

Some participants felt that it would be beneficial to develop a space or venue for artistic and cultural events and to showcase local art. Others felt, however, that it would be more fruitful to use existing buildings (some of which need investment) more effectively, rather than building something new. It was suggested that decisions could be taken by the local community about which buildings should be prioritised for use as artistic/creative/heritage venues.

Interesting ideas were put forward about how to involve schools in Wolverton’s heritage (including taking artefacts to schools, inviting schools into the museum and holding a Wolverton heritage day).

A theme that was also raised in connection with the economy and energy topics concerns the need to balance the desire/necessity to preserve and conserve Wolverton with the need to

allow – and even encourage – new development and growth. It was suggested that a Conservation Area Committee could be set up to provide advice and work closely with others in the early stages of any new developments.

As previously noted, the point was made that Wolverton should expect, and demand, high-quality public art.

PARTNERSHIP, GOVERNANCE AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

There was a sense from the questionnaires and discussions that at present people do not know who, if anyone, is responsible for taking the vision forward. Frustration was also expressed about the perceived – or possibly actual – lack of power available to or exercised by the various organisations mentioned (Wolverton Association, Wolverton UN Limited, the town council, Wolverton Steering Group etc), and a lack of clarity about the current role and responsibilities of these organisations in relation to the vision.

From some feedback it is possible to infer a sense of uncertainty about who is “banging the drum for Wolverton”. Going forward there is a need for an organisation, or collection of organisations, to act as an enabler, providing support and leadership whilst being accountable, representative and allowing voices to be heard; it is also important that this organisation or body has the confidence of outside agencies and funders. It was suggested that to succeed such a body needs to comprise a representative and amicable mix, and must be accountable back to the community.

Some participants consider that local authorities – bodies with statutory powers, and, in theory at least, democratic mandates – rather than a partnership group, should be taking the lead. Others, however, felt that political involvement can hinder progress.

These comments should not be allowed to obscure the findings that suggest that there is a huge amount of energy and goodwill *in* Wolverton *for* Wolverton. People like living here, and many people want to get involved to make it a better place. They have ideas – big and small, long term and short term – about what needs to be done.

The difficulty is how to turn enthusiasm and plans into reality. Although clear progress in implementing aspects of the original vision has been made (such as the Secret Garden and railway station projects), to judge from the comments made fundamental questions remain about power/authority, accountability, ownership of assets, representativeness, the timescales and extent of the ambitions associated with the new/refreshed vision, financing, and organisational structures and relationships.

One approach that was suggested during discussions is to establish a mini Local Strategic Partnership (or a body that builds on/reports to the existing Wolverton Steering Group). This might be made up of agencies and local residents or their representatives (who could, perhaps, be elected via community elections). There was discussion too about the value of having issue-based groups that focus on a particular project (with these groups reporting to/being led by the single, coordinating body discussed above).

Comments were made about the need to avoid ‘consultation fatigue’ as well as the requirement to ensure that taking the vision forward does not become the responsibility of a relatively few people. This is also important in relation to the amount of time that people have to give to community development work. Encouragingly it was noted that there are new people in Wolverton (and also a group of older people) who could potentially get involved; the challenge is to find the right ways to engage with these people for the next stages.

As far as the vision itself is concerned, there were only limited discussions about how the vision itself was presented and whether or not this helped with the planning and delivery of the vision’s aspirations. It was, however, suggested that the refreshed vision should include a business plan that sets out clear actions, priorities, responsibilities and success criteria. The idea of presenting the vision as a picture was also put forward. There was discussion about the scale of the vision – with some suggesting that “small is good” and works well in Wolverton. Finally it was noted that the vision should encompass the wider parish – incorporating the hopes and aspirations of residents in the wider Wolverton parish.