



Malmesbury Meets Lyme

An exchange of experience between the
people of Malmesbury in Wiltshire and Lyme
Regis in Dorset

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Those Taking Part:

Marcus Dixon Lyme Regis Development Trust , Wendy Davies chair of Lyme Regis Development Trust (Hosts); Cllr Sally Holman (Mayor Of Lyme Regis); Cllr Stan Williams (Former Mayor Of Lyme Regis); John Marriage (Chair of the Trustees of Lyme Regis Museum.)

Catherine Doody (Cllr Malmesbury Town Council); Chris Jager Malmesbury Abbey and Chamber of Commerce; Roger Giffin; Malmesbury Museum and Malmesbury Civic Trust; Miranda Payne Malmesbury Museum; Caroline Pym; Malmesbury Civic Trust and Malmesbury Young People's Drop In Centre; Jan Crawley South West Foundation and Creating Excellence (note taker).

The Context

Representatives of both Malmesbury Town Council and Lyme Regis Development Trust had been interviewed as part of the Empowering Communities Research Project managed by Creating Excellence in the South West. It had appeared that while each area was very different there was also some common ground between the two areas. A meeting was therefore set up to enable representatives of each area to come together and share experiences and ideas.



The Background

Lyme Regis

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.

Despite the underlying issues Lyme Regis is a highly desirable place to live, with an attractive sea front and delightful Town Centre. An estimated 20,000 people are thought to visit Lyme Regis each weekend in the height of the season. Tourism is one of the main sources of income for the Town.

Malmesbury

Malmesbury and surrounding villages is a rural area covering 23,731 hectares. There are 18 parishes in the Malmesbury Area Partnership, ranging in size and make up.

There are many indications that Malmesbury, as an area, far from scoring highly in the index of deprivation, is in 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%.

The Malmesbury area is one in which "people like to live" (*Profile of Malmesbury CA and its villages*)¹. 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.

Areas of Common Interest

Both areas are attractive to tourists. Lyme Regis because of its seafront and connection to the Jurassic coast; Malmesbury because of its beautiful Abbey.

Both areas serve a rural hinterland.

There is an active museum in each Town Centre run largely by volunteers.

Both areas have been working on their Community Area Plan. In Malmesbury this has been undertaken by the Malmesbury Area Planning Group which encompasses the Town Council.

In Lyme Regis the process for the development and the delivery of the Plan has been led by the Lyme Regis Development Trust, a Third Sector Organisation, with the support and backing of the Town Council.

Lyme Regis Development Trust

Lyme Regis Development Trust has been the main enabling force behind community planning in the area. Lyme Regis Development Trust was set up in 1998 with the aim of delivering community driven consultation and planning. Since its inception, the Trust has organised many rounds of consultation with the local community and 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 projects according to local need.

One of the first projects that the Trust was involved in was 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.

LymeNeT

The Government, as part of its commitment to Lifelong Learning, invested funding in community learning centres. With this funding the Development Trust was able to assist with the establishment of LYMENET a Learning Centre for Lyme Regis. At LymeNet they provide facilities and learning opportunities for people in Lyme Regis and the surrounding areas. The organisation can help whether young people are still at school or have perhaps left some time ago and want to gain some recognised qualifications. They can also help if individuals just want learn how to surf the internet. They have experienced staff on hand to help people to choose a path to achieve their goal.

Facilities at LymeNet include 20 computers, high quality colour and mono laser printers, scanners, digital cameras and a multimedia digital projector. A photocopying and fax service is also available. They can also arrange on-site training for organisations. LymeNet at one stage received significant assistance towards its running costs. The Development Trust is now having to look to generate income to support the running of LymeNet.

LymeNet is accommodated in the St Michael's Business Centre which is owned by the Development Trust.

Influencing the Community Plan in Lyme Regis

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, but the Chair of the Trust illustrated how currently the approach can be 'top down' with instructions coming from the West Dorset Strategic Partnership rather

than the community managing to influence the direction of the Local Strategic Partnership.

Influencing Community Planning in Malmesbury

Malmesbury does not have an organisation such as the Development Trust to assist to make things happen in the local community and to pull the various third sector organisations together. There is a Community Plan and there are Community Forums but there was little knowledge of or engagement with these structures. The fact that Wiltshire is going unitary is making engagement difficult although Wiltshire County Council has plans in place to ensure this engagement happens in the future.



Turn Lyme Green

Malmesbury representatives were able to hear about a new environmental campaign group in Lyme Regis called Turn Lyme Green which has the support of the Town Council and The Lyme Regis Development Trust. The group's initial aim was to free Lyme Regis from plastic carrier bags, making it among the first half dozen towns in Britain to aim to go plastic bag free: Modbury in Devon was the first, led by marine film maker Rebecca Hoskins, who had been appalled at the carnage these bags cause to wildlife, both in the sea and on land. The moving spirit behind Turn Lyme Green is Candida Blaker, an international human rights consultant now living in Lyme Regis with her partner, the artist Hugh Dunford-Wood. The Development Trust has had an important input acting as a contact point and supporting the action. A holiday company in Lyme Regis have now taken to sponsoring the bags



Visitors from Malmesbury with the Turn Lyme Green shopping bags

Town Council-Malmesbury

The Town Council in Lyme Regis has 14 Councillors compared with 16 in Malmesbury. The Council in Malmesbury is currently heavily involved in a major refurbishment of the Town Hall which is costing around £1 million. The Town hall was previously owned by North Wiltshire County Council and at the time of handing it over to the Town Council, the Building was in a bad state of repair. The Town Council has had to raise £1,000,000 and the interest for this is being paid for by the local community through the precept which had to be almost doubled to cover the interest on this loan.

The other issue that is important to the people of Malmesbury is the issue over the public conveniences. It is not a statutory requirement of any council to provide public conveniences. The cost of these is therefore not being met by County or District and in many areas such as Malmesbury and Lyme fall on the Town Council. Accessible conveniences are important to the town, not least because Malmesbury has a significant number of tourists. The Town Council has decided that the most economical way of providing a public convenience that would be open for the maximum amount of time, would be to provide this in the refurbished Town Hall which may also be hosting a cafe.

There is a business plan in place for the Town Hall but the Town Hall, because of the money spent on repair, will never be able to 'break even'. The grant of £35,000 that North Wilts Council used to give to the Town Council to run their Town Hall on their behalf is due to cease and the full cost of running the Town Hall will fall on the Town Council. The Town Council is also having to cover the cost of the Tourist Information provision in Malmesbury even though this service is used by visitors and the hinterland.



Town Council Lyme Regis and the Community Participation Initiative (CPI)

The Lyme Regis Town Council is very proud of its Community Participation Initiative (CPI). They are working with the Development Trust to consult directly with people from the community. They arrange regular meetings and work through the Local Area Partnership.

These meetings have brought about a change in the way that people in the community view the Council and what is going on in the Town. The CPI has brought up such topics as Shelters on the sea front, traffic and housing. There is a Youth Forum that brings together Youth organisations and their representatives. A young councillor has taken this initiative forward opening up the way that the Council works.

The Museums

The Philpot Museum in Lyme Regis

The Museum stands in the heart of the town, just where the beautiful coastlines of Dorset and Devon meet. The building has great idiosyncratic charm. Built in 1900-01 by Thomas Philpot it was badly dilapidated by 1991, and a major scheme of reconstruction and extension followed by new displays throughout, has recently been completed. From the beginning, the Museum has been run almost entirely by volunteers. It had a difficult history for a while. The building was a private donation to the town and will only have to return to the ownership of the District Council if it ceases to be a museum. The museum has been run almost entirely by the Trustees. With the curator being part-time and living outside of Lyme Regis this has posed quite a problem. The Museum has now raised sufficient funds to employ a full time curator. It is also now a fully independent Museum, registered with the Museums and Galleries Commission.



The Museum in Lyme Regis has an ambitious fundraising plan to raise £3 million for an extension and additional activities. It charges visitors for entry and this brings in about £40,000 per annum in revenue. It also runs a shop which generates income. From time to time the museum is able to put on specialist displays from which it also able to generate around £10,000 toward its running costs. Many of the artefacts in the museum are based around Mary Anning and the heritage of the fossils that are discovered along the Jurassic coastline.

Malmesbury Museum

The Athelstan Museum in Malmesbury is currently totally reliant on its volunteers. Following the resignation of its curator Roberta Prince, who had been with the Museum for 23 years there were fears that the museum could close. Roberta had helped to preserve and research, catalogue and display thousands of items of local history.

Over the years she had worked closely with the local community, assisting visitors to the museum, both from the UK and overseas, with their family history research and also assisting professional researchers delving into Malmesbury's unique past.

Roberta's retirement coincided with the transfer of the management of the Museum from North Wiltshire District Council to the Friends of Athelstan Museum (FOAM). Since transfer of ownership FOAM has done an amazing job to raise funds for the Museum. FOAM has also ensured that the museum is open almost every day of the year. This was one of the major issues that FOAM faced when taking on the running of the museum. Previously there were many days when the museum would have to close through lack of people to staff it.

FOAM has between 40 and 60 volunteers who make sure that the museum can stay open for the longer hours. They are now in receipt of a Lottery Heritage Grant of £200,000 which will enable them to employ staff for one year. This has also coincided with their move to the newly refurbished Town Hall. The focus for the Museum is the history of Malmesbury and the surrounding parishes.

Both museums are totally reliant on their volunteer workforce and recognise their value and input. Without the volunteers it would have been impossible for either museum to keep going.

Watermill and Town Walkway Lyme Regis

A ten-year restoration project to rescue this ancient but derelict watermill in the heart of Lyme Regis was completed in 2001. The Town Mill, which dates from 1340, is now back in full working order and open to visitors throughout the year. The Town Mill recently completed a

major project to install a hydro-electric system at the mill. The system generates 'green' electricity from a renewable resource using the River Lim that already flows to the flour mill to drive its waterwheel and millstones. Some of the electricity generated is used to light and power the millhouse, whilst the rest is sold to the National Grid.



The Learning

In addition to the issues and points raised in the discussion as recorded the Malmesbury representatives made the following points. They would take away with them the enthusiasm of Marcus the Manager of the Development Trust. There was great learning to be had by just bringing people together with common interests and allowing them to exchange ideas and the group had appreciated having the opportunity to do this.

For future events there may have to be more time taken to ensure that all of the right people are able to come together for maximum benefit. Overall the learning seemed to stem from the presence of the Development Trust in Lyme and the role it was able to undertake in bringing people together, consulting with the community, ensuring that the community views were taken into account in community planning and acting as a broker between the local community and the authorities.

It makes you realise what can be done. So many times people in Malmesbury have talked about bringing Malmesbury together. It goes to show you that if you have an external body working in this way then people will come together.

Malmesbury is now planning to invite Lyme Regis back Malmesbury to see its newly refurbished Town Hall and to continue the discussions.