

# Wake Up Saddleworth

LAAs in an Urban  
/Rural Fringe Area

March 2008

This research was funded by DEFRA and carried out by the Rural Resource Unit at GMCVO. Its remit was to examine the issues effecting the rural parish of Saddleworth and explore the role the voluntary and community sector might have in delivering services as part of the Local Area Agreements process.

The title of this report is a reference to 'Wake Up Delph' a community-led campaign aimed at raising money for the village's Christmas lights. It is intended not just as a community call to action (though many residents are already active), but also a plea to Oldham Borough Council to wake up to the possibilities and potential within Saddleworth.

## Key points

Recommendations for LSPs or councils:

- Understand the unique character and potential of rural areas
- Identify and support existing activity through on the ground intelligence
- Show leadership in promoting the VCS as a tool for community engagement and partner for collaboration
- Work in a joined up, coherent and transparent manner to encourage public participation
- Encourage and fund VCS support agencies and the development of a vibrant and professional VCS sector
- Develop creative, nuanced, locally appropriate strategies to commissioning service delivery from larger VCS groups and hubs
- Use LAAs and other creative measures as a way of achieving environmental sustainability, community development and economic targets

Carried out by the Rural  
Resource Unit at GMCVO

# Saddleworth profile

Saddleworth is a civil parish in the Metropolitan Borough of Oldham (OMBC), Greater Manchester. It comprises several villages and hamlets on the west side of the Pennine hills including Uppermill, Greenfield, Delph and Diggle. Saddleworth is broadly rural and has a population of almost 25,000 people making it one of the larger civil parishes in the United Kingdom. Historically part of Yorkshire, when the West Riding was abolished under the Local Government Act 1972 it was incorporated into the Oldham Borough.

## Key issues

Identified from interviews and research

## Deprivation

Research indicates that while the area as a whole is well off, significant pockets of deprivation exist. There are problems accessing specialist health services and a lack of facilities for after-school/breakfast clubs and adult education provision.

## Transport

There is a lack of cheap, regular public transport services. A campaign exists to re-open Diggle railway station and there is an aspiration to open up the route of the former 'Delph Donkey' railway line to train or light railway.

## Planning and development

There is a perception that too many housing developments are taking place in Saddleworth and that luxury, unaffordable schemes are favoured forcing out local residents. Young people are unable to afford housing and move away from the area. There is a break down in community links and traditions due to shifting populations and a resentment that PG Section 106 isn't used to support social housing projects locally. Historic buildings are not adequately protected.

## Young people

A lack of activities for young people in the area. Previous problems with anti-social behaviour have been identified in some villages. Young people are hanging around villages with nothing to do.

## Old people

An ageing population has difficulty accessing services. Isolation is linked to public transport issues.

## Council cuts

There have been cuts in funding from OMBC to key services ie Delph Library, Uppermill Tourist Information Centre, Springhead Community Centre. No consultation or warning came from the council. There is a perception that money cut locally is spent in urban parts of the borough. Although Council grievances were voiced it should be noted that there were reports of improving relations and new partnerships with some council departments and officers.

## County allegiances

Many feel alienated from the urban centre of the borough and feel more in common with rural areas of Yorkshire. There is a perception that taxes are high locally to pay for services in urban areas. Past antagonism with urban councillors was highlighted. Popular support exists for a move back into Yorkshire including a White Rose society and a 2006 petition signed by 3,500 people. There is some support for a High Peak-style, South Pennine rural council. It should be noted that significant support was also found for remaining within OMBC.

## Economic development

The area is has under gone long term, post-war de-industrialisation. There has been a break down in social networks and traditions linked to industry and a change in character from an area offering employment to dormitory towns. This has led to a loss of young people from the area.

## Farming issues

There is a declining farming industry with farms sold for residential rather than agricultural uses.

# Related concepts

## Localism agenda

A key theme driving local area agreements is the localism agenda, a devolution down of budgets spending and decision making from central government to a local level. In practise there are limits to this process, does autonomy lie at a city regional, borough or parish council level? In Saddleworth we have a local area plan, an Oldham Strategy and a Greater Manchester plan on the cards. The details of how this works in practise are being played out as the LAA negotiation and delivery process evolves. Taken to its natural conclusion localism should allow a strong and vibrant voluntary and community sector to play an important role in the informing policy and delivering services.

## City regions

Government policy is based around the the city region as an important strategic entity and key economic driver. This approach has been incorporated into the *Northern Way Growth Strategy*. The emphasis on city regions has prompted concerns that rural issues will be neglected, do rural areas service their parent city or are they regarded as separate, independent entities? The city region focus may be an exacerbating factor within the urban/rural tensions in Saddleworth.

Pennine Prospects provides another angle on the issue. Established in 2005 to support the regeneration of the South Pennines, the company is run by the key local authorities including OMBC, water companies, Natural England and voluntary/ community sector. Its focus is on protecting the built, natural and cultural heritage for the benefit of the area's residents but also has a role in linking the urban and rural regeneration processes across the three city regions that it adjoins (Leeds, Manchester and Central Lancashire). It offers an way of addressing rural issues and sharing best practise between councils experiencing similar issues.

## Climate Change

Described as the biggest threat facing the UK, the future effects of climate change are starting to be dealt with at a local government level. Upland areas of the UK such as Saddleworth will see great change and plans for adaption and mitigation of the effects of climate change will need to made in the near future. Within Saddleworth community awareness appears to be strong. Local campaigns are active including a renewable energy project to exploit the area's water resources (see case studies) and the environmental benefits of public transport have also been highlighted.

Saddleworth (and the South Pennine area in general) possess a wealth of important environmental assets ie peat bogs acting as climate sinks and protecting against flood events, wind, water, habitat buffer zones etc. A strong environmental sustainability commitment has been made in the *Oldham Community Strategy 2005-2020* document but large scale projects and initiatives have yet to be initiated.

As environmental stresses increase these assets will become more contended. Already a strong community-led campaign has blocked the installation of wind turbines. In Saddleworth climate change will increasingly become both threat and opportunity.

# Mapping the Voluntary and Community Sector

We carried out a survey of Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) groups in Saddleworth and found over 135 groups ranging from community associations and centres to brass band clubs and alternative health drop in sessions. A spreadsheet of groups can be found in Appendix 1.

## VCS assets and trends:

Identified during interviews

## Community involvement

Saddleworth has a strong and vibrant civic society with activities and events going on all the time. The vast majority of groups are small, un-constituted organisations run by one or two part time volunteers. It is debatable whether these groups would identify themselves as part of the voluntary and community sector. One response was, 'People in Saddleworth are just getting on with what they are doing, they would feel patronised to have it referred to as volunteers.' In many cases community activity relies on older, retired volunteers (common within the Saddleworth demographic) with available time and useful experience to contribute.

## Community hubs

Each village within Saddleworth has a strong, independent and unique community. The community or residents associations typically acts as a key community hub, a gateway into the wider network of community activity within the village. The Saddleworth Community Associations vary in terms of organisation, community support and activities.

## Buildings

Within the villages a small number of organisations own or manage buildings, typically these are small community centres, church halls or theatres.

## Response to Council cuts

Recent cut backs from OMBC have seen the closure of valued community assets. These include Delph library, Springhead Community Centre and the Tourist Information centre in Uppermill. Though much resented these closures have had the effect of rallying support locally and initiating sustained community action.

## Engagement with Voluntary Action Oldham

Few groups were found to be active in Voluntary Action Oldham's (VAO) networks. This may be a reflection of the alienation many feel from Oldham-based (ie urban) institutions, and the lack of on-the-ground engagement from VAO due to limited resources and other, urban priorities.

# Community in action - case studies

## Millgate Arts Centre, Delph

In 2005, OMBC ceased funding Delph Library. In response Delph Community Association rallied local support and over 40 volunteers to keep the library open and pay overheads. Adjoining the library, within the same old co-op building, is the Saddleworth Players theatre, an amateur dramatics company who have rented the council-owned building for a number of years. The Community Association and the Players have now joined forces to form a new entity, The Millgate Arts Centre. They have negotiated a long term lease from the council and with the help of Voluntary Action Oldham and other support organisations have applied for a large lottery community hubs grant to revamp the building. The Centre is now undertaking a consultation process to assess local community need and the potential for providing specialist adult education, health and young people's services. The success of the project stems from the community support and sound financial planning, aligned to a pragmatic partnership with OMBC and other local institutions.

[More information: delph.org.uk](http://delph.org.uk)

## Saddleworth Museum, Uppermill

Created to document the changing culture of the area, Saddleworth Museum was founded in 1959. Today it incorporates a permanent display, tourist centre, shop and art exhibition and hosts lectures, charity events and gigs. OMBC funding is supplemented by fundraising activity from an active supporters group, grants and earned income. The building is entirely owned by the museum and was extended in the 1980s. With 20,000 visits a year it is staffed with employees and over 50 local volunteers. In 2009 the museum celebrates its 50th anniversary, a model of a professionally run organisation combining significant community participation with well managed finances. Its future might be less certain. OMBC cuts mean the awarding winning Tourist Information centre may close with the loss of valuable income.

[More information: saddleworthmuseum.co.uk](http://saddleworthmuseum.co.uk)

## Greenfield and Grasscroft Residents Association

Founded in 1977, GGRA is one of Saddleworth's longest running and best organised tenants associations with over 300 households connected to the group's email discussion board and over 100 paid up members contributing £5 a year to the association's coffers. The group actively campaigns on several fronts including fighting the destruction of a local mill and working for a plastic bag-free village. Their opposition to a proposed Tesco development typifies their approach. A highly organised campaign immersed itself in the planning process but when the decision went against the group they changed tack and began working with OMBC officers and the local MP to secure a new community health centre under planning gain. The group works to highlight local issues and concerns, publicly campaigning where appropriate but also working pragmatically in partnership with key institutions and authorities. They take dynamic and engaged position, highlighting the power of a very local organisation to work intelligently as a bridge between local concerns and wider, council activity. Success comes from a driven and committed leadership fused with a commitment to organised and representative community participation

[More information: ggra.co.uk](http://ggra.co.uk)

## Renewable energy project

Inspired by a community interest renewables company in New Mills, Derbyshire, local residents came up with the idea of using fast flowing stretches of river within Saddleworth to create electricity. Still in development the project has brought together people from a diverse range of interests and localities under a non-partisan agenda. It has received the support of Oldham Council and local MP and climate change minister, Phil Woolas and demonstrates how community-led projects can produce innovative and experimental solutions, utilising local assets.

# Saddleworth networks and bodies

## **Saddleworth Community Council**

Formed in 2007 to replace the area committee, Community Council meetings are attended by local ward councillors, co-optees and members of the public. It is seen by some as party political, lacking binding power and statutory rights unlike the old committees. Some view as as distant and un-transparent. However, the council has a budget to support community projects and its open meetings are held at different locations throughout the parish. It has given valuable political support and endorsements to local projects.

## **Saddleworth Parish Council**

Attained Quality Parish Council Status in 2005. The Council is currently engaging the community and voluntary sector groups from the area in formulating a Parish Plan. Seen by some as toothless, ineffective and overly bureaucratic by others as a useful and helpful entity.

## **VCS networking**

In 2007, GMCVO and Voluntary Action Oldham ran a networking session in Saddleworth attended by the majority of village community associations as well as other key groups. Though many attendees found it useful people interviewed in this research were wary of repeating the meeting or starting a cross-Saddleworth VCS network due to the fear of political co-option.

## **Existing strategies relating to Saddleworth**

*Oldham's Community Strategy 2005-2020,*  
Oldham Partnership

*Saddleworth and Lees Area Plan,* January 2004,  
Saddleworth and Lees Area Committee  
(now Saddleworth Community Council)

*Saddleworth Parish Plan,* currently in production,  
Saddleworth Parish Council

# The LAA process in Oldham

Local Area Agreements (LAAs) simplify the funding relationship between central and local government. Oldham are awarded a single pot of money from government to achieve a set of pre-agreed targets over five themes: safe and strong communities, healthier communities and older people, economy and enterprise, housing and children and young people. Centralising funding allows Oldham to be more strategic in its spending. In commissioning organisations to deliver targets Oldham gains more control over end outputs while allowing delivery organisations to develop on-the-ground methods and solutions.

The LAA and commissioning process is administered by the Oldham Partnership, an organisation made up of council, third sector and public sector representation. Commissioning is undertaken by the Oldham Partnership Executive.

## The role of the Voluntary and Community sector

The VCS is a cross cutting theme running between the LAA's key blocks and is represented on the partnership by the Voluntary Community and Faith Partnership (VCFP). Administered by Voluntary Action Oldham it is made up of an open membership of over 130 groups. The partnership lacks significant representation from Saddleworth and the two workers supporting the VCFP during the time of the research were on short term, 12 week contracts, due to end on 31st March 2008.

## Voluntary sector experience

Voluntary and community organisations can bid to deliver specific services as part of the LAA process. *Oldham's Community Strategy 2005-2020* includes a commitment to increasing the number of voluntary, community and faith groups delivering services.

In practise the VCS has not become significantly involved in commissioning. Research from the Young Foundation into VCS experience of LAAs has suggested common barriers include: the complexity and bureaucracy of competitive tendering processes, lack of skills and specialist knowledge required to develop sustainable and competitive

tenders, lack of information about the opportunities available for third sector contractors and issues with short-term funding and payment in arrears. These issues are compounded by the fact that many local authorities do not actively encourage commissioning from the third sector.

Potential exists for VCS groups to deliver services within consortia or in partnership with larger organisations. Again this has not happened in Oldham and one example found that while a VCS group was included in a partnership tender, when it came to delivery their larger public sector partner organisation failed to use them.

# Conclusion

The aim of this report was to look at ways to maintain a strong and vibrant Saddleworth community through the support of the voluntary and community sector and the co-operation of Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council. For this to happen a culture of engaged, pragmatic and dynamic partnership incorporating mutual respect needs to exist between the Saddleworth voluntary and community sector and OMBC. Within this there is a role to develop more professional elements of the VCS with a view to LAA service delivery.

## VCS recommendations:

- Take a pragmatic approach to OMBC partnership, campaigning to highlight issues and need but where appropriate collaborating with council departments to achieve aims, secure funds and deliver projects.
- Use Saddleworth Community Council, Saddleworth Parish Council and the Voluntary, Community and Faith Partnership where necessary to push issues and secure endorsements.
- Use Voluntary Action Oldham's services to build skills and resources and help access funding.
- Engage in the Saddleworth Parish Plan process to register important issues and needs.
- Where appropriate consider tendering for Local Area Agreement funding of service delivery:
  - Build relevant skills and experience.
  - Seek advice from support agencies.
  - Outsource services where appropriate to consortia such as Greater Manchester Voluntary Support Service (GMVSS).
  - Tender in partnership or consortia.

## Council/LSP recommendations:

### A plan for Saddleworth

The proposed Saddleworth Parish Plan is a community-led planning process that can allow Saddleworth residents and the VCS sector to define their own development.

- Acknowledge that though Saddleworth faces problems in common with the rest of the borough it also has a combination of unique issues and assets.
- Encourage Oldham Partnership and Saddleworth Community Council to support and engage in the Parish Plan development.
- Use the Oldham Partnership as a central co-ordinating point to ensure relevant plans are coherent, complimentary and tied to delivery targets.
- Recognise environmental challenges and innovative community-led solutions that exist.

### Support for the VCS

- Provide long term funding of the Voluntary Community and Faith Partnership to ensure the sector is adequately represented at LSP level.
- Support Voluntary Action Oldham to provide capacity building, training and advice in developing the sector.
- Invest in building capacity and professionalism of larger groups, utilise support agencies such as VAO and GMVSS.
- Use existing Saddleworth community associations and hubs to provide a location for delivery of VCS training, skills and advice to breakdown the rural/urban divide.
- Maintain grants pots to support informal VCS groups and build capacity within larger organisations.
- Encourage leadership and community engagement within the VCS.

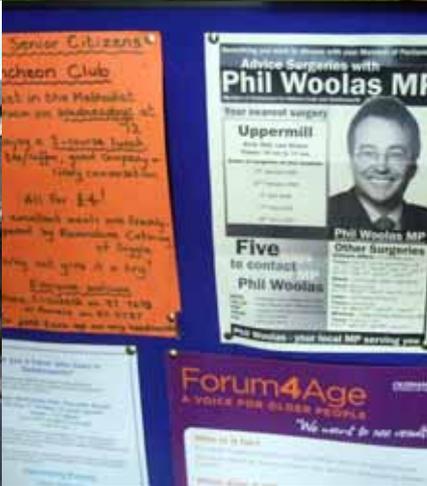
## Joined up council thinking

- Identify and support existing community activity using on the ground intelligence and engagement.
- Co-ordinate between council departments and officers in order to support existing community activity. Oldham Partnership has a role in facilitating this and encouraging inter-department communication.
- Work clearly, transparently and openly in order to facilitate community communication and involvement.
- Engage in community consultation before making cuts in order to involve those affected in making decisions and, where possible, reduce the impact through collaboration with existing community activity.
- Use creative and innovative measures to support community development eg Planning Guidance Section 106 in order to compensate communities for loss of green belt land.
- Demonstrate leadership and vision in promoting a strong and independent VCS sector and encourage collaboration with council departments.

## Improved approach to commissioning from OMBC

The LSP has the potential to develop the LAA process in order to deliver environmental, community development and economic development.

- Work with existing community hub projects in Saddleworth, ie Milgate Arts Centre, Saddleworth Museum, Greenfield and Grasscroft Residents Association, to explore or pilot service delivery within LAA process.
- Strategically use LAA commissioning and continued grant funding to build capacity of voluntary sector to deliver services.
- Develop a more creative, nuanced approach to working with the VCS to deliver services eg encourage consortia applications incorporating VCS representation.
- Incorporate environmental, social, local and economic criteria into the LAA tendering process.
- Change and simplify the commissioning process in order not to exclude VCS groups ie longer lead times, VCS training, simplified and clearer application process, longer contract periods, contract renewal longer before the end of contracts.





## About this report

This report was based on interviews conducted by researcher *Jonathan Atkinson* over a two month period in winter/spring 2008. Additional VCS research provided by *Anna Seward*. Every effort was made to interview a representative selection of people from the local community and from Oldham Borough Council. Naturally time and resources dictated that not everyone could be talked to and the author welcomes representations and feedback from those not involved.

Available online at: [www.gmcvo.org.uk/rural](http://www.gmcvo.org.uk/rural)

## Interviewees

Many thanks to everyone who gave their time in helping putting together this report.

Tahmeena Khan	Improving Reach project, Voluntary Action Oldham
Janet Maloney	Fundraising officer, Voluntary Action Oldham, Saddleworth resident
Catherine Jones	Information officer, Voluntary Action Oldham
Ken Hulme	Delph Parish Councillor
Mike Rooke	Grasscroft and Greenfields Residents Association
David Ship	Saddleworth Players treasurer/Millgate Arts Centre treasurer
John Eley	Partnership Development Manager, Oldham Partnership
Imogen Fuller	Principal Regeneration Officer, Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council
David and Elizabeth Darlington	Active members of the environmental and faith community
Peter Fox	Curator, Saddleworth Museum
Richard Browning	Co-ordinator, Voluntary, Community and Faith Partnership
Bill Edwards	Oldham Environment Forum chair, Oldham Partnership steering group chair, Saddleworth resident

---

## More information

GMCVO, Rural Resource Unit  
Contact Melanie Jeffs on 0161 277 1014 or e-mail [melanie.jeffs@gmcvo.org.uk](mailto:melanie.jeffs@gmcvo.org.uk)

---