

Rochester Town Council – Petition Submitted

Background

The town of Rochester is the historic heart of the unitary authority of Medway in Kent, England. Perhaps best known for being one of the favourite places of Charles Dickens, who based many of his novels in the area, but also for having the second oldest Diocese in England, Rochester is now aspiring to become one of the first new urban parish councils within Medway. Since our last report, Rochester is even closer to achieving its goal of giving the 20,000 residents more influence in the decision-making process, having submitted their petition to trigger a Community Governance Review at the beginning of October 2015.

Why A Council Is Wanted

Rochester Council aims to deliver better democratic representation of the Rochester Community, strengthening local identity and the town's ability to attract more public funds. Along with the other Medway Towns, Rochester is served by just one tier of local government. This means that Rochester is represented by only 9 Councillors, whereas other smaller areas from Kent have a significant larger number of representatives. The campaign also aims to strengthen the identity of Rochester, putting it back on the political map by giving it legal status and defined boundaries, through the creation of a statutory body acknowledged by the government.

Progress With Campaign To Date

At the time of drafting this case study, Rochester had already submitted their petition to trigger a Community Governance Review. Although initially the petition was scheduled to be submitted in September, having already achieved the minimum number of required signatures in early July, due to an extension campaign to include a neighbourhood on the border of Chatham and Rochester that has expressed an interest in joining Rochester Town Council, it has been decided to postpone the submission date to October. With the help of excellent volunteers and the support of the National Association of Local Councils and the Kent Association of Local Councils, the Rochester campaign has been excelling at raising awareness about the establishment of a Rochester Town Council and keeping momentum.

Learning From The Campaign

The Rochester campaign has benefitted from the recent legislative changes that lower the community threshold for instigating a Community Governance Review, having to raise 500 signatures less than it was estimated at the beginning of the campaign. Rochester managed to raise most of its signatures by actively promoting the campaign through local media appearances and publications, but also through the town crier, street canvassing in Rochester Street and information packs sent to 11,000 households, as well as through the campaign website, where residents of Rochester are able to sign the petition online.

Campaign Lessons To Share With Others

One of the lessons that can be taken from the Rochester Campaign is the importance of making your campaign visible to the community you are aiming to represent. The campaign leaders have been investing a substantial amount of the campaign budget in advertising the campaign in the local newspaper, the Kent Messenger, and in creating a promotional film about the importance of establishing a Rochester Town Council. What worked well in collecting signatures was also street canvassing, when volunteers managed to collect almost 100 signatures in one day. In addition, sending petition forms to households in the area ensured that the campaign also reached out to those who may not find online petitions accessible. Campaign leaders also recommend delivering promotional leaflets using members of your own team, as opposed to contracting a provider, as they have the campaign's interest at heart. In Rochester, volunteers were more efficient than the contractors at targeting those areas that have not returned many signatures, helping show that there is broad support for a town council from across the community.