

Welwyn Garden City – Petition ‘Opened’

Background

The town of Welwyn Garden City is part of the Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council, in the centre of Hertfordshire, with an electorate of 36,000. Envisioned by social reformer and town planning pioneer Sir Ebenezer Howard, Welwyn Garden City has developed into a thriving international business centre. It also prides itself with excellent leisure facilities, including the 126 acres Stanborough Park. Yet within its borough, Welwyn Garden City is the only community that does not have a local council. The “WGC4us” group has started a campaign to set up a local council, opening a petition in 2014 to trigger a Governance Review of the area.

Why A Council Is Wanted

The campaigners believe that the creation of a town council will ensure residents of Welwyn Garden City are better represented in the decision-making process. A town council would give residents the power to decide what the priorities for the area are, allowing for more financial independence from the Borough. Therefore, a town council would improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of the garden city by managing services, attracting more visitors and footfall by promoting the town's history and facilities, organising public festivities and lobbying on behalf of the residents on relevant Borough Council and County Council Committees.

Progress With Campaign To Date

The idea of a Welwyn Garden City Town Council was proposed in 2012 with the local paper holding an online vote, which showed a majority in favour. In 2014, having received a grant from the National Association of Local Councils, WGC4us launched the campaign in earnest by opening a petition to request that Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council conducts a Community Governance Review of the area. The campaign has been promoting the creation of a town council through information sent to households, a comprehensive website, as well as street canvassing and media coverage in the local paper. The petition is more than halfway to reaching the required number of signatures that will allow WGC4us to formally submit their request.

Learning From The Campaign

In spite of gaining many residents' support, the campaign for a Welwyn Garden City Town Council has been facing opposition from a local membership-only society whose activity would overlap with one or two of the roles of a town council. The campaign leaders have successfully defended the importance of creating a town council by pointing out that it has much more to offer than the membership organisation which has neither powers nor a democratic mandate. The residents of Welwyn Garden City need a body that will represent their interests as a community, as opposed to an organisation that will only represent its members.

Campaign Lessons To Share With Others

When starting a campaign to set up a local council one should be prepared to face some opposition. The WGC4us campaign provides a good example of tactfully dealing with opposition in a public debate. They have successfully defended their position through their local newspaper, the Welwyn Hatfield Times, by stating the advantages that the creation of the town council would bring to the area. As stated by the campaigners, local councils are the backbone of democracy and no other body can take their place in representing the residents of the area, given the democratic mandate that local councils hold as elected public bodies.