



**Sutton Coldfield Town Council: The Creation of a New Town Council in Sutton  
Coldfield, Birmingham**

## Headlines:

- Sutton Coldfield is a large urban town located on the edge of Birmingham, West Midlands.
- Sutton Coldfield's current population is 100,000 which meant 10,000 signatures had to be obtained on the petition to submit to Birmingham City Council to trigger the necessary Community Governance Review to create a local council.
- Residents were dissatisfied with the loss of the old Sutton Coldfield urban district council in 1974 and further with the removal of the old Sutton Mayoral chains and regalia
- The campaign to create the new Sutton Coldfield Town Council has therefore been a Herculean effort to regain a local political identity for the town. The unique selling point of this campaign is that it succeeded to create a new town council in the second largest local authority area in Europe in a city where service localisation has struggled to be implemented by Birmingham City Council so far.
- This case study tells the story of how Sutton Coldfield successfully established a Town Council in the summer of 2015 after years of campaigning, networking and consultation.

## Why A Council Is Wanted:

The theme of this case study is the creation of a new town council in the locale of Sutton Coldfield, Birmingham. This campaign was supported by the National Association of Local Councils, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and the Warwickshire and West Midlands Association of Local Councils through the national New Councils' Programme between 2013 and 2015 (a programme funded by Central Government to support the creation of new parish councils in previously un-parished areas). Sutton Coldfield is at the end of the journey a campaign group travels to after the principal local authority has given permission to create a new town council during the relevant Community Governance Review (CGR) phase.

Ken Rushton, Cllr. Rob Pocock, Stephen Smallwood and the Sutton Vesey Community Association campaigned for years to create the new Town Council in Sutton Coldfield in the belief that services could be best delivered locally due to the size of Birmingham City Council – the biggest in Europe – which made the needs of towns difficult to voice. Sutton Coldfield residents since 1974 have not felt they have had a sufficient voice in the way key services are delivered by Birmingham City Council such as health, education and planning and a town council will at least give these residents a permanent, statutory and elected voice – on their behalf – in negotiations on service delivery with the City Council. Following the creation of Sutton Coldfield Town Council, residents will now benefit from a £1.8 million precept; newly



elected Sutton Coldfield Town Councillors will determine how this sum will be best spent on behalf of residents in the area.

### **Possible Service Areas For The New Town Council:**

Since 1974, residents of Sutton Coldfield have sought more of a voice on issues like town planning, car parking, highways and green spaces. Whilst the campaign group recognised during the Community Governance Review phase that though the General Power of Competence (GPC) is a power of first resort for parish councils – campaigners also know that parish councils are neither planning nor highways authorities. However, the creation of the largest town council in England in the town will do much to give residents a bigger say on these key issues. The new Town Council have also realised that these service areas are interlinked critically. Highways bring footfall to and through Sutton Coldfield on the edge of the second largest city in England (Birmingham). This is why the new town council is seeking a central role in town planning for Sutton Coldfield – as green spaces in such a busy urban environment are crucial and car parking (itself critical for visitors to the town) – would be a hugely important additional revenue stream for the town council.

Other recently formed parish councils have been created in areas such as Kidderminster, Finham, Pannal and Westgate. Elections for the new town council will take place on 5 May, 2016. Given the success of the Sutton Coldfield campaign, it is now likely that there will be other campaigns to create new parish councils in other nearby areas of Birmingham (such as Castle Vale and Shard End), to join Sutton Coldfield and New Frankley as the first two parish councils in Birmingham.



Above; area map of Sutton Coldfield, Birmingham.

## Who Are The Key Partners / Stakeholders Involved?:

The key organisation involved in the campaign from the campaign group perspective was the Sutton Vesey Community Association. The key member from Birmingham City Council was Councillor Rob Pocock, who since his election in 2012 has championed the creation of a town council and constantly worked toward his agenda of greater community involvement. These campaigners were also received huge support from a small group of officers at Birmingham City Council who ensured that the Community Governance Review timeline was adhered to stringently and that – subsequently – the needs of all candidates for election to the Town Council were satisfied in the lead up to polling day and afterwards. Local policy advice was provided by the Warwickshire and West Midlands Association of Local Councils

for the duration of the campaign. The National Association of Local Councils also provided detailed technical advice to the campaign group on the technicalities of Community Governance Reviews throughout the duration of the campaign.

The campaign group was grant funded with £17,000 over three financial years to help produce leaflets, organise public meetings, and related activity to galvanise and sustain resident interest in the concept of a new town council and the campaign to create one in Sutton Coldfield. Such funding was provided by the Department of Communities and Local Government and accessed from the Warwickshire and West Midlands Association of Local Councils via the National Association of Local Councils between 2013 and 2015.. Ken Rushton, Sutton Coldfield Campaign Champion claims '*there would not have been a campaign*' without this funding, citing it as extremely helpful in communicating with residents, namely due to the political challenges the campaign faced with Birmingham City Council, as explained below.

### What Are The Key Issues / Challenges?:

It took approximately two years to gather the 10,000 signatures required to trigger the Community Governance Review for the creation of the new Sutton Coldfield Town Council. Apart from the huge logistical challenge of gathering signatures, there was also the challenge of widely advertising to create greater awareness of the campaign given the sheer size of the town. The physical size of the campaign area and its population explain why posters posted on local trains and stations were crucial in raising awareness. Party politics has also been an issue as well as the ongoing need to minimise its involvement in the campaign from Birmingham City Council which met the efforts of the campaign group efforts with resistance initially. Local media coverage earlier in the campaign also supported this initial resistance to the very idea of a new Sutton Coldfield Town Council (as to that point New Frankley Parish Council had been the only parish council in Birmingham). There were points – particularly earlier in 2015 – when it appeared as though the campaign would not succeed for these reasons alone.

Grant funding from the New Councils' Programme in 2015 was used to facilitate ongoing negotiation with Birmingham City Council following the consultative ballot which completed on 16<sup>th</sup> July 2015. This was followed by discussions prior to a final decision by Birmingham City Council in September 2015 (on the creation of the new town council) regarding how best to strategically inform residents and resident groups of decisions. The grant was allocated towards the cost of public meetings and information dissemination via leaflets and newsletters

For instance 2 campaign meetings in Sutton Coldfield of two hours' duration were held following the vote in Birmingham in September / late October, 2015. The first meeting determined what final campaign tasks were now required and tasks / research were





allocated appropriately. The second meeting pulled together the work subsequent to the first meeting and established clear priorities and a timetable of actions eventually leading to the first election for Sutton Coldfield Town Council.

*"WALC congratulates the group of residents, led by Ken Rushton that have, through sheer hard work and determination, pulled off the amazing achievement of establishing Sutton Coldfield Town Council. We look forward to welcoming them as members and providing, in the years ahead, the advice and support they will need to deliver quality services to their community that will make Sutton Coldfield an even better place to live." – John Crossling, WALC.*

### How Have These Issues / Challenges Been Overcome?:

The £17,000 of Government funding since September, 2013 has helped the campaign group to overcome huge difficulties which may have proved insurmountable otherwise. The two main problems were gathering the 10,000 signatures and sustaining awareness of the campaign over a two - three year period. The main solutions paid for by these monies were as below;

- Printing of newsletters and briefing leaflets;
- Hire of community halls for briefing events;
- Postage and distribution of selected direct mailshots to community groups; &
- Advertising and promotional posters.

The direct mailing to 45,000 homes in the Sutton Coldfield area was the single most effective method the campaign group felt it used to overcome the challenge of the early resistance from Birmingham City Council and lack of support from local media which resulted from this.

To avoid party politics becoming a factor in Sutton Coldfield, the campaign group aimed to put newer, younger faces into the council who could bring forward a fresh start and ideas to the council moving forward. 24 new town councillors were elected to the town council at the council's historic first elections on 5 May, 2016. These representatives were from a range of political parties and some were Independents.

## Outcomes - Learning From The Campaign:



Above: The campaign poster for a Royal Sutton Coldfield Town Council.

The initial campaigning achievement was the securing of the 10,000 signatures required to trigger the Community Governance Review to create the Town Council. The second main achievement was to secure an overwhelming majority of 'Yes' votes when the final referendum of the Review took place of residents earlier in 2015.

On the final referendum, an overwhelming majority of the electorate – 70% – voted 'Yes'. No one on party political grounds or otherwise could then dispute this. Since this time and also when Birmingham City Council communicated back its formal agreement to the creation of the town council later in 2015 – the sharing of learning has been national (in the form of presentations at NALC events) and local – in the form of sharing campaign ideas with Shard End and Castle Vale (emerging campaigns for parish councils from the same areas).

Since then, Sutton Coldfield residents and the campaign group have been able to improve their relationship with Birmingham City Council and work hard to have an outward facing approach to decision making, involving community voices as well as looking at the way other councils across England manage similar issues.

Other related outcomes have been the subsequent smooth passage of the new town council through its first elections on 5 May, 2016 (with the election of 24 new town councillors) and the holding of the council's inaugural parish council meeting on 17 May, 2016 (where the new council voted to call itself a Town Council and vest a Sutton Coldfield Town Mayor). The council is still in the process of recruiting its first town clerk (chief officer).

## Key Achievements:

The key element of success on a project of this scale was to persuade 70% of the residents voting in the 2015 referendum to create the town council to vote 'Yes'. The second main achievement was then to persuade officers and members of Birmingham City Council that there was nothing to fear from the creation of the new Sutton Coldfield Town Council –



political or otherwise. This latter task may have been made marginally easier by the outcome of the referendum result – but campaigns elsewhere (as in Fenton and Corringham) have failed at the first attempt at a similar stage of the campaign. So this was a real achievement given the geographical size of the area and its population.

### **Campaign Lessons To Share With Others:**

Sutton Coldfield residents will benefit from a strong and permanent voice on several strategic policy issues such as highways, car parking, green spaces and town centre management – through the new town council – and largely through changed resident relationships with Birmingham City Council. As mentioned, residents will benefit in year one from £1.8 million from a local precept (the form of council tax raised by parish councils) which can be spent on services in Sutton Coldfield. Communicating the benefits of a town council has not been as much of a challenge as first thought as most residents recognise that due to the size of Birmingham City Council, their services have not been local enough until now.

Another lesson learnt from the campaign is the effectiveness of direct communication with residents, such as the mailing method used by the Sutton Coldfield campaign group which, with the help of the Government funding, enabled the campaign to reach 45,000 homes directly. The council cite this as their most effective form of communication, and highly recommend it to campaigns looking to persuade local residents of the benefits a community council can bring.

The campaign group also recognises that sharing lessons on gathering petition signatures and how to sustain a long campaign are critical. Engaging with the principal local authority once a Community Governance Review has been triggered - is also critical. Finally, it is also important to recognise once a re-organisation order has been issued by the principal authority, the entirely new set of challenges involved in creating a new town council: budget setting, vesting and namely, having sufficient residents to stand for election.





**Who Can I Contact?:**

**Ken Rushton: Sutton Coldfield Campaign Champion - [kenrushton@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:kenrushton@blueyonder.co.uk) / 0121 355 3224.**

**John Crossling: Warwickshire & West Midlands Association of Local Councils – [johnc@walc.org.uk](mailto:johnc@walc.org.uk) / 01789 472 61.**

**Other Information:**

**More information on creating a Council: The NALC 'Create a Council' web page:  
<http://www.nalc.gov.uk/our-work/create-a-council> .**

**To see template resources such as a media release, leaflet and poster, please click here:  
<http://www.nalc.gov.uk/our-work/create-a-council> .**

**More information on how to create a new council: The NALC 'Create a Council' page:  
<http://www.nalc.gov.uk/our-work/create-a-council>**

**The NALC 'Power to the people' resource:  
<http://www.nalc.gov.uk/publications>**

**The Royal Sutton Coldfield Town Council Campaign:  
<http://www.suttoncoldfieldtowncouncil.com/> .**

**Warwickshire & West Midlands Association of Local Councils:  
<http://www.walc.org.uk/> .**

**Sutton Coldfield Town Council web pages on the Birmingham City Council web-site -  
<http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/sutton-coldfield-parish-council> .**