



**Welwyn Garden City Council: How A Petition Was Opened To Parish Welwyn
Garden City, Hertfordshire**

Headlines:

- Welwyn Garden City is part of the Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council, in the centre of Hertfordshire.
- The case study tells the story of how the Welwyn Garden City campaign group opened a petition to trigger a Community Governance Review (the process through which a parish council is created).
- The case study outlines the progress of the campaign, highlighting some of the institutional challenges that the campaign has encountered.
- Currently, the petition has gathered over half of the signatures required. In spite of this, due to opposition from a local membership body, the campaign has been struggling for some time now to get the minimum number of signatures required before it can be submitted to the Borough Council.
- Campaign leaders had to make the difficult decision that unless something is going to change, they will have to stop campaigning for the time being.

Why A Council Is Wanted:

Welwyn Garden City is the only community within its borough that does not have its own local (parish or town) council. This means that the Welwyn community is under-represented in local government, with every decision about the town being taken by the Borough Council. The campaigners believe that the creation of a parish council will ensure residents of Welwyn Garden City are better represented, putting them in control of important community decisions and developments.

With parish councils being the cornerstone of the Government's localism programme, having the opportunity to take over more powers as part of the devolution agenda, campaign organisers consider the creation of a parish council would improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of the garden city. They would like to see the town council 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. In a poll conducted by a local newspaper asking residents whether they feel they would benefit from the establishment of a local council, more than an overwhelming 50% of participants voted 'yes'.

In addition, Welwyn Garden City residents would like to develop and deliver a Neighbourhood Plan through the parish council. Residents want to take more control over planning and reduce the risk of fragmentation, as well as regenerate the town centre. In the absence of a parish council, the Town Centre Partnership has tried to manage the town

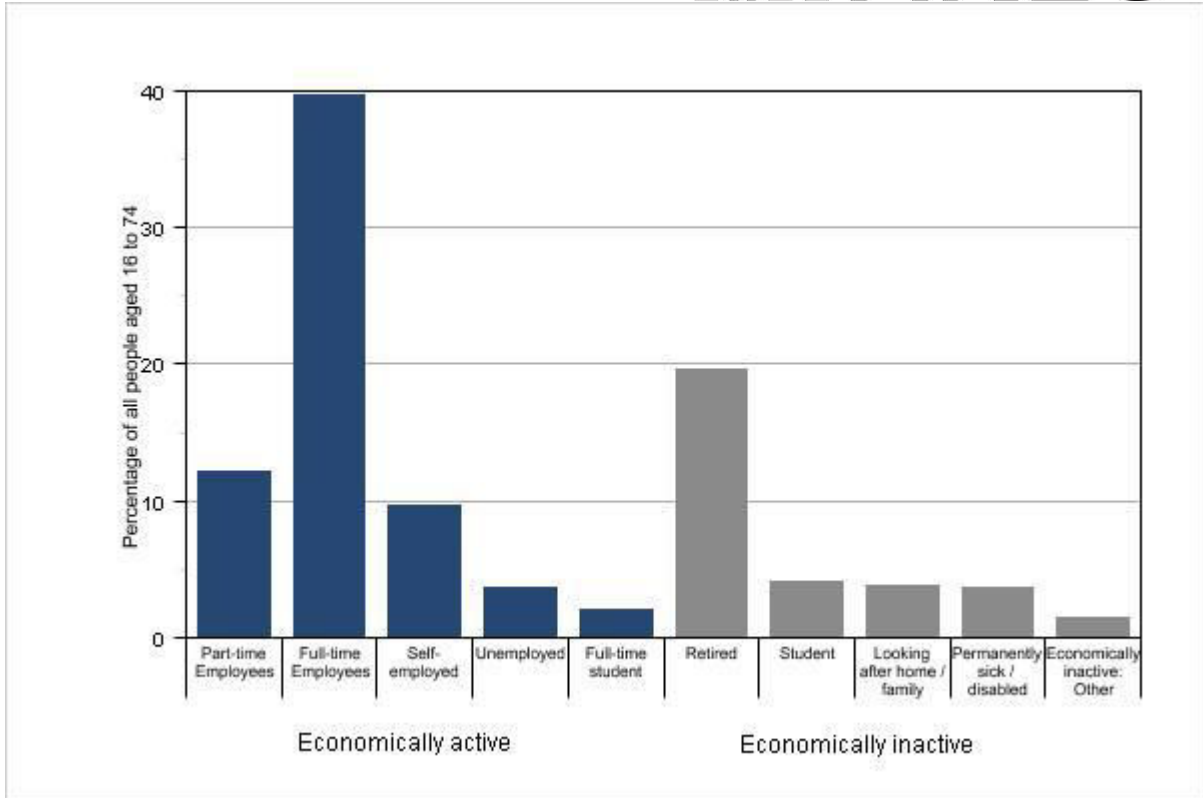
centre, however, with limited success. Campaign leaders believe that a parish council is much better suited for this role, as its budget would allow it to undertake one-off projects such as the renovation of the 'poster booths', as well as coordinate bigger initiatives such as the 'Supermarket Levy'. Nevertheless, the parish council could support the Town Centre Partnership in their bid to create a Business Improvement District (BID). It could also take on the management of public buildings such as the proposed Three Magnets Centre, and run these as a business from which the community profits.

Campaign Demographics:

The town of Welwyn Garden City is part of the Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council area in Hertfordshire, with an electorate of 36,000. Envisioned by social reformer and town planning pioneer Sir Ebenezer Howard, Welwyn Garden City has developed into an international business centre, being Britain's second 'garden city'. The town's housing stock, neighbourhood shopping and green spaces were transferred to Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council in 1983.



Above: The Parkway Fountain, Welwyn Garden City.



Above: Economic activity in Welwyn Garden City based on March 2011 data from the Office of National Statistics.

Welwyn scores below the national average in the Indices of Deprivation, being ranked 19,031 out of 32,844 English neighbourhoods, where the most deprived neighbourhood has a rank of 1 (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2015). The average weekly household income has been estimated by the Office of National Statistics in 2008 at £860. This compares with £700 for the East of England region.



Who Are The Key Partners / Stakeholders Involved?:

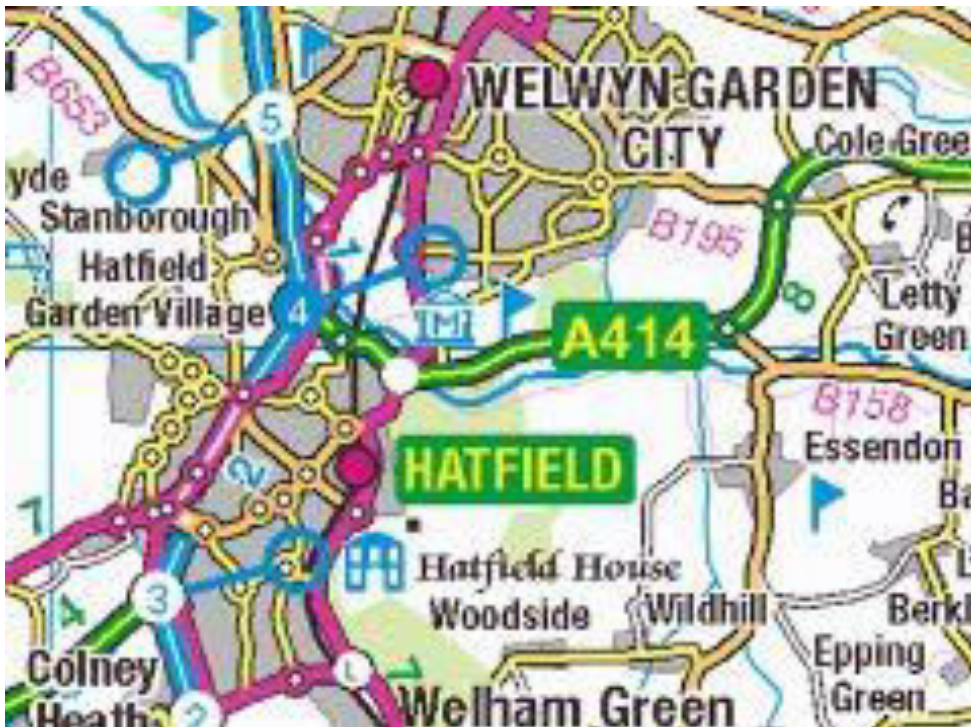
The campaign for the establishment of a Welwyn Garden City Council has been led by “Welwyn Garden City For Fs” (WGC4us) community group. The campaign organisers have been working closely with the Hertfordshire Association of Parish and Town Councils, as well as the National Association of Local Councils (NALC). WGC4us has also been liaising with Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council on matters related to triggering a community governance review (by submitting to it a valid petition). In addition, the WGC4us campaign has received the support of the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), being awarded a grant under the New Councils’ Programme. This grant was used to pay for campaign newsletters, a campaign web-site (<http://www.wgc4us.org.uk/>) and leaflets, as well as public meetings.

Progress With Campaign To Date:

In 2014, having received a grant from the Department for Communities and Local Government, 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. Over the spring and summer of that year, the campaign group used some of the campaign monies to mass mail 21,000 households in the town to raise campaign awareness. This mailing was huge and was delivered by the Royal Mail to almost all households in the town. This mailshot was planned and had been included on the campaign plan approved by NALC before grant monies had been disbursed to WGC4us.

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.

Unfortunately, due to opposition from a local membership body, which has actively worked against the WGC4us campaign, campaign leaders have been struggling to collect the minimum number of signatures required to trigger a Community Governance Review. As this has been going on for some time now, the campaign leaders had to make the difficult decision that unless something changes over the next couple of months, they will have to stop their campaign. The membership body’s opposition is sourced from an overlap between some of the activities the body carry out that traditionally a parish council would undertake



Above: Map of Welwyn Garden City area.

How Have Issues / Challenges Been Overcome?:

Campaign leaders have successfully defended the importance of creating a parish council by pointing out that it has much more to offer than a membership organisation which has neither powers nor a democratic mandate. A parish council would give the Welwyn community power to take control of local services, either by taking over delivery or through closer scrutiny, transparency, and ensuring residents get value for money. It would also give residents a say in planning decisions, and, more generally, in all aspects that affect their local community. 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.

As well as the support from DCLG, NALC and the Hertfordshire Association of Local Councils, the campaign received tremendous support from local media coverage where regular press releases on updates of the campaign were shared. On several occasions, local media reporters came to the campaign asking for such updates; having the local media positive about the creation of the council was something which helped the campaign greatly in its efforts to combat negative publicity by the local membership body.

Local residents were also extremely supportive of the campaign, with a direct mailing to signatories which urged them to encourage family, friends and neighbours to sign the electronic petition or a hard copy; with an attached petition in the mailing and a link made



available in the electronic mailing for those who signed the e-petition. The campaign found this method extremely effective as it helped emphasise the aim of the local council; bringing communities together and putting residents in control of a key decision.

In spite of this, the negative publicity from the membership-only society opposing the campaign, as well as the limited resources available, have had a negative affect on the campaign, namely due to the principal authority not accepting the electronic signatures that the campaign groups gathered, of great disappointment to the residents and individuals who worked tirelessly on the campaign.

Carina Helmn, County Officer at Hertfordshire Association of Parish and Town Councils:

“The task for the Welwyn Garden City campaign group was enormous given the large size of the electorate. From the start we knew that gathering the signatures required to trigger a Community Governance Review was going to be a challenging task, especially since the principal authority made it clear that it would not accept electronic signatures. I know other campaigns across England had the same problem as well. I wish principal authorities would be more receptive to this new form of petitioning. Today you can do almost everything online – having the possibility to gather signatures through an online petition would make it a lot easier for campaigners to reach residents and collect the required signatures.”

Learning From The Campaign:

Campaign leaders have made the right decision to halt campaign activities unless local attitudes change. Leading a campaign where there is limited local support can be a very lengthy and resource-consuming process.

However, this is not unusual as there was a similar conflict in Letchworth Garden City some years ago between a local heritage body and the City Council there at the time. The lessons learnt from this campaign have been to work with such heritage membership bodies from the outset – on both the timing of and types of campaign run – to at least neutralise early opposition where it can be found.

Anthony Fisher, campaign champion talks about what lessons he learned from the campaign, that may be useful to others looking to create parish councils in their areas: *“I don’t think that our campaign group has made any great mistake, though we have learnt some lessons along the way, in what has been a principled campaign. When we started, we were new – unlike the Welwyn Garden City Society [the membership body that posed challenges for the campaign], we did not have an established profile within the community and therefore, people were circumspect. I know that other campaign groups have opted to be under the umbrella of a civic society – I would definitely recommend this as an already established group is usually well known to residents and has the capability to engage with the community. Unfortunately, we did not have this option – the Welwyn Garden City Society has been and continues to be opposed to the creation of a city council.*



I also believe that having a good team is essential: the bigger the electorate, the bigger the team you are going to need to service the electorate. Welwyn Garden City has an electorate of 36,000 and from the beginning we knew that collecting the minimum required signatures was going to be challenging. The campaign group got off to an excellent start with a good number of residents showing interest in getting actively involved in the campaign; however, the number of volunteers has dropped over time and now we are left with a handful of people.

Perhaps this has to do with the general apathy of the electorate. People are busy and the little time they have, they would rather spend in ways other than campaigning. Nonetheless, campaigning itself – collecting signatures, door knocking, canvassing etc. – may not be everyone’s cup of tea. I was disappointed when one resident asked why we wanted more bureaucracy. I told him we want more democracy not more bureaucracy. We want better representation, and for the community to be able to take control of the place where they live, it’s their town. The borough council works within its borough remit, but in my view this is undoubtedly holding our town back.

I respect the borough, but love the town. Welwyn Garden City is a beautiful place and has so much untapped potential. The town needs a body that can maximise its potential and make the most of the Garden City’s rich heritage. I believe this is the role for a City Council and not the borough council, whose main purpose is to manage the borough and not every individual area. I hope that over time, residents will come to see this the same way.

Both the National Association of Local Councils and the Hertfordshire Association of Parish and Town Councils agree that campaign leaders have done everything within their power to lead a successful campaign. Had the same campaign been led under different circumstances, without doubt, it would have been successful. Unfortunately, some elements are beyond our control. Perhaps in a few years’ time Welwyn Garden City will be ready to have its own city council.”

How Was Progress Made So Far?:

The Welwyn Garden City campaign prides itself with a group of dedicated volunteers who have worked hard to keep the campaign going. Together they have promoted the benefits of having a parish council, talking to residents, sending information to households, putting together a comprehensive website and actively engaging with the opposing membership-only society in local media.

Although the campaign might not reach its goal, WGC4us volunteers have raised awareness in their local community that could have more say about the issues affecting their community and be better represented in local government, should they decide to support the creation of a parish council.

Campaign Lessons To Share With Others:

When starting a campaign to set up a local council campaigners should be prepared to face some opposition. The WGC4us campaign provides a good example of tactfully dealing with opposition in a public debate. The campaign group has defended its position through the local newspaper, the *Welwyn Hatfield Times*, by stating the advantages that the creation of the city 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.

Carina Helmn, County Officer at the Hertfordshire Association of Parish and Town Councils: *“What every new campaign should realise is that the process of establishing a town or parish council requires sustained effort from volunteers over a long period of time. Volunteers have no obligation to support the campaign from beginning to end and many of them will drop out along the way. The challenge is to identify what brings volunteers together, what feeds their enthusiasm, and to keep momentum going.”*

Who Can I Contact?:

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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> .

Create A Council - <http://www.nalc.gov.uk/our-work/create-a-council> .

Power to the People resource - <http://www.nalc.gov.uk/publications> .

Welwyn Garden City for us campaign - <http://www.wgc4us.org.uk/> .

Hertfordshire Association of Parish and Town Councils -

<http://www.haptc.org.uk/contact-and-find-us.html> .