



**Rochester Town Council – The Campaign To Create A New Town Council In
Rochester, Kent**

Headlines:

- The town of Rochester is the historic heart of the unitary authority of Medway in Kent, England.
- This case study provides readers with an update on the technical challenges faced by a group campaigning for a new town council and how the non-acceptance of an e-petition by Medway District Council did not deter the campaign group from securing the requisite number of hard copy signatures before re-submitting the final petition in May, 2016.
- The campaign group had originally been informed by its principal authority that an e-petition would be acceptable as a form of petition. However, after intervention from principal authority councillors this decision was revoked and the campaign group had to make up the shortfall of signatures by door-knocking which delayed the submission of the final petition by several months until May, 2016.
- Medway Council also asked the campaign group to secure additional signatures as there had apparently been a shortfall in the original number of valid hard copy signatures (due to the death of residents or people moving out of the area and not informing the principal local authority). This was also stringently acted on by the campaign group who in addition to collating the shortfall signatures to compensate for the invalid e-petition, collected far more new resident signatures. The final petition was then submitted in May, 2016 (with far more resident signatures than actually needed).

Reasons For A Town Council:

Rochester has a democratic deficit: along with the other Medway Towns, Rochester is unparished and is therefore only served by just one tier of local governance: the unitary authority. The creation of a town council in Rochester would mean that an additional 15 non-party political elected councillors could be representing Rochester in their relationship with the upper tier of unitary governance, putting residents in control of their community. Furthermore, residents during the campaign felt that Rochester was in danger of losing its historic identity and that (especially in heritage terms) Medway Council does not have as much of a vested interest as Rochester residents in preserving this historic identity. The campaign group therefore considered that a town council representing the direct needs of Rochester residents – would be best placed to manage much of the town's heritage services.

Furthermore, campaign leaders consider that the creation of a town council will put Rochester back on the political map through the creation of a statutory body; hopefully also led by an officially recognised mayor. It was felt by residents that a town mayor for Rochester would be the best way of symbolically resurrecting the town's historic identity



and a new Rochester parish council could if created at its first full council meeting agree to formally adopt the style of a town council and have a town mayor. This possibility was distinctly attractive to both the campaign group and Rochester residents.

The town council will be granted the necessary powers to address local issues, having the possibility to take over services and assets, as well as lead on local initiatives such as neighbourhood planning, youth clubs, cleaning up public spaces, improving footpaths and green spaces. Rochester residents made it clear to the campaign group during the gathering of petition signatures that they were dissatisfied with some elements of service delivery and asset management from Medway Council in the town of Rochester. Campaign leaders hope that the town council will give local people a greater say in how public funds are invested in their town and since a town council in Rochester would have the powers to address these problems (those around neighbourhood planning, youth clubs, cleaning up public spaces, as well as improving footpaths and green spaces) – this governance model was the answer to many local issues. A town council will have the power to apply for grants and raise local funds to invest in initiatives that directly benefit the people it represents. The town council in Rochester will also be able to raise its own precept (a form of council tax) to spend on the above mentioned services in ways and specific locations that residents tell it they want.

These motives set out by the campaign leaders clearly resonated within the community. The petition calling for the creation of a town council in Rochester was originally submitted on 7th October 2015 but unfortunately Medway Council found a number of signatures were not valid. Medway Council also reversed its previous decision on accepting online petitions. The campaign group, though initially disheartened by this unexpected turn of events, took stock and focused on collecting the additional signatures required to trigger the Community Governance Review. The final petition was submitted to Medway Council in mid-May, 2016 (after the Police Commissioner elections) and the campaign group is grateful to Medway Council for its flexibility in agreeing to accept this final petition.

Background:

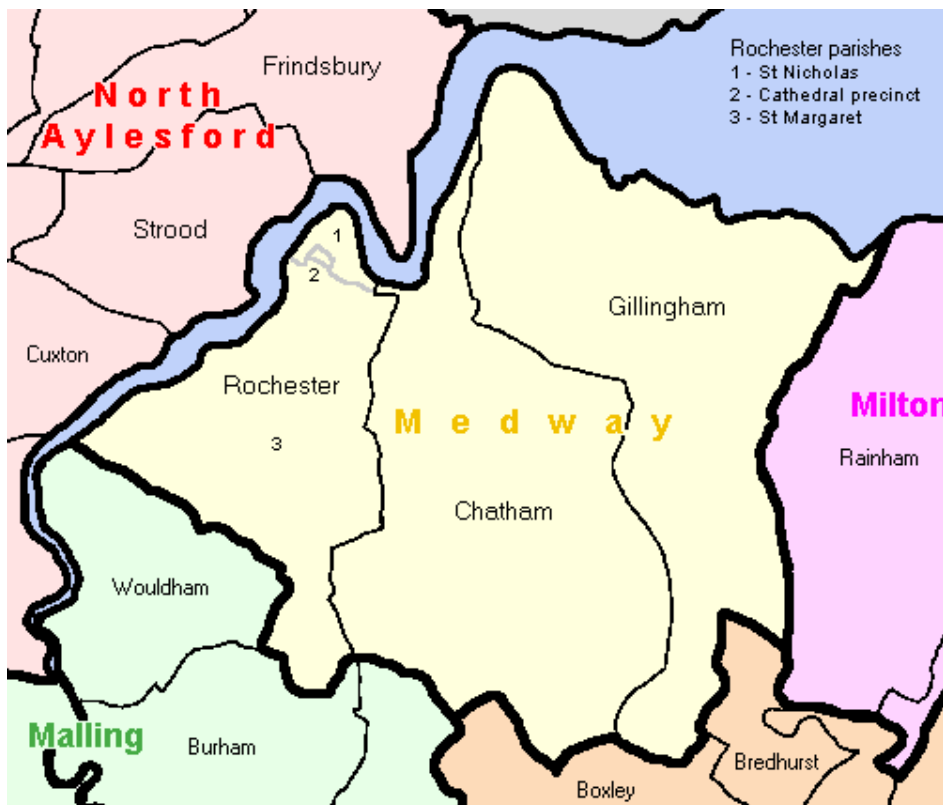
Rochester is a town and historic city in the unitary authority of Medway in Kent, England. Together with its neighbouring towns, Strood, Chatham, Gillingham and Rainham, it forms a single large urban area known as the Medway Towns.

The town has a rich heritage. Like many of the mediaeval towns of England, Rochester had civic Freemen whose historic duties and rights were abolished by the Municipal Corporations Act, 1835. Restoration of the post of civic freeman is just another one of the tasks that a new Rochester Town Council could deliver if it was created – again linked to preserving the critical historic identity of the town.

The UK's decline in naval power and shipbuilding competitiveness led to the government decommissioning the RN Dockyard at Chatham in 1984. Rochester and its neighbouring communities were hit hard, experiencing a painful adjustment to the post-industrial economy.

In 2007-2008 the average weekly total household income in the Medway was estimated at £670. This compares with £800 for the South East region. The unemployment rate in Medway is slightly higher than the average unemployment rate in England: according to the office of National Statistics, in March 2013, Medway had an unemployment rate of 9.5%, in comparison to 7.8% an average unemployment rate across England. So another crucial role of any new Rochester town council would be to act as a lynchpin in the local economy and to use tourism and promotion of the historic legacy of Rochester to attract visitor footfall to the town and ensure that local businesses thrive and that residents benefit from increased interest in their town (for instance visits to Rochester Castle).

Economic activity is predominantly focusing on retail and professional, scientific and technical services. The creation of a town council for Rochester would, critically, also help switch the emphasis from the traditional local reliance on white-collar service income derivation to one of local income generated through more tourism and interest in the town's rich local heritage.



Above; boundary map of Rochester, Kent.



Who Are The Key Partners / Stakeholders Involved?:

The Rochester campaign was sponsored by the City of Rochester Society, being led by a group of volunteers, all of whom are active in a range of civic groups in Rochester. Together they played an instrumental role in managing the campaign, as well as liaising with Medway District Council. Roles and responsibilities have ranged from organising public meetings, to obtaining petition signatures, issuing leaflets and setting up a campaign website. All of the tasks have been crucial in the delivery of the campaign and every member of the campaign group has been critical to the sustainability of the campaign.

The Kent Association of Local Councils and the National Association of Local Councils have also been strong supporters of the Rochester campaign. In addition, the campaign received funding from the Department of Communities and Local Government under the New Councils' Programme, a government initiative to support the creation of new town and parish councils.

Progress With Campaign To Date:

With the help of dedicated volunteers and the support of the National Association of Local Councils and the Kent Association of Local Councils, the Rochester campaign has been working hard to raise awareness about the establishment of a Rochester Town Council and sustaining campaign momentum.

The Rochester campaign has benefitted from the recent legislative changes which lowered the community threshold for instigating a Community Governance Review (the process by which a new parish council is created) having to raise 500 signatures less than it was estimated at the beginning of the campaign.

The Rochester campaign group submitted its petition on 7 October 2015 to trigger a Community Governance Review. However, in December 2015 Medway Council confirmed that it had validated 92% of the paper signatures. The campaign group then worked towards re-submitting the signatures gathered (through the online petition), which Medway Council requested to be resubmitted in ink and obtaining some additional signatures to ensure that the campaign group triggered the Community Governance Review. The petition was resubmitted to Medway Council on 12 May 2016. The campaign group worked very hard to gain these final signatures and it very much appreciated Medway Council's advice and support around technicalities surrounding the final petition.

Challenges Faced By The Campaign:

As no campaign is the same, Rochester campaign leaders have found that some campaign methods worked better than others, encountering some challenges along the way. When



starting their campaign, it was decided to outsource leaflet deliveries informing residents in the area about the campaign. However, it was discovered that this was not an efficient method of dispersing information: leaflets were not distributed evenly, with some neighbourhoods not receiving any leaflets at all.

Overcoming Campaign Hurdles:

Campaigners therefore decided to take matters into their own hands and deliver the leaflets themselves. This also provided an opportunity to speak to residents and gain a better understanding about the issues that matter to them, which can be addressed through the creation of a town council. So the campaign group leafleted every house in the area intended to be represented by the new parish council, which was time consuming but very effective.

In trying to attract additional support, campaign leaders also approached and met with political parties to explain the benefits of having a town council for Rochester. However, they also needed to avoid the creation of a town council becoming a political matter (as some campaigns elsewhere in the country have been de-railed by political parties during the Community Governance Review phase).

What Would The Rochester Campaign Recommend?:

The campaign also considered engaging other unparished areas in the Medway Towns. This proved to be a difficult and lengthy process, delaying the Rochester campaign. It also made the drawing of the town council boundary more difficult. Campaign groups must always be aware of the critical need for campaign momentum. Therefore, it was decided to limit the boundaries of the campaign. The Rochester campaign group therefore recommends to other campaign groups that they should keep their campaigns simple and practical and should agree and know the boundaries of the area they want the new council to represent from the start.

One challenge was when Medway Council changed its mind and decided not to accept the signatures from the online petition, asking for these to be submitted in ink. Volunteers contacted everyone who signed the online petition and sent them a new petition form along with a return address envelope. So before opening an online petition, the Rochester campaign group advise other campaign groups to ask their principal authority to confirm in writing whether they accept the signatures gathered through an online petition (or not).

Outcomes - Learning From The Campaign:

The Rochester campaign found that engaging residents through social and traditional media worked very effectively. The campaign group 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 High Street and in residential areas; 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 initially online. The campaign group issued regular e-updates to residents signing up online to support the campaign; and it used its Twitter and Facebook account to drive interest in local campaign events and canvassing sessions to gather signatures from amongst residents.



Above: the campaign group submitting its petition to Medway Council.

What Have Been The Key Elements Of Success?:

One of the lessons that can be taken from the Rochester campaign is the importance of making the campaign visible to the community the campaign group is aiming to represent. The campaign leaders have been investing a substantial amount of the campaign budget in sending all 25,000 Residents in Rochester letters and petitions explaining why Rochester needs a town council. Also - advertising the campaign in the local newspaper, the Kent Messenger, and promoting the campaign through the Town Crier (thus capitalising on the rich heritage of Rochester) – worked very effectively.

Campaign Lessons To Share With Others:

When collecting signatures it was found that street canvassing was highly effective, with volunteers managing 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 that campaign groups deliver promotional leaflets using members of their own teams, as opposed to contracting a provider, as the campaign group is focussed on the outcome of its campaign for the area. In Rochester, volunteers were more efficient than the contractors at targeting those areas that had not returned many signatures, helping show that there is broad support for a town council from across the community.

Who Can I Contact?:

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Other Information:

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> .

To see case studies from other areas campaigning to set up new parish councils please click here <http://www.nalc.gov.uk/our-work/create-a-council> .

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

NALC Power To The People resource: <http://www.nalc.gov.uk/publications> .

Rochester Town Council Campaign: <http://www.rochestertowncouncil.org.uk/> .

City of Rochester Society: <http://www.city-of-rochester.org.uk/> .

Kent Association of Local Councils: <http://www.kentalc.gov.uk/> .