

Notes of the Whitley Bay Area Forum**Held on 10 March 2008****1. Present**

Councillor H Jackson (Chairman)(in the Chair), Councillor M Marshall (Deputy Chairman) Councillors M McIntyre, E Hodson, A Austin, P McIntyre, J Bell, K Mewett, J Wallace and B Prendergast.

2. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors B Burdis, C Gambling and A Potter.

3. Also Present

Voluntary/Community and Council representatives
R Brunskill, North Tyneside Council
I Bell, North Tyneside Council
C Lannigan, North Tyneside Council
A Moses, Whitley Bay Chamber of Trade
B Caithness, Hillheads Residents Association
D Francis, Secretary of the National Association of Local Councils
Approximately 55 members of the public

4. Welcome and Introduction

Councillor Jackson opened the meeting of the Forum welcoming all those present for an open discussion on residents' thoughts on Whitley Bay becoming a Town/Parish Council. He then introduced Mr Francis the guest speaker who outlined the role and responsibilities of a Parish or Town Council.

He reported that Parish and Town Councils fulfilled two main purposes

- 1) community representation
- 2) additional local service provision above that provided by the principal council covering the area (in this context, the "principal council" is North Tyneside Council

which included discretionary powers. Mr Francis outlined the kind of additional services Parish and Town Councils provided. They can acquire, provide and maintain a range of physical infrastructure and community facilities, such as allotments, baths, burial grounds and crematoria, conference facilities, community centres, common land, highways and associated traffic installations and calming measures, street furniture, parks, playgrounds and play equipment, public buildings, village halls, public conveniences and war memorials.

Parish/Town Councils do not maintain or run facilities that are owned by the principal authority except by mutual arrangement.

A principal authority would normally consult a Parish or Town Council or planning matters and other significant service changes that affect that community.

Any part of North Tyneside that set up a Parish or Town Council would still be part of North Tyneside, would pay council tax to North Tyneside Council and would receive North Tyneside Council services.

In relation to funding and council tax, Mr Francis indicated that Parish/Town Councils do not receive any funding from central government.

They therefore raise income through an annual precept, which is levied on households in the parish. This local tax is added to the council tax bill of the relevant billing authority and is collected on behalf of the parish council by the principal authority.

Parish and Town Councils are also able to borrow money (with the approval of the Secretary of State), raise money through charges for service provision, and apply for funding from grant and funding awards.

In relation to how much extra residents would pay in council tax, he stated that the parish precept could be levied at a nominal rate. In the case of Lamesley Parish Council in Gateshead for example, the precept is £7,500 a year, levied on the 1240 households in the parish. This amounts to £5.98 a year for a Band D household.

Whilst often the only employee of a parish council is a part time clerk, some town councils have a significant payroll and provide services such as leisure centres. Great Aycliffe Town Council for example (Newton Aycliffe in County Durham), employs 53 full time and 50 part time members of staff. Its precept for 2006/07 was £1,441,878, with employee costs of £986,700. This means that Band D taxpayers pay an additional £194 per year (Band A - £129) on top of the council tax they pay to Durham County Council and Sedgfield Borough Council.

Mr Francis stated that Parish and Town Councils have their own elections and their own councillors, although borough councillors can also put themselves up for election to a Parish or Town Council. Councillors serve for four years. There would be more parish councillors than borough councillors – for example there are 30 town councillors in Great (Newton) Aycliffe. Allowance payments are at the discretion of the Parish/Town Council. All Parish and Town Councils have a chief officer, known as the Parish or Town Clerk.

The 2007 Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act sets up new arrangements for setting up new Parish and Town Councils. They can be set up following a “Community Governance Review”. Such a review can be launched by the principal council, acting on its own initiative, or by the receipt of a petition from a community containing 10% of the voters on the electoral register within that community. He indicated that, however, final guidance from central government was still awaited on this issue.

Mr Francis reported that the main alternatives to Parish and Town Councils included

- increasing the role, profile and influence of existing ward councillors;
- improving borough council consultation and engagement arrangements;
- Area or Ward Committees;
- Neighbourhood Agreements; and
- improved, more responsive service delivery

Discussion was then opened up to those attending.

Full and detailed discussion then took place on the issue amongst those present.

A resident asked for clarification on the additional powers being offered by Town/Parish Councils and what limits were there in respect of the size of such Councils.

Mr Francis explained the additional powers available and anything from five to 20 councillors could be appointed under the Local Government Act 1972 to

centre on Parish or Town Councils depending on the size of the area and population.

The additional charge precept levied on Council Tax payers averaged out at about 1.7% above the standard council tax levy. Mr Lannigan indicated that it was up to residents to decide if they were getting best value for the additional services provided by agreeing to a Parish/Town Council.

Residents' views were also sought as to why they felt they needed a Parish Council on top of the services provided by the Borough Council. Residents raised various issues, the main issue which was the regeneration/development of Whitley Bay.

The question was asked what would happen if an overwhelming number of residents agreed to go ahead for Whitley Bay to become a Parish/Town Council, could the Council overrule the decision.

Mr Lannigan replied that he was still awaiting advice from Central Government on the issue.

After a lively and varied debate on the issue

It was Agreed that

- (1) a petition be circulated to residents of the Whitley Bay area seeking their views on the proposal;
- (2) Councillor Jackson to see if a working group could be set up to discuss the matter in more detail in his role of Chair of the Councils Overview and Scrutiny Committee;
- (3) Mr Lannigan be requested to publish the report on Parish/Town Councils on the Council's website;
- (4) the Community Network (VODA) website be examined for information in relation to the introduction of Parish Councils; and
- (5) Councillor Jackson to report his findings back through the News Guardian on recommendations from the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee on suggestions for a Parish/Town Council for Whitley Bay.