

A Town Council for Whitley Bay?

**Results of a Survey carried out between
September 2009 and March 2010**

A Report by Robin Smith[#]

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Summary

The author of this report carried out a survey of the opinions of residents of North Tyneside about the possibility of a Town or Parish council for Whitley Bay. Information was sought using an internet survey form first posted in September 2009 and available for submissions until the end of March 2010. The survey form (appendix 1) included requests for contact details, the preferred area that might be included in any Town council and an invitation to provide comments/views on the reasons for any preference expressed. The survey form also included a section summarising the background to the survey with a link to the LOCAL webpage (set up for residents of the Grosvenor Estate area of Whitley Bay) that provided further information on the topic of Town and Parish councils following research by the author carried out in April 2009.

The survey did not exclude consideration of views expressed through other means than submission of a survey form but in the event there were none.

The number of responses to the survey was disappointing. There were only 8 and 2 of these from the same address! The poor response is partly a result of inadequate publicity. This is discussed below. However, a more important factor is believed to be lack of interest – or apathy among the electorate. Although the majority of those who responded was in favour of a Town council it is concluded that there is no sufficiently popular consensus in favour and that a governance review by North Tyneside council is not justified.

Background to the Survey

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 includes a section, Part 4 - Parishes - that describes changes to the way Parish/Town councils may be formed and how the powers of a Parish Council might be extended. These additional powers come under the general heading, 'Power to Promote Well-being'. Additional powers can be devolved to Parish/Town Councils by the "principal council" – North Tyneside MBC in our case. The Department for Communities and Local Government produced a report entitled, 'The Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme - The Quality Scheme Explained' which explains how a Parish/Town Council can qualify to take on the promotion of WELL-BEING and thus qualify to take on additional powers.

The underlying purpose of Part 4 of the 2007 Act is to encourage greater involvement of the local electorate in Local Government. The power to decide on the creation of parish councils and the extension of powers is transferred to principal councils and no longer requires a decision by the Secretary of State.

On the passage of the 2007 Act through Parliament, in late 2007, Alan Campbell, MP for the Tynemouth Constituency, wrote a letter to all constituents to highlight the new opportunities for Parish/Town councils.

In March 2008 an Area Forum was held in Whitley Bay for the NE Area on the single topic of Parish/Town councils. The notes of this meeting, to which all residents in the NE Area were invited, are reproduced in appendix 2. At the end of the meeting the author advised the Chairman that he would do some research on the topic and advise him of the outcome. The results were provided in April 2008 in the form of an addition to the LOCAL webpage (appendix 3). This included internet links to relevant online information and to the website of Exmouth Town Council, an example of a long established Town/Parish council.

At the same time advice was obtained from Alan Campbell, MP and a copy of his letter (appendix 4) was posted on the website.

Why a Survey?

Despite the interest that was raised by the March 2008 Whitley Bay Area Forum there is no evidence that any of the 5 agreed actions (appendix 2) was carried through. Mr Campbell's website continues to provide a page (appendix 5) giving basic advice about Town Councils and inviting views on the topic. A petition on "a referendum on town councils" was also posted on the North Tyneside Conservative Party's website (appendix 6) for a period of a few months but no results appear to have been published by the time the webpage was removed.

Mr Campbell's letter (appendix 4) advises that: -

Under the new guidelines NTMBC has the power to either instigate a community governance review or respond to a community governance petition for a community governance review to be undertaken - which can be brought forward by anybody.

If a petition is brought forward, as Whitley Bay has more than 2500 electors, the petition would have to be signed by at least 10% of the electors and define the area to which the review is to relate (whether on a map (or) otherwise), as well as specifying one or more proposed recommendations. The council would then be obliged to undertake a community governance review and would have to follow the appropriate guidelines as outlined in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 Part 4

In the absence of any further initiative from either North Tyneside Council or the main political parties over 18 months the author decided to attempt to revive interest in a Town Council through a survey, **confined to the Whitley Bay area**, that would help to gauge the level of interest and **define a preferred area** in advance of the necessary petition (as described by Mr. Campbell).

Survey Publicity

The survey was publicised in the first instance by writing a letter (appendix 7) to the editor of the News Guardian, the local newspaper that is freely distributed throughout much of North Tyneside. (The most recent edition claims a weekly distribution of "55,762 copies from July to December 2009 – 99.4% free"). The letter was not published but an edited version appeared as an article, headed "Town council idea surveyed" in the 11 October 2009 edition (appendix 8).

Additional publicity was given in e-mail acknowledgements to those who had submitted internet survey forms with a message requesting them to publicise the survey to friends and acquaintances that might be interested in the topic but perhaps had not seen the article in the News Guardian. The message was also sent to a list of contacts that included, Mayor Arkley, Whitley Bay ward councillors, some former North Tyneside councillors, Alan Campbell MP and about 30 other acquaintances of the author, some of whom had attended the March 2008 Area Forum.

Results of the Survey

Only eight individuals submitted survey forms. Their submissions (excluding contact details) are given in the form of a table (appendix 9).

Six individuals were in favour of a town council; one was against and one was undecided. The preferred area for the town council of five out of the six was that covered by the wards of Whitley Bay, Monkseaton North and South and St. Mary's. The other's preference excluded the ward of St. Mary's from this group.

The resident (no. 7) who appeared undecided by responding with a "Don't know" gave comments indicating he/she was against a town council - but thought there was a case to be made for parish councils in rural areas.

One resident (no. 8) in favour expresses a view that was equivocal or undecided.

Conclusions

The poor response to the survey may reflect the limited publicity it was given. Nevertheless, that only eight residents took the trouble to participate and that there were no other expressions of interest in the topic throughout the period of the survey, it can be concluded that there is a widespread lack of interest in a town council for Whitley Bay. The apathy is such that even a governance review led by North Tyneside Council is not justified.