

# WINDS OF CHANGE

## Revolution in Progress

Fylde Civic Awareness Group's report in Issue 5 introduced our plan to change the way our Council works - away from the 'Leader and Cabinet system' back to the 'Committee system' where all elected councillors have the right to speak and vote.

The Localism Act enables communities to petition for a referendum for this change, and with the support of the Big Lottery Fund and the Parliamentary Outreach Service, our "Localism in Action Project" has moved on apace.

Our Democracy and Localism seminar achieved both its aims - it explained the issues to local people (and some from Dorset and elsewhere), and it generated good media coverage, including BBC local radio and TV news, and interviews on the regional Sunday Politics Show. There has also been interest following the last NWacts Newsletter.

Then we began to collect the signatures (5% of the electorate - which in our case is 3,077), and recruited 20 shops throughout the borough where people can sign, or where they can leave a completed petition form downloaded from the internet (*Real signatures are required, so e-petitions are not possible*). We also recruited another 50 domestic letterbox 'drop boxes' to receive completed internet petitions.

There was an initial surge of support with the best shop producing 100 signatures a week. But after six weeks, the customer base of individual shops (Newsagents, Hairdressers, Cafes, Convenience Stores) is becoming exhausted, and we are moving to other methods of signature collection. We are already close to halfway with 1,700 signatures, but we expect the second half will take longer. The Act allows 12 months, so we have no doubt of completing.

Not unexpectedly, the majority group opposed the change. Their principal arguments are the cost of a referendum, and that people are concerned with outcomes not processes. There need be no referendum of course. Simply obtaining enough signatures without their being formally presented might encourage the majority to vote for the change without incurring the cost of a referendum.

But we have also had a few surprises. We had one shop return a petition after a visit from a Cabinet Member who was critical of the shop for taking part and we know other shops have likewise been approached.

Another petition counter-measure (in more ways than one) came when we discovered flyers on some shop counters. These appeared to be from the Council and were headed "A Message from Fylde Council Leader" They urged people not to sign the petition. Subsequently, postcard flyers with a similar message and a photograph of the Town Hall were

delivered right across the borough. Again we were surprised, because the Council is precluded by law from publicising a view in this matter. The Council's Chief Executive said they were not a Council publication and had not been funded or produced by the Council.

The Leader claimed they were a personal message from him, and had nothing to do with the Council. He added that they had been funded, produced and delivered by his own political party.

We thought this situation perfectly illustrated the problem caused when power and authority is vested in a small Cabinet group comprising a single political party. It becomes difficult to distinguish whether the Leader is speaking for his party, his Cabinet or for the whole Council.

We asked the Chief Executive for a public statement to dissociate the Council from these flyers that were damaging support for the petition. He declined. So we have asked the Secretary of State if he will consider issuing formal guidance to Fylde Council and we await his reply.

We did say things had moved on apace!

One other noteworthy event arose. One of the newer independent Councillors who supports a return to the Committee system was unhappy the flyers distributed in her area made it appear the Council Leader was speaking for her - because they looked to be from the Council of which she is a member.

Her disagreement intensified because she claimed she had never voted him into office since she was elected almost two years ago. After much discussion and weeks of denial from the Town Hall, she has finally been proved right. Fylde Council should have elected a Leader at the first annual meeting after the 2011 election, but they failed to do so, and for almost two years Fylde Council has not had a legitimate leader and, because only the leader can appoint a cabinet, they too must have been illegitimate.

So in March 2013 Fylde Council elected the Leader it should have elected in 2011. However, the decisions made during the interregnum currently hang in the balance. Counsel's opinion is being sought in the matter of legality, and the Council's auditors are considering the financial aspects - not least of which are the Special Responsibility Allowances paid to a Leader and Cabinet who may not have been lawfully entitled to receive them.

This was a turn we had not expected, but we find it difficult to believe that anyone reading this will not believe that change in the way our council works is long overdue.

Our collection of signatures continues.....

**Fred Moor**  
**Clerk: Fylde Civic Awareness Group**