

Supporters of Ashton Gardens - Press Release

Timing:

- For immediate publication

Subject:

- **SOAG RESPONDS TO CRITICISM**

Summary:

- The Supporters of Ashton Gardens respond to criticism from Fylde BC.

The Council's plan to sell part of the gardens disappointed us. They can find money for the lottery bid elsewhere, but are choosing not to do so. We thanked Councillors for their dealings with us, but we favour the views of heritage experts who say no part of the gardens should be sold.

Our final decision was needed by 12 May, and we had to move quickly. We felt the inhabitants of St Annes should have their say before we answered. The Council would only consult a sample of residents, but we wanted to hear from everyone, so we arranged our own referendum.

It is quite an irony that in doing this we have been accused of providing misleading and incomplete information, even before our detractors have seen the referendum leaflet.

We do not intend to mislead anyone. We believe St Annes residents are intelligent enough to make up their own minds.

One Councillor said, "What SOAG fails to see is that the land they are selling is of no use to the park". He must not have read the report of his own heritage experts who prepared the lottery bid. They said, "The denial of planning permission to develop on any area of this garden must be seen as a key to the retention and restoration of the historic character of the gardens. This relates not only to the change in boundary that would result from such development and loss of land, but to the irreversible change that would result from demolishing an original and public building, such as the Ashton Institute and its replacement with privately owned hard space or buildings".

The Council say the Ashton Institute is derelict. It is not. It is just unoccupied. We have sent details of people who wanted to use it. Our architect has asked for access to see what it would take to bring the inside into a better condition, but his offer was declined. We have recently asked again.

Another Councillor said the gardens were not donated by Lord Ashton. This is wrong, as the plaque in the rose garden clearly shows. It says - "These Gardens were presented by the Rt Hon Lord Ashton to the inhabitants of St Annes on the Sea 1914". When accepting the gift the Council of that time expressed its "sincere appreciation of his magnificent gift to the town, which will ever remain as a monument of his benevolence and consideration for the present and future inhabitants of St Annes on the Sea"

This is an important issue for us, because Lord Ashton's gift was charitable. One of the most eminent charity counsel at the London Bar says a Court may conclude that the Gardens are held by Fylde Borough Council on charitable trusts. This makes it difficult (if not impossible) for the Council to sell any part of the park without first seeking a declaration from the Court as to the legal status of the Council's ownership". After our previous meeting, Councillors said they would refuse to seek such a declaration. If the people of St Annes say - as they have said to us before - that none of the gardens should be sold. SOAG will challenge this sale of the land.

We are a non-political, not-for-profit voluntary organisation that exists to protect, preserve and enhance Ashton Gardens. We have an open membership policy. Our membership increased by 70% this year. We have undertaken: over £2,000 worth of planting in the Rose Garden; bulb plantings; and had the Ashton Institute repainted. By hard work at coffee mornings and carnival days, we raised £5,000 toward restoring the gardens. We are a broad church, and meetings of our Executive Committee are open to all members to attend and have their say. We will continue to respect the sincere and deeply held views of all our members, and their right to hold them, be

they current, past, or indeed future members. That applies whether they agree or disagree with the view of the majority.

We think a referendum of the whole town is the best way to find out what the community thinks about selling part of the gardens. We have great difficulty understanding why the Council only wanted to have a sample consultation of a limited number of St Annes residents when they could ask everyone as we are doing.

Release ends

Note for reporter/editor

The graphs show the actual numbers of people choosing each option, and to make it more clear, on one of the copies, we have written the percentages above each column for your information. An excel spreadsheet of the results is available via email (info@ashtongardens.org.uk) if you would like a better quality copy for printing

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