



Supporters of Ashton Gardens

SOAG exists to protect, preserve, and enhance Ashton Gardens.

15 April 2005

Secretary, Ashton Gardens Ladies Bowling Club
St Annes

Dear

We understand that Fylde Borough Council, may have invited you to a presentation or exhibition regarding its plan to submit a bid for 75% Heritage Lottery Fund grant aid in respect of Ashton Gardens, St Annes, and we ask you to take the time to read this letter before you attend.

In order to generate its 25% partnership funding, the Council proposes to sell a small but important part of the Gardens. They say the Gardens are not a high enough priority to use any of their capital receipts, reserves, or borrowing, and they have told us they are not prepared to consider any method of funding other than this land sale.

Lord Ashton of Lancaster paid for, and gifted the Gardens to the people of St Annes. The present population - on every survey we have undertaken - is overwhelmingly opposed to the plan to sell any part of them.

From the first successful campaign to stop Safeway taking a quarter of them, to the present campaign to prevent the sale of this smaller part, SOAG has been the public face of the gardens, and their defender. However, because we cherish, and will not compromise the integrity of the gardens, the Borough Council now seeks alternative ways to generate the community support that is a requirement of the Heritage Lottery Fund and others.

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To seek this support, the Council first proposed a meeting with a representative from each of 21 groups. Your organisation's name appeared on the first list of groups to be invited. SOAG was also one of those invited, and agreed to send a representative. We looked forward to being able to argue our case at the meeting.

It appears the Council's presentation format has changed, and presentations are now to be made to smaller groups who are being invited at different times and on different days. Thus no-one will be able to share the perspective of all the other groups attending the meeting.

Whilst this may make it easier for the Council to promote its view, it denies groups opposed to the sale of the land, (such as ourselves and the Lytham St Annes Civic Society), the opportunity to argue our case.

SOAG has therefore asked me to write to as many of the groups as we can identify, to ask you to hear our case (attached), and to take account of it when you are asked to provide support for a scheme that we know does not enjoy the support of the St Annes community, those to whom Lord Ashton left the gardens in perpetuity.

Yours truly,

Fred Moor
Chairman

STATEMENT OF CASE

The Ashton Gardens are Grade II listed on the National Register of Historic Parks and Gardens. They need restoration because previous Councils have not met their obligations to fund the necessary repair and maintenance of the gardens infrastructure, and we agree that a Heritage Lottery Fund grant will make funding this backlog of repair and restoration easier.

To this end we welcome the possibility of grant aid. The Gardens are widely cherished by our community. SOAG's members have raised £4,000 to contribute to the scheme. Over the last few years, we have also undertaken practical work in the gardens valued at over £6,000.

However, we oppose the sale of land to fund this scheme. We believe the historic integrity of Ashton Gardens should be respected and maintained, and we do not, nor will we ever, agree to the sale or disposal of any part of them.

WHY THIS SCHEME SHOULD NOT BE SUPPORTED

- The apartments development will damage the setting of the Gardens.
- The sale of land will destroy the integrity of the gardens.
- Heritage experts have opposed the development.
- The public in St Annes oppose the development.
- Almost 8,000 people objected to the land disposal.
- Moving the Institute building is an unnecessary expense.
- The Council has access to other funds it can use for its 25% match funding.
- The gardens were a charitable gift from Lord Ashton. No part should be sold.

WHAT IS SOAG's EVIDENCE?

- **Character, Integrity, Setting, and the Expert View.**
 - The gardens occupy one of Fylde's first conservation areas, but the respect and protection that should have been afforded by this and other planning policies has been abandoned in the face of a potential capital receipt.
 - The Council's expert landscape consultants (Scott Wilson Resource Consultants) summed up the position in their first report when

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 Lytham St Annes Civic Society oppose both the sale of land, and the apartment development.

➤ **Public Opinion Opposes The Sale Of Any Of The Gardens**

- In 1998, 44,000 people signed a petition opposing the sale of a quarter of the gardens. 1,000 people marched through the town in public protest.
- In 2003, SOAG and six other community and business groups held a public meeting to air various issues. Over 300 people attended. The strongest concern of those attending was that *"No part of Ashton Gardens should be sold or otherwise disposed of."* (76%). Another concern was that *"Community buildings should not be taken for private profit"*. (73%)
- In March 2004, a survey of 100 members of the public at a SOAG coffee morning showed that 94% opposed the sale, and 82% opposed the sale even if it cost the lottery bid at this time.
- In July 2004 SOAG held a referendum of 10,000 households in St Annes. It asked the question *"Do you think any of Ashton Gardens should be sold, even if it is a small part"*. 1,000 responses were received. Again, 94% said "No" to the proposed sale.
- In September 2004, the Council advertised the disposal. Within three weeks, SOAG forwarded a petition of more than 3,700 signatures and 3,800 individually signed letters of objection. In all almost 8,000 objections were received - and dismissed.

➤ **Cost and Expense**

- The total cost of the work needed exceeds £3 million. The inclusion of work to more buildings means the bid has recently been re-prioritised down to £2 million and, as a consequence, original work deemed "essential" to the gardens themselves has been compromised.
- The Council could borrow for these capital works and spread the cost over ten years. This cost (*confirmed by the Council*) would be around £60,000 per year, (something in the order of 2p per person

per week). They say the gardens are not a high enough priority to do this, and they intend to sell the land. SOAG has offered to find sums within the Council's existing budgets that would fund the loan repayments without increasing the tax take or cutting existing services to the public. This offer has not been accepted.

- o Alternative funding is available. There is a capital programme of more than £5 million over the next five years that itself could be re-prioritised, or they could use some of the £2.5 million windfall capital receipt from the sale of Council houses or other capital funds.
- o Dismantling, storage and re-erection of the Ashton Institute will waste £150,000. An architect working voluntarily for SOAG believes the £500k for restoring this building is grossly excessive, and the real cost is nearer £300k.

We refute absolutely the Council's claim that it is not able to find the match funding by any means other than selling part of the gardens.

To destroy the integrity of the Gardens in order to restore the remainder is, in our opinion, to defeat the object of the exercise.

We hope that you will not provide the comfortable illusion of support for the whole scheme that the Council now seeks. We earnestly hope you will join with SOAG and the local community to support the lottery bid, but oppose the sale of any land within the gardens to fund the restoration.