

Supporters of Ashton Gardens - Press Release

Timing:

- For immediate publication

Subject:

- **SOAG Supports Civic Society Aims at Lowther**

Summary:

- SOAG says Fylde Councillors are wrong to want to "wash their hands" of Lowther Gardens now it is a charitable trust.
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The Supporters of Ashton Gardens were saddened to see Fylde Councillors threaten to "wash their hands of Lowther" because it must now be registered with the Charity Commission and accounted for separately from the Council's corporate property portfolio. We have already lost more than enough of our heritage.

Just as Lord Ashton paid the exact sum to buy the St George's Gardens for the people of St Annes, Lowther was also a gift for the Council of the day to hold in trust for the community. Both were provided for the purpose of recreational activity, and with conditions attached to their acquisition.

Prompted to look into these conditions by the Civic Society, the Council's barrister has said those considering Lowther Gardens in future must act as trustees, in the best interests of the gardens.

This advice has produced an unfortunate response from the Council. The report to Fylde's Executive Committee speaks of having to continue to subsidise the gardens by using the Council's funds - as though maintaining the gardens was something undesirable, something Fylde Council would prefer not to do.

Individual councillors say they object to paying for the gardens and pavilion because they won't have any say in how they are run. How sad it is to see this view from those entrusted with our civic assets, and how fortunate the Civic Society was able to remind them of their duty.

Councils provide for the recreational needs of their community through local taxation, and Fylde's responsibility in this matter has not suddenly changed. Fylde itself has argued that, whether the recreational needs of the community are met via services provided directly by Council staff, or through a contractor they employ, or by a trust, or by volunteers, is largely immaterial. The Council says its role is to secure provision of the services deemed necessary.

Clearly, successive councils have deemed both Lowther Gardens and the Pavilion to be necessary for decades, and they are no less necessary or important today simply because the Council will be delivering them via a charitable trust in future. - In short, the need for the service has not diminished because the method of delivering it has.

So Fylde's responsibility to meet the cost is as it has always been. But there is positive news. A charitable trust will almost certainly incur lower overheads than those borne by the Council's staff at present, and as a charity, the trust will receive a mandatory 80% relief from business rates on rateable land and buildings. The change to charitable trust status, with a ringfence around the gardens, will focus attention on the gardens and pavilion to the betterment of all users and it should cost taxpayers less than it does now.

Instead of criticising, we believe the Council ought to be expressing gratitude to the Civic Society for drawing attention to the savings they will be able to make as a result of this change, and we look forward to the Council resolving that Ashton Gardens is also a charitable trust in the near future.

Press Release ends
