

St Annes Public Meeting Overwhelmed

There were amazing scenes in St Annes last Thursday night, where Arnold Sumner chaired a public meeting called to provide an outlet for the people of St Annes to express their concerns for the future of the town.

Seven groups: Ashton Ward Residents Group; Lytham St Annes Civic Society; the Holiday Association of Lytham St Annes; St. Annes Chamber of Trade; St. Davids Road Community Action Group; Supporters of Ashton Gardens; and St. Annes Community Arts Centre came together to set out their own concerns, then invited views and suggestions from people about what should be done for the future.

The United Reformed Church Hall saw scenes reminiscent of the 1998 Safeway protest, when 44,000 people signed a petition against the plans, and St Annes saw its first ever protest march of over 1,000 people.

The 150 person capacity of the hall was exceeded well before the starting time of 7.30, and police had to ask for some of those inside the hall to move outside. Whilst obviously disappointed, most people unable to get inside were good natured and followed proceedings from extension loudspeakers from the car park. A spokesman for the organisers said "We had no idea so many people would arrive. Over the course of the evening 300 people came, and we sincerely apologise to those unable to be seated, Happily however, a system people-swapping allowed everyone who wanted to speak to have their say, and all were given the questionnaire on which to express their personal views"

As the meeting progressed, it became clear that, whilst polite, considerate and measured, people were also angry. The paper has been full of complaints week after week, and several Councillors themselves have expressed a view that since the administrative system at the Town Hall was changed, they are no longer able to represent the views of their constituents, as they would wish to. When opened to the floor however, speaker after speaker complained that they were effectively disenfranchised by a decision making process dominated by people who live and work outside St Annes, and whose best interests are focussed elsewhere.

The main issues from the invited speakers centred around the loss of the town's character, identity and voice; the current plans for redevelopment of parts of the town; and public nuisance issues.

Speaking on behalf of Trevor Patchett who is forming the Ashton Ward Residents Group, Fred Moor spoke of concerns about the extension of the Safeway store - including the way it would change the character of the town for visitors, and the impact on small traders. In an echo of the cry from John Strong of the Lytham Chamber of Trade he warned of large increases in the non-food range already implemented by Safeway in their Plymouth store which now carries 11,000 non-food lines. However his main concern was the traffic arrangements that will see town centre roads closed and increased traffic in surrounding residential areas. He hinted that, like the Heathrow Airport decision, the nuisance this would cause for residents might breach Human Rights laws. The group was also concerned about St Annes nightclubs opening into the small hours. They had opposed a recent extension application and hoped to investigate arrangements to have such licences revoked. Mr Moor thought it important that St Annes developed its own voice, perhaps via a Town Council.

For the Civic Society, Marion Coupe highlighted the problems of development based on speculation rather than on the needs of the town. She also criticised the Council for failing to properly consider alternative uses for buildings of character before allowing them to be demolished. She thought the character of St Annes was under threat and said the Civic Society supported the idea of a Town Council, having advocated it for both Lytham and St Annes a few years ago.

Mike Bennett spoke for the Holiday Association of Lytham St Annes, and was concerned that the Council lacks commitment to tourism which is the second largest employer in the town. He also criticised poor maintenance of public gardens. He too supported the idea of a Town Council.

Having adequate parking for customers and the lack of sufficient CCTV cameras were the main concerns of the St Annes Chamber of Trade. Andrew Brotherton made a valiant presentation in which he recognised his views may be unpopular. He spoke of the need to keep anchor stores like Safeway in the town and expand them, a view evidently not shared by most of the audience.

The St David's Community Group is centred on the area around St Davids Road South and began by explaining their successes in getting a communications network established and getting people to work together. However, spokesman Peter Vodden went on to say that the point of his presentation was to show that, by working together in a small way, a group of residents had achieved success. He believed that if the whole town worked together in the same way it would become a big success.

St Annes original protest group "Save Ashton Gardens" became the "Supporters of Ashton Gardens" when they thought the battle had been won, and changed their role to fundraising for the Gardens. Now, although wanting to shed the combative image, they reluctantly found themselves recast in fighting mode. Speaking for the group, Chairman John Andrews expressed surprise that the Council was planning to sell the Ashton Institute and part of the gardens when SOAG's extremely experienced charity law barrister said that a Court may conclude the park is held by Fylde Borough Council on charitable trusts, and that this makes it difficult for the Council to sell any part of the park without first clarifying the legal status of the Council's ownership. He also warned that the Council seemed to be delaying the application for lottery grant for the Ashton Gardens whilst applications for other parks and gardens caught up with it. He saw a danger that other areas would be given priority. SOAG also want better facilities for young people in the gardens

The final invited speaker was John Bentham a leading light in the campaign to provide a community arts centre for St Annes. He outlined their story and said how angry he was that the Council was failing the people of the town. It was allowing the character of the area to change by demolition of much loved public buildings, and at the same time presiding over the decline of facilities for the community. He thought it essential that a voice for St Annes be created, and strongly supported the idea of a Town Council.

A letter was read out from David Webb, Chairman of the St Annes Partnership who had raised £1.75 million toward the improvements in the square. He said the scheme was subject to wide public consultation, and the organisations in the town all had a voice on the partnership.

An email from Cambridge was also read out sent by Angela Carr and Janet Schofield highlighting a Council planning brief to use parts of the Queen Mary School site for residential development when youngsters in St Annes are being bussed out to schools outside the town.

Comments from the floor in the second half of the meeting demonstrated the level of dissatisfaction with what is being done to the town. Don Moore of "Defend the Dunes" criticised the failure of the Council to address the environmental issues of the dune area, and wholly supported the aims of the meeting.

Many speakers were concerned that the Borough council was out of touch with what the people of the town wanted, and speaker after speaker said they wanted to have a say in the way their town was run, advocating more public meetings and a more representational style of democracy.

Star of the evening was a lady who recently adopted British citizenship having been raised in the USA. She articulated the words of many when she spoke passionately of her love for the town and the values that it represents. She was highly critical of the way it is being despoiled, and of

the lack of voice for the people. She referred to the meeting at which a Councillor had said of the Ashton Gardens petition that raised 4000 signatures that he did not care how many signatures were on it, he would vote the way he wanted. She asked "Do we need Councillors like that -- No! We do not!" There was enthusiastic support from the floor for this proposition.

Even local Councillors took to the floor, and spoke up in support of the idea of a Town Council for St Annes. Several said that following recent changes at the Council they were no longer able to speak up without constraint for the people they represent.

Everyone who attended the meeting was provided with a questionnaire to which each organisation represented on the platform had contributed their two or three key issues. Through the questionnaire, all those attending would be able to show their support for these matters and other broader issues, and to make freeform comments on matters of concern to them.

At the conclusion of the meeting chairman Arnold Sumner said the questionnaires would be analysed and the views passed to all interested parties. This would take a few weeks, as some would no doubt be returned by post. He advised people to watch the local paper for news of progress.

It is thought likely that, once the matters on the questionnaires have been analysed and digested, the speakers from the platform will publish the results, and move forward to investigate the idea of a Town Council to provide a strong voice for St Annes in the future.

Fred Moor who helped to organise the meeting said "The idea of a voice for St Annes, and indeed for other towns, could become very important in the future if, as widely expected, Parliament introduces regional Government and abolishes the County Council. If this happens, some of the services that used to be provided by County could fall into a vacuum because they may be too big for a Borough Council and too small to be operated by regional authority. That could well see the merging of smaller councils like Fylde, Wyre and Blackpool into a single authority - probably run from Blackpool. If something like that were to happen, it is crucial that towns like St Annes have their own strong voice.