

FYLDE CIVIC AWARENESS GROUP



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SUBMISSION REGARDING LOCALISM BILL CHAPTER 3

SUMMARY

Our District Council has not functioned satisfactorily since the Local Government Act 2000 caused changes to its style of governance. Our evidence for this consists of: the Council's own report; quotations from a public meeting in 2008; and the views of town and parish councils representing more than half of Fylde's residents. We urge the Committee to support Chapter 3 of the Bill which allows Councils to return to the former Council and Committee system should they wish to do so.

INTRODUCTION

1. Submission from the Fylde Civic Awareness Group, based in the Borough of Fylde in Lancashire.
2. Fylde Civic Awareness Group is a not-for-profit membership organisation run by volunteers. Our core costs are funded by member subscriptions, and we undertake project work locally which is either self-funding or grant aided.
3. We date from 2002, when a Steering Group was formed from seven local organisations to petition for the creation a Town Council for St. Anne's on the Sea. That petition was granted, and the Steering Group changed its locus and focus to become the Civic Awareness Group - offering support and encouragement to local people to stand for election to the new Town Council.
4. We ran a series of seminars on local government and how to prepare to be a councillor. Five people from those seminars were elected as founding members of the Saint Anne's on the Sea Town Council.
5. In subsequent years we broadened our scope to the whole of Fylde Borough. We became the Fylde Civic Awareness Group, and offered seminars about local government in the run up to borough and parish elections.
6. In the last election (2007), we held twelve pre-election seminars. Fourteen people who were not previously councillors gained knowledge and confidence as a result of the seminars and stood for election. Six of these were elected to the Borough Council, and a further two were elected to the St Annes on the Sea Town Council.
7. In 2008, at the request of several local groups, we arranged a public meeting where concern over local issues and decisions was vented. As a result of that collaboration, we expanded again - to provide an assembly, support, and resource facility for local groups. We now accept applications for membership from Fylde's groups and organisations with a civic focus, and currently have seventeen member groups.
8. This year, our work to date has included providing some civilian training for the police. At the request of the Cabinet's Portfolio Holder for Planning we have also hosted fora of community groups concerned with planning matters. We have arranged IT courses for our members, and we are nearing the end of our 2010/11 series of pre-election seminars which, to date have attracted 193 unique attenders.
9. We wish to offer evidence to the Committee on the desire as expressed by residents of Fylde, for a return of the former Council and Committee system of local governance, and in particular to refer to the views and results of a public meeting in 2008.

SUMMARY

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councils representing more than half of Fylde's residents. We urge the Committee to support Chapter 3 of the Bill which allows Councils to return to the former Council and Committee system should they wish to do so.

SUBMISSION

11. From its formation until 2005, Fylde Borough operated a Council and Committee system.
12. Following the Local Government Act 2000, the Council debated new styles of governance. Members were told that 'staying as they were' was not an option, and the Council initially opted for the least change, by moving to a 'Streamlined Committee' system.
13. This was not well received by councillors, and from 2003 onward, Fylde experimented with a range of provisional governance styles, Streamlined Committee, Executive Committee, and the Leader and Cabinet System.
14. None of these proved universally popular with the majority of members (*"It is clear that members are not satisfied with the current way of operating"*- Chief Executive's report to Modernisation Group, 26 July 2004).
15. Fylde's councillors had been used to much closer involvement in all decisions.
16. In April 2005, following promotional statements in favour of the Leader and Cabinet system by that Leader and Cabinet, a 'backbench' motion sought a return to the *"4th Option Committee system"* to give all councillors a greater say. This move was not successful, and the provisionally adopted Leader and Cabinet system prevailed.
17. On 19 December 2005, the Council considered the results of a consultation exercise in respect of its plan to confirm the Council's future governance arrangements as being the Leader and Cabinet system. The agenda report recommended the Council move to a permanent Leader and Cabinet system.
18. A consultation had been undertaken which, at the time the agenda was prepared, showed the resulting support as being:

	Leader and Cabinet	Directly elected Mayor + Cabinet	Directly Elected Mayor + Council Manager	Streamlined Committee System	None of the Options/No Comment
Residents	158	0	0	140	1
Organisations	3	0	0	5	
Employees	32	5	3	4	
Parishes	0	0	0	4	
TOTAL	193	5	3	153	1

19. However, returns that were received after publication of the agenda changed this result, and delivered a small majority in favour of the Committee system. The Council Leader noted at the meeting that only a small proportion of the people in Fylde who could comment had done so. He declared the result of the consultation to be not significant and proceeded with the original plan to confirm the Leader and Cabinet system.

20. As time progressed, it became clear that several of the decisions made by the new governance system were causing public disquiet, and this began to bring the system of governance itself into question.
21. One commentator said at the time *“This Cabinet system focuses power into too few hands and is not sufficiently democratic. It is a system that lacks the capacity to ensure the breadth and depth of vision and experience available from the 50 or so councillors at Fylde is utilised. It fosters an aspirational culture based on patronage from the Leader (in whose gift the ‘portfolio holders’ rise and fall) and, unlike the former committee and Council system, it singularly fails to create a seedbed and nursery in which new councillors can gradually cut their teeth and develop the talents and experience necessary to become effective and experienced councillors.”*
22. By February 2008, we had seen: the closure of a modern swimming pool due to losses elsewhere in the Council’s accounts; plans to build a new £7m Town Hall funded by the sale of open space and other assets; and the unpopular and large scale housing development proposed at Queensway and elsewhere, which, together with other concerns, had raised public disquiet to the point at which community groups were calling for change.
23. Representatives of several community groups in the principal township met with members of the St Annes on the Sea Town Council to voice their concerns.
24. The Town Council listened, then agreed to host a public meeting where the concerns that had been put to them by these groups could be tested more widely to gauge public views. They asked the groups to arrange the meeting; and they, in turn asked the Fylde Civic Awareness Group to undertake its organisation.
25. The format of the meeting was:
- Open public access to anyone wishing to attend
 - No ‘panel speakers.’ The aim was to allow the audience to express their concerns and what they thought should be done about them.
 - Fylde Civic Awareness Officers would chair the meeting and St Annes Town Council Chairman would introduce the discussions
 - A Questionnaire would be given to each person attending. As well as seeking freeform comments, it would have about twenty short, single sentence “issue statements” with which people could “strongly agree” through to “strongly disagree”. The issue statements were contributed by a range of local groups and organisations. The list of groups invited to contribute an issue statement was agreed as:
 - i. Chamber of Trade
 - ii. Civic Society
 - iii. Campaign to Protect Rural England
 - iv. Defend Lytham / (Defend St Anne’s)
 - v. Defend the Dunes
 - vi. Friends of St Anne’s Swimming Pool
 - vii. Fylde Civic Awareness Group
 - viii. Gazette newspaper
 - ix. Holiday Association of Lytham St Annes

- x. Heeley Road Residents Group
- xi. LSA Express newspaper
- xii. Park View For You
- xiii. ROAR
- xiv. St Anne's on the Sea Town Council

26. The meeting was held on 16 April 2008, and a full report is available from:
<http://www.visitor.org.uk/civic/pdf/ssareport.pdf>

27. The audience was self-selected, not selected to be statistically to be representative of either St Anne's or Fylde Borough residents, thus no claim to statistical accuracy was made for the results. They were simply the views of the 200 or so people who attended the meeting.

28. One of the 20 issues was: "*The Council's Cabinet system is undemocratic and producing many bad decisions*" 87% 'Strongly agreed', and 9% 'Agreed' with this postulation.

29. Within the freeform comments, there were 32 comments about the swimming pool closure, and 22 comments about new developments. But the greatest number of concerns by far (60 comments) was about the way Fylde Borough Council was operating. Chief amongst the concerns were:

- the Cabinet system of governance.
- A perceived lack of transparency and democracy .
- Also mentioned as concerns were: financial mismanagement and criticism of 'group decisions' made in private; the divisive nature of overt party politics; and an unwillingness to respond to public concern was also of great concern.
- Several people said they had no confidence in the present administration.
- Perhaps the comment which best summarised this aspect is "*I want to know how we can get rid of this cabinet system. How do we stop the lack of transparency in decision making?*"

30. Some examples of the verbatim comments received were (*Numbers refer to questionnaires*)

31. *004 Very concerned that elected councillors are not being allowed to speak on matters which directly affect the people they represent. Too many decisions are being taken without transparency.*

32. *005 I am concerned about the credibility of the Council and their undemocratic attitude ignoring the needs of the people. The electorate at this meeting have no confidence. Too many chiefs.*

33. *007 Fylde Borough Council's Cabinet System is very undemocratic and leaves its members open to financial pressure from developers and others. Decisions should be made by the full council. FBC should listen to the wishes and concerns of the residents of Fylde.*

34. *013 In view of complete disregard of the electorate, there should be a council election held within the next 3 months.*

35. *018 The Council Cabinet system is the main problem to how the Council is run. It is not democratic! Therefore decisions are creating major problems.*

36. 031 *I cannot believe the arrogance of FBC and their absolute disrespect of the electorate.*
37. 034 *Concerned about corruption in our local government: Financial mismanagement, Cabinet (closed) decisions, undemocratic, (prepared) plans to sell off St Anne's pool to business. This smacks of corruption and backhanders.*
38. 056a *Feel it is undemocratic that essential decisions concerning vital assets are in effect taken by a small cabinet of councillors and all other councillors are subject to party whip. I feel on local issues nobody should be subject to party politics.*
39. 056b *I feel the town has been spoilt by the present Council and the people have been let down by the decisions they have made on many issues.*
40. 084 *The Cabinet system is dividing all the Councillors and is not democratic.*
41. 089 *Do away with the corrupt councillors who are making a complete hash of all things.*
42. 109 *The Cabinet is useless and need removing. The Committee system did work. A unitary authority of Blackpool Wyre and Fylde may be a future development. Conservatives who do not agree to a decision should abstain. These are the normal policy to be followed. I became a Conservative at 16 in 1948.*
43. 110 *We are disenfranchised if our Councillors are not members of the Cabinet as they are restricted in the number of questions they can ask and cannot ask supplementary questions. Decisions are taken by a minority elite not on a majority vote.*
44. 114 *Cabinet system is unfair. This council does not listen to residents views. Lived here for 60 years and very sad at the demise of St Anne's through Councils mismanagement, especially through recent years.*
45. 133 *The 'Cabinet' system is iniquitous! How can seven individuals supposed to comprise a range of skills and knowledge relevant to the issues prevalent at any one time? What purpose do the remaining councillors serve? This makes a mockery of democracy.*
46. 144 *I believe that the 'cabinet' system employed by FBC is un-democratic and should be disbanded.*
47. 177 *The elitist cabinet need to be removed for the benefit of council harmony and community improvement. All responsible for financial mismanagement should lose their jobs and any financial severance benefits.*
48. *The meeting concluded when a member of the public from the floor said:*
49. *I have heard views and concerns of many and their disquiet at some of the decisions which have been and are being made. Councillors in the majority party obeying the cabinet which requires unswerving obedience. Many matters have caused concern and have been aired at this meeting. These are but SYMPTOMS of the underlying malaise, namely this pernicious governance incorporated in the cabinet. I am therefore putting forward a RESOLUTION which in my belief would rectify many of the ills being aired tonight:*
50. ***This meeting, representing many hundreds of Borough residents of all parties, interests, creeds and beliefs hereby declares that it has NO CONFIDENCE in the present cabinet of Fylde Borough Council and***
51. ***(1), calls for greater consideration to be given to public opinion and the wishes of the people through a more representative governance, with the abandonment of any***

threat of penalties which might be imposed for voting according to conscience, enabling a return to democratic decision-making by a majority of Councillors in full Council and

52. (2), calls on all Parish and Town Councils in the Fylde Borough to confirm and endorse this resolution.

53. Put to a show of hands, that motion was approved with not a single vote against from the 200 people present. We believe this was a clear demonstration of dissatisfaction with Cabinet style governance at District level.

54. After the meeting, a report was sent to the Borough Council and to each Town and Parish Council in Fylde asking them to debate and come to a view on the proposition.

55. Not all parts of Fylde have a Town or Parish Council, and some councils declined or otherwise failed to debate the matter, but in summary, the result was:

56. Of those Town/Parish Councils who debated the proposition, those representing 82% of Fylde residents supported it.

57. Support for the resolution reduced to 53% of the whole population of Fylde when unparished areas and those that did not debate the motion were included.

58. It nevertheless showed that Parish and Town Councils representing more than half of Fylde's electorate showed an overall majority in favour of a return to democratic decision-making by a majority of Councillors in full Council.

59. We were pleased when this prospect became a feature of the Localism Bill.

RECOMMENDATION

60. Our Borough Council has signalled an intention to reconsider its present governance arrangements if the Bill becomes law, and we would urge the Committee to support Chapter 3 of the Bill which allows Councils to return to the former Council and Committee system should they wish to do so.

Submitted on behalf of the Fylde Civic Awareness Group

Chairman: Jon Harrison

Clerk: Fred Moor

24 January 2011