

A massive thank you

As Chairman of Friends of Winchcombe I would like to thank everyone of the 180 plus people that turned up for the meeting on Friday 6th March. I would especially like to thank the majority of silent committee members and great supporters who helped me to get that message in front of you. Whilst I did do a lot of talking, so did the audience in participating and we were under no illusion what the majority thought without having to manage any of the comments to our convenience. It was a team effort and a clear response on what we need to do.

It was only right that we started the evening with a statement from John Gerrard (ex Chair) covering his concerns about the developments of FOW, since I took on the role of Chairman. It is clear that John does not feel that we are moving in a direction he would approve of and in many ways that set the tone for the core reason to have the meeting.

What is the role of FOW? To be led by the committee, or to be led by the membership?

I promised after my first re election as Chairman to you give members and supporters the chance to voice their feelings on how FOW should progress and tell the committee how to represent them. I made it clear that I would defer immediately if the opinion of the majority was not behind this and I have done that. The majority have spoken at the meeting and a clear message was delivered to all in the audience. No one can now doubt what the majority FOW feeling is.

The Friends of Winchcombe is a campaigning group set up with the intention of voicing matters and acting on making Winchcombe a better place to live. At the creation of FOW we stood against development in the AONB at Almsbury and resisting plans for intrusive and insensitive development. This has been a consistent FOW belief from the first days of FOW and only recently has this has been in doubt. Some felt that we should rename FOW, as the new committee was taking FOW in a new direction. I do not agree with this, nor did the 99% of the audience attending. We have brought FOW back to original principles. Winchcombe needs a strong group to present different opinions, if nothing else to further the process of democratic discussion.

But we are not single issue group, we have a view on infrastructure, traffic, retail support for the shopkeepers and business rate payers, youth engagement and public facilities, to name a few current issues facing Winchcombe.

We also concluded that in the absence of our voice being heard and acted on, we need to take more substantial action to achieve representation. A clear mandate was given for us to deliver candidates for election to the Town Council and Borough Council and we are now seeking people who would be interested in being part of a 'consortia of common view' to speak to me directly, or contact us via the website. We **do need to act on this rapidly** with election registration deadlines looming; so if you are interested please contact me directly so we can discuss matters privately, but swiftly. No person will be disclosed by us until they are happy, or actually formally submit themselves forward for election.

In the last month the core committee has been returned in post by a majority vote - twice. We have had a very well attended, full and very open discussion, hearing considerable contribution from the floor about the feelings of the membership, both as supporters of change and supporters of no change to FOW.

What we need to do now is press for that voice to be taken as a serious concern; particularly in view of concerns about The Neighbourhood Plan progressing regardless of public opinion. We really do want to engage in a constructive and supportive discussion to create a Neighbourhood Plan that considerably more people can understand what is contained within it and support it. That however requires compromise by both parties and I offer the opportunity to discuss in more technical and specific detail how FOW feel the plan can be modified or improved to achieve greater acceptance. If however this position and offer is ignored, or rejected by the Town Council and / or the

Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group, we are left with only one and very radical position; to campaign for a rejection of The current Neighbourhood Plan at referendum. If anyone believes that the 150 people supporting this, out of the 170 people attending, represent all of the disaffected of Winchcombe, then a substantial underestimation of public opinion is taking place. We will now endeavour to substantiate this with wide surveying of opinion and public sharing of this.

Any organisation change process is painful for some and I am deeply sorry that some will feel that the FOW has moved to a position they simply can not support. I hope that over the coming months they will see that we may have opposing views to some matters, we are genuinely trying to create an engagement with the decision making bodies that is currently perceived as lacking. By doing this we can contribute something worthwhile whilst not having to agree with everything. In the final analysis the success of this is not always that we win our battles, but that we grow our membership so we can genuinely say we are representing a need in the community. This is the first time in years that FOW has seen a significant increase in membership, despite a few leavers.

So with a reasonably full agenda of things to act on, we have delivered the transition. Whilst we have not yet asked for subscriptions, at some point this will become necessary to refill our fighting funds. We will contact you to update you on what we need and why. In summary watch this space, continue with your valuable support and contribution and help us to make your voice heard.

Regards

Rupert Chislett
Chairman on behalf of the FOW committee