

Minutes of public meeting 22.06.06, Victoria Hall, Sheffield

The meeting was called to discuss the controversial issue of the proposed supercasino in Sheffield. Among those present were several faith representatives, the media, councillors, businesses, interested parties and members of the public. Councillor Steven Bate (SB) of Blackpool distributed a booklet produced for the Blackpool campaign.

Attended: 61 Chair: Cllr Jillian Creasy

Councillor Jillian Creasy (JC)

Welcomed and thanked all for coming.

Cllr Creasy's position was that she was not in favour an outright ban on gambling, only against the supercasino. Concerns included the economic, social and environmental impact that the supercasino would create. Cllr Creasy was also concerned about the lack of open public debate before the council made its decision.

Richard Caborn MP, Council Leader Cllr Jan Wilson and Sir Robert Kerslake, Chief Exec of the City Council, Nigel Tomlinson, Chief Exec of the Sheffield Chamber of Commerce and Industry, had all declined invitations to attend or to send a representative.

Of the developers, MGM, Sun International, and Las Vegas Sands, the latter has sent someone to listen to the proceedings.

The main speaker will be Cllr Steven Bate from Blackpool who is a member of the national Campaign Against Supercasino Expansion.

After this, there will be comments from Neville Martin, Business and Professional Ministries, and Jamal, from the Umar Mosque, Firth Park.

Cllr Steven Bate (SB)

I come from a mining family and was born in Hemsworth.

95% of people do not want more gambling facilities, and I believe that Sheffielders are against the idea of a US-style supercasino.

The supercasino will create hundreds of thousands of problem gamblers, up to half a million, and there is no clear way to measure or define what makes a problem gambler.

In casinos, 8% of gamblers produce 60% of the house profits.

I do not understand why politicians can allow supercasinos to go ahead.

It takes a relatively short time to produce a problem gambler. The medical evidence suggests chemical neurological effects of habit forming result in a stronger addiction than that produced by crack cocaine.

It is precisely this effect that the casino owners want, with large, £1million jackpots, and each slot machine making £100k a year. (*see below*)

Caborn and Jowell wanted market forces to decide how many supercasinos there could be, but the Lord's curtailed this.

Profits from supercasinos are shared between the overseas owners and HM Treasury. The percentages of the 'take' of each is yet to be decided.

The profits of a supercasino are drawn from local people, whose gambling displaces money spent on local traders, who cannot compete with the free inducements that the casinos offer, i.e. there will be job losses, closed local businesses, degeneration, loss of nearby shops and restaurants, reduced use of hotels, and infrastructure problems caused by the importing of 'customers' to the casinos.

In Blackpool, there are plenty of resources available for alternative activities, but only gambling is considered by the authorities.

Casino developers offer local enticements, e.g. sports, but it is a small percentage (2%), as taxes and profits take most of the money, which must come from local people, who are most at risk, especially those from deprived areas who have time on their hands.

The anticipated local debt average for a problem gambler is £40k, and it is anticipated that the proposed development will create 25000 such problem gamblers.

Promises of regeneration have turned out to be false.

The GMB trade union invited US people to speak to their delegates, who described the extent of the problems.

Jamal, representing the Umar Mosque, Firth Park

Blessing

Thank you for this opportunity to speak on behalf of the local Muslims of South Yorkshire. It is important to listen to local people, and to respect their wishes.

What is democracy here when 95% do not want a supercasino, but plans go ahead?

The fundamental question is: Does gambling benefit our society? Other than feeding Fat Cats, the most deprived end up worse off. Therefore, why have a supercasino?

What message are we giving to our youth, when we defy logic by harming our society?

We have freedom of speech, so why are the authorities deaf, dumb and blind to the protests against gambling and the harm it does, for example, the consequent personal tragedies and the subsequent local crime.

Whose opinion counts most? Just using the logic of the argument, Our Creator knows - regardless of religion - how we should behave. The Koran, Chapter 5, Verses 90 and 91, clearly state that gambling is wrong - it is an evil.

The logic is that success of a society demands that the proposed supercasino is wrong.

Please, also, consider the spiritual and religious implications of gambling - it creates division, hate and enmity. A supercasino would destroy our society as it leads to worse behaviour by gamblers.

Why do this (have a supercasino) - it is driven by pure greed - fed by the addiction of gamblers who are then tempted to crime.

On behalf of the Muslims of South Yorkshire, we are against the idea of a supercasino, not least for the protection of our children. Thank you.

Neville Martin (NM) Business and Professional Ministries (and member of Christian People's Alliance)

I will focus on the business impact.

On 16 June 2006, the council issued a consultation document (Gambling Act 2005, Licensing Statement of Policy, 1st Draft for Consultation). However, the decision (to seek a Regional casino in Sheffield) was taken by the council in December 2004, 6 months before the gambling act came into force, i.e. the council had pre-empted the change in the law.

The council's idea of consultation is a sham, because the decisions are already made.

50 local businesses are claimed to support the bid. (*but see below*)

The B&PM's policy is to support ethical business, i.e. no supercasino.

For the proposed £200million development to be viable, it needs to generate £60 to £70million profit per annum, and this money must come from the local economy, diverting money away from regeneration and increasing poverty.

Therefore, on economic grounds, the argument for a supercasino fails.

Neil Kraus, member of public, from Australia, now living in Sheffield.

Generally, UK people do not understand the supercasino concept.

The developers and operators use clever words to disguise the truth and make gambling appear attracting, for example, use of the word 'gaming' as though gambling is a sport to be encouraged.

In Victoria, losses of about £1billion are taken from the local economy by gambling.

It can be expected that £1million per week will be required to help the problem gamblers.

Please bear in mind, if there are only 2% of problem gamblers in a community, their impact is on 20% of the population.

Psychological research has been done to optimise gambling profits by targeting the individual, especially the most vulnerable, who are the most profitable. Tactics include rewards, plush surroundings, 'tailored' music to induce more gambling, etc.

Neil Kraus described how he had seen personal family and other tragedies of gambling.

Neil Kraus concluded that Sheffield does not need a supercasino.

SB There is a ratio of 1:3 for pounds lost and pounds needed to treat the addicted, their families, and repair the social damage.

Member of public

Using the figures quoted, the losses to the local economy in Sheffield would totally wipe out the Objective 1 Eurofunds, leaving us worse off than before the Eurofunding started.

Sid Cordle Sheffield Christian People's Alliance

I was once a councillor on planning committees.

The Bramall Lane plan is not feasible at all from a planning perspective.

Meadowhall would be difficult, but at least it could claim regional presence.

The council's and developer's policy statement for Bramall Lane are self-defeating.

If Manchester United can resist sponsorship from gambling outlets, so can our local team.

Crime is naturally attracted to gambling outlets.

Please note, there could be not just one, but many supercasinos if we allow this proposal to succeed.

Rev Nigel Manges, Cemetery Rd Baptist Church, Sharrow

It says a lot when the developers won't turn up.

Has anyone found a poor casino or bookie?

I have seen regeneration in Sharrow, a supercasino would not be a part of this, but a backward step.

I have personally helped cases where gambling has resulted in debts of £17k, £29k and £35k. The burden is not just that of the gambler, but is carried by the families.
The supercasino is a bad move, and we oppose it.

SB There has been no genuine debate.

Councillor Alan Whitehouse (AW)

I will play devil's advocate.

Will gamblers determined to gamble simply gamble elsewhere - such as 'on-line'?

SB The evidence is that it (having a supercasino) will be much worse than 'on-line' Internet gambling.

AW

The Liberal Democrats generally support Labour on this issue. However, local democracy does not work, as our votes are made according to the political party line, and therefore there is no open debate.

I am personally against a supercasino, as we need jobs, not encouragement for gamblers.

Jack Nichols (JN) Anglican Bishop of Sheffield

I have been labelled 'The Antigambling Bishop'.

Addiction is no respecter of people. The most deprived will suffer most, but so will rich people, and the knock-on effect of, say, a businessman going under, is widespread.

There are a variety of religious-based views on gambling, from raffles to the occasional flutter, but most are against supercasinos.

This view is not crackpot religious conservatism and must not be used as such.

I speak on behalf of the mainstream Christian churches. Sheffield is a city with a conscience, with a good record of trying to close the gap between rich and poor, and the supercasino will undo all the good.

A supercasino will dehumanise people.

Sawar Arwan, member of public, (to JN)

Is Christianity against gambling?

JN There is no scriptural proscription. However, interpretations are different, and issues can be complicated

SB In Blackpool, we were labelled as religious moralists to be ignored. We persevered, but our cause suffered because of the labelling by pro-gamblers.

Fred Thompson, member of the public

I believe the Bible is correct and guides against gambling. The supercasino is the thin end of the wedge. It will also drive out the smaller operators.

Dr. Catherine Hill, member of the public

We have enough addictions already. This will make matters worse and impoverish families. This is not right. Gambling is not a healthy approach to living, and the current policy is an irresponsible approach.

David Price Church Action on Poverty

We are against this. The Casino Advisory Panel (CAP) will recommend the winner to Jowell next December, and the House of Lords sits on the issue next March.

You can write to the CAP before the end of June, or e-mail them (see their website)

The more complaints the better.

SB Write to MP's, Lords, Bishops, etc - get the message across

Ken Torres Local businessman, member of Chamber of Commerce

I am an elected Chamber Council Member of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

The supercasino is a non-partisan issue.

If Cllr Jan Wilson wishes to make this a partisan issue then she should put it in Labour Council's next election manifesto – Vote Labour for the super casino.

The supercasino has been railroaded through.

Nigel Tomlinson, Chief Exec of the Chamber of Commerce called a meeting in the Millennium Gallery, to be addressed by Sir Robert Kerlake, who sent out the invitations.

It is NOT true that all businesses were in favour. All those who attended were deemed to have supported the concept (of a supercasino).
Answers to my questions were not satisfactory.
I have been asking the Chamber of Commerce and Industry for a ballot of all the Chamber members and to date this has not happened.
Why not have a referendum in Sheffield?

Member of public.

What you have described - falsely claiming unanimous support by virtue of attendance, has been used regularly by this council.

JC Nigel Tomlinson was invited to tonight's meeting, but didn't attend.

Cllr Bernard Little (BL)

I represent the area around Bramall Lane. We already have huge social problems, and this (supercasino) will make matters worse. Bishop Jack is right. We want proper jobs and good policies which support community facilities. There will be bad environmental effects, worsening air quality, and increased traffic. The congestion will make it even harder for local business people to go about their daily business. We have a powerful case.

Cllr Mohammed Shaffaq

Discussion and debate is yet to take place. Note that Sheffield people are not being asked if they want a supercasino. There will be a bad impact on our area (Tinsley).
We could take meetings like these into the communities affected, and elsewhere. We should have a debate.

SB In the US, allowing voting on the issue is avoided, as in Sheffield.

Adrian Alker, Vicar, Broomhill.

40,000 students would be a very vulnerable group, who would be tempted to gamble their grants. The student union officers are very concerned about the welfare of their members, so why not include them in an opposition partnership?

SB In LA, you must be 21, in the UK 18.

JC Let's discuss how we can move forward from here.

JN - Let's have a small planning group, say 6 (general consent)

Member of public - Can we have a broad base of representatives? (consented)

Member of the public - How can we contact you?

A. nevillemartin@btconnect.com

A. Write, for the moment, to Cllr Jillian Creasy, Green Party, Town Hall or telephone 0114 2727886

Member of Public - Nobody here has spoken in support of the supercasino

JC - As I mentioned earlier, there is one developer represented here, but they came purely as an observer and it would be unfair to ask that person to come forward at this time. If anyone wants to speak in favour or even to act as devil's advocate, that would be welcome.

BL - Can the steering group discuss the impact of the supercasino, and perhaps encourage if not obtain the services of a council officer?

SB - With reference to the earlier question, you can access my website as an information resource (cllr.steven.bate@blackpool.gov.uk)

AW - I suggest we can insist on putting planning conditions on the applications, i.e. maximising the contribution they must make to the local affected communities.

SB - Don't get bogged down in planning.

JC - The Casino Advisory Panel will visit the short listed cities over the summer and then hold inquiry style meetings about each proposal. We could ask to attend this. The City Council is organising a consultation via Sheffield First, including the group chaired by Bishop Jack, but this process presumes that there will be a supercasino, and is only asking how we can maximise benefits and minimise problems – not whether or not we have a casino. The Council's public consultation in September is too late to affect the CAP decision.

NM - We can use the gambling laws to our advantage. The issue is not about just one casino, but the underlying principle.

SB There is a massive campaign for just eight regional casinos.

Q. Can we work alongside other groups from the other cities?

A – yes, we can link via Campaign Against Supercasino Expansion.

Cllr Jillian Creasy

This has been a very successful meeting.

Thank you all for coming and especially to our speaker, Cllr Steven Bate.