

Discussions on Gaza twinning postponed

'Israeli authorities' have warned The City of Edinburgh Council that a plan to twin the capital with Gaza could be unlawful, it is understood.

The intervention reportedly led officers to pull a petition calling for the creation of the new civic partnership from the Policy and Resources Committee agenda on Monday evening, less than 24 hours before it was due to be considered by councillors.

A council spokesperson said the item was withdrawn "so legal advice can be taken."

Pete Gregson, who launched the petition, was expected to speak at the meeting alongside the Mayor of Gaza Dr. Yahya Sarraj.

If it went ahead as planned, councillors would have been asked to agree on a response to the proposals, rather than vote on whether to pursue the twinning arrangement or not.

A council source said "Israeli authorities" challenged consideration of the matter— even to negatively consider — as unlawful.

According to the source, the Israeli officials behind the legal challenge claim consideration of the twin city bid could be seen as supporting Hamas, the militant group which governs the Gaza strip and is listed in the UK as a terrorist organisation.

As the committee was meeting for the last time before May's council elections, it is not known when the petition will return to members.

Mr Gregson, who has already waited three years for his petition's consideration due to delays caused by Covid-19, said: "This is ridiculous conjecture. Israel is undermining our democracy with threats, stopping friendly relations between cities."

The move comes as UK Lawyers for Israel (UKLFI) warned the council that councillors would "probably commit criminal offences if they participate in twinning between Edinburgh and Gaza City."

Mr Gregson started the Edinburgh-Gaza twinning campaign in 2019 in response to Gaza border protests and has since attracted 362 signatures – with the council also receiving 15 letters of support for the partnership.

The petition reads: 'We call upon Edinburgh to twin with Gaza City in the same way we are currently twinned with Munich, Xi'an, Vancouver, Santiago, Nice, Krakow, etc. Twinning could give joint economic development arrangements which Gaza City, in its current impoverished state, would clearly benefit from.'

Mr Gregson added: "It's an agreement between our Lord Provost and their Mayor, that's all it is – an agreement to have friendly relations and to encourage groups to work together."

A City of Edinburgh Council spokesperson said: "The report considering the petition was withdrawn so the committee could receive legal advice on specific points that were raised.

"Once legal advice is received councillors will then be able to consider a response to the petition, based on Edinburgh's current international framework."

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter

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