

Council shelves plan for new 'friendship arrangement' with Taiwanese city

Edinburgh Council has shelved plans for a new 'friendship arrangement' with a Taiwanese city after concerns were raised it could harm relations with China.

Organisations including the University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh Airport and Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce warned the local authority the move could result in sanctions on the city and reduced trade, tourism and student numbers.

Councillors were set to be asked to approve the initial five-year partnership to strengthen cultural and commercial links between the capital and Kaohsiung. However, on Monday (June 24) the decision was pulled from the agenda for this week's full council meeting.

A report, now made private but seen by the Local Democracy Reporting Service, admitted the arrangement "does pose potential risks for the city's relationship with China, but that these risks are difficult to quantify with confidence".

It added the current threat level to the council of a cyber-attack remained "very high" and signing the arrangement "could increase these risks".

Taiwan considers itself an independent nation, and largely functions as one currently. However this view is not shared by

China and most other countries including the US and UK and the island's political status is contentious.

Council leader Cammy Day, who has spearheaded efforts to strengthen relations between Edinburgh and Taiwan, said having taken on board the views of the business community and other partners "we've decided that more discussion is required before taking this agreement forward".

He said: "We'll continue this dialogue and report back to a future council meeting.

"In the meantime, I remain in no doubt that developing these types of relationships with progressive and open-minded cities like ours is absolutely the right thing to do for the people of Edinburgh."

Conservative group leader Iain Whyte said the local authority should focus on "improving the vital local services it provides rather than dabbling ineffectually in international politics".

Cllr Day visited Kaohsiung and Taipei on a Taiwanese government-funded trip last year. In August he secured agreement from councillors to "work towards a memorandum of understanding between Taiwan and the appropriate city partners".

This has since changed to a "friendship arrangement" built on a "principle of mutual benefit".

This would seek to 'strengthen commercial and innovation cooperation, enrich the cultural and artistic life of both cities'.

However China's representative in Edinburgh told councillors he had "grave concerns" about a "sister city agreement between Edinburgh and cities from Taiwan".

In a letter sent earlier this month consul general Zhang Biao

wrote: "This is not a action simply to promote exchange and friendship, it is deeply related to the Taiwan question and will bring about serious consequences.

"The Chinese government firmly opposes counties that have diplomatic ties with China to conduct official exchanges with Taiwan in any form, including signing agreement with sovereign implications or of an official nature."

Mr Biao said the council signing a friendship arrangement with Taiwan "will hurt the feeling of the Chinese people and bring about serious consequences to our bilateral relations, which we do not want to see".

He added: "Surely Edinburgh would benefit little but lose a lot from such action."

Letters of support were received from the Kaohsiung City Government, the Taipei Representative Office in the UK and the Scotland Taiwanese Association, but the council was urged not to sign the arrangement by several organisations.

Edinburgh Airport feared it could harm work to increase the number of direct flights to China, Essential Edinburgh said there could be sanctions on the city "with consequential impact on future student and visitor numbers from China", and Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce emphasising the "success of recent trade missions... and the importance of maintaining strong relationships with both Taiwan and China".

Furthermore Edinburgh Hotels Association highlighted the "importance of Chinese visitors and students to Edinburgh's businesses and tourism economy" and the University of Edinburgh urged the council to carefully consider "risks associated with the general denigration of relationships with partner bodies in China if the proposed formal arrangement proceeds".

Councillor Iain Whyte, Conservative group leader on Edinburgh

Council, said: "It's obvious that this needed far more thought before being brought forward as a formal proposal.

"The pause is helpful as it will allow the Council to engage more widely should any proposal returns.

"Ultimately, this is yet another example of where the Council should concentrate on improving the vital local services it provides rather than dabbling ineffectually in international politics. It's time to focus on Edinburgh people's priorities."

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter