

Policy Committee Decision Report

Title of Report:	Entering into a Friendship Agreement with Nablus
Date of Decision:	29 August 2024
Report To:	Strategy & Resources Policy Committee
Report Of:	Kate Martin, Executive Director – City Futures
Report Author:	Nik Hamilton, Investment Team Manager

Executive Summary: In February 2024, Strategy & Resources Policy Committee considered an International Update Report covering the Council’s known international relationships and making recommendations in respect of them. As part of this consideration, the Committee agreed that the City Council enter into a Friendship Agreement with the City of Nablus, situated on the West Bank in Palestine.

This report outlines subsequent steps taken to implement the decision and seeks approval of draft wording for the proposed Friendship Agreement between the two cities.



Council Plan outcomes: [People live in caring, engaged communities that value diversity and support wellbeing](#)

Policy Committee remit:

This report is to be considered by the Strategy & Resources Policy Committee as its remit includes Responsibility, including referral to another Policy Committee for consideration if appropriate, for any policy matter not otherwise allocated to a Committee: [Part 3C - 3.3 Matters Delegated to Committees May 2024.pdf \(sheffield.gov.uk\)](#)”

Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? [Yes/No]

No

Recommendations:

Strategy & Resources Policy Committee is recommended to:

1. Approve the draft wording for a Friendship Agreement with Nablus, attached to this report as an Appendix and agrees that a signing ceremony (either virtual or in-person) be arranged;
2. Notes the further steps to develop the relationship between the cities of Sheffield and Nablus, as described in the report.

Financial Implications: Yes. Approved by: Adrian Hart

Legal Implications: Yes. Approved by: Andrea Simpson]

Equality and Inclusion Implications: Yes. Approved by: Bashir Khan

Full Equalities Impact Assessment completed with EIA number: 2589

Climate Change Implications: Yes. Approved by: Victoria Penman

Background Papers: None

Appendices: Appendix: Suggested Wording for the Friendship Agreement with Nablus

1. Background to the issue

1.1 An approach to the (then) Lord Mayor was received from the Mayor of Nablus seeking to establish a formal relationship with Sheffield in April 2019. This followed on from a visit by the Sheffield Labour Friends of Palestine to the West Bank in November 2017.

Regrettably there then followed a series of delays in responding to this approach, compounded by changes of key personnel within the Council and a global pandemic.

At the time the initial approach was made in 2019, there was no formal Policy in place in respect of responding to approaches to establish new international relationships.

A Partner City Policy was subsequently developed, the principles of which, including assessment criteria for the purposes of assessing new approaches and reviewing the effectiveness of existing international relationships, were agreed by Strategy & Resources Policy Committee in November 2023.

2. Proposal

2.1 A further International Update report was presented to Strategy & Resources Policy Committee on 21 February 2024, together with the final version of the Partner City Policy. One of the agreed recommendations was to enter into a Friendship Agreement with Nablus Municipality, on the basis that precedent suggested, given that in excess of 20 locations were identified as having some form of historical link with Sheffield, that in all likelihood, without the delays outlined above, we would have established a formal link with Nablus.

The Partner City Policy includes assessment criteria, against which each new approach should be considered: Location Overview; Strategic Fit; Profile; Due Diligence Considerations; Connections; Resources and Purpose.

With the limited information available, coupled with Internet research and direct questions posed to contacts within Nablus Municipality, an assessment summary is detailed below:

What does the economy; population and general outlook of Nablus look like? Are there similarities to Sheffield?

Nablus is considerably smaller than Sheffield, having a population of c. 200,000 living within the administrative borders. Today, the population is predominantly Muslim, with small Christian and Samaritan minorities.

Traditional industries continue to operate in Nablus, such as the production of soap, olive oil and handicrafts. Other industries include furniture production, tile

production, stone quarrying, textile manufacturing and leather tanning. Unlike Sheffield, there does not appear to be specific sectors such as advanced manufacturing; digital or medical devices.

In March 2024, Nablus' most recent Mayor was selected as a National Minister within the new Palestinian government. His successor is former Deputy Mayor, Dr. Husam Shakhshir, who took over in May 2024.

The local government system in Palestine is different from the UK, in that Members of the Council do not represent certain localities or suburbs, they all represent the same electoral area.

Nablus Municipality has a total of 15 councillors.

The mandate of the Municipal Council is a for a 4-year term.

In Nablus, councillors represent 2 main political powers, with Fatah being the majority party in Nablus.

Does Sheffield have a significant Palestinian diaspora?

Analysis of the latest 2021 Census records for Sheffield, with categories including 'National Identity', 'Ethnicity', 'Country of Birth' and 'Passport Held' suggests that there are insufficient numbers of Palestinians living here to register specific entries. Within the Middle East, only the countries of Iran and Iraq have specific numbers attributed against them, nationals from the remainder of countries within the Middle East are simply grouped together as 'Middle East and Asia: Middle East: Other Middle East'.

Has Palestine been identified as one of South Yorkshire's key target markets for trade and investment?

Having considered existing import/export activity and the region's competencies, the SYMCA International Plan, April 2022, identified Priority Markets for South Yorkshire as being the 'Core Immediate Markets' of: USA; Germany and France; and 'Longer Term Opportunities' (3 years+) of: Japan; India; Italy and Sweden.

Does Sheffield have many Palestinian students studying at our two universities? Is Palestine a target market for international student recruitment?

Analysis of the latest HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) records for Sheffield for the academic year 2021-22, provides a breakdown of student numbers by nationality – there were no recorded HE students of Palestinian nationality studying in Sheffield. Palestine is not currently a target market for international recruitment for either university.

Where did the proposal to establish links with Nablus come from?

The idea to link with Nablus was initially mooted by Sheffield Labour Friends of Palestine (SLFoP) and has gained momentum subsequently.

What is Nablus seeking to achieve from establishing links with Sheffield?

Through conversation with Nablus Municipality representatives, they have outlined a number of goals they would like to achieve by developing a relationship with Sheffield.

This includes establishing links between both municipalities and local communities where they can exchange experience and knowledge in different fields and areas such as improving municipal services rendered to citizens; capacity building, involving local community in decision-making; exchange of expertise in some fields including education; resilience and environment. Moreover, establishing connections between similar segments from both societies is another goal they would like to achieve - this includes school and university students, youth in general, sports clubs etc.

The suggestion is that specific ideas and initiatives could be agreed upon later, depending on both partners' needs and capacities.

Nablus are keen to have active engagement with their Partner Cities and develop effective cooperation – an example given of Barcelona (a Twin City) where they sent over 11 firefighters in 2016 for knowledge exchange. Nablus developed links with Barcelona, due to a sizeable Palestinian / Arab population living there.

Based on this analysis, is a Twinning Agreement appropriate?

In respect of any new approaches received the above factors would ordinarily be considered to determine in line with the Policy's hierarchy of relationships, whether a formal Twinning Agreement is appropriate, or if not, whether there should be another form of agreement, or if not, then whether an informal, community-based arrangement could be facilitated.

The Partner City Policy outlines a hierarchy of relationships:

Twinning / Sister City relationships are seen as formal longer-term agreements (albeit with the inclusion of agreed review points).

Other Partner relationships include: Partnership Agreements, Declarations of Friendships; Memoranda of Understanding; Letters of Support, Trade & Collaboration Agreements, all of which are more likely to be time-limited arrangements, where each party receives short-term benefits.

These partnerships may be renewed or converted into Twinning / Sister City relationships, at a later date, if desired.

This hierarchy was agreed on the basis that initial approaches would not automatically lead to a Twinning / Sister City Agreement being agreed and signed at the outset, with the suggestion that a 'Declaration of Friendship' may be more appropriate in the first instance, until such time as the potential relationship has been scoped out and the resource implications considered.

Development of a Friendship Agreement with Nablus

Given the length of time that has passed since the initial approach in April 2019, Strategy & Resources Policy Committee agreed that a Friendship Agreement with Nablus should be explored.

Draft wording for the proposed Friendship Agreement between Sheffield and Nablus is contained for approval within the Appendix to this report.

The Friendship Agreement would be reviewed after an initial 12-month period, in line with the Partner City Policy.

Pending approval of the Friendship Agreement by this Committee, engagement with representatives from Nablus Municipality will then be undertaken to agree the most appropriate arrangements for signing.

Whilst there is the existing connection between Nablus contacts (predominantly through university academics from An-Najah National University and Sheffield Hallam University; the links that have been established through the activities of Palfest Sheffield, plus the SEEDS Association for Development and Culture) and the Sheffield Labour Friends of Palestine group, it appears that Nablus Municipality, as a body, itself, does not currently have any direct links with organisations/contacts here in Sheffield.

As is the case with some of Nablus' other partner cities, typically in the first instance they engage with the sister municipality, and then progress to develop links with local bodies (Friendship Associations etc.). In this regard, given the existing links with Nablus through the Sheffield Labour Friends of Palestine and the newly established Sheffield Nablus Twinning Association and the active support that they have provided, it is proposed that they be encouraged to develop this community-driven relationship.

Further work is required in respect of identifying the potential opportunities for Sheffield City Council to collaborate with Nablus Municipality, either through direct Council to Council knowledge exchange and/or effecting introductions to key city stakeholders.

3. How does this decision contribute to the Council Plan?

3.1 Council Plan outcome

3.1.1 This decision contributes towards Outcome 3 of the Council Plan: *'People live in caring, engaged communities that value diversity and support wellbeing'*. In acknowledging the existing links with Nablus through the Sheffield Labour Friends of Palestine (SLFoP) and the recently established Sheffield Nablus Twinning Association, together with the existing links with Nablus through An-Najah National University and Sheffield Hallam University; and links that have been established through the activities of Palfest Sheffield, it is all about supporting community empowerment here in Sheffield to engage with members of the community in Nablus. The decision also seeks to support the championing of equality and diversity, fulfilling our commitment with partners to become an anti-racist city.

3.2 People – Prosperity - Planet

3.2.1 This decision aligns with the 'People' policy driver – listening to, involving and working with the people of our great city to celebrate and stand up for the diversity of Sheffield, maximising the assets and strengths of communities.

In entering into a Friendship Agreement with Nablus, there are less immediate alignments in respect of the 'Prosperity' and 'Planet' policy drivers, however, as the relationship between our two cities develops, it may well be that there are opportunities to collaborate in respect of trade and investment (linking into 'Prosperity') and/or opportunities for best practice exchange with regard to our respective approaches to tackling climate change (Planet).

3.3 City Goals

3.3.1 This decision does not directly contribute towards achieving the City Goals, although there are some synergies with *'A Sheffield of Thriving Communities'* and particularly Goal 9: *'We're able to embed strong and caring relationships that bring people together and bridge divide across generations, neighbourhoods and communities'*.

This decision references the approved Partner City Policy, whilst acknowledging the particular circumstances surrounding the handling of Nablus' approach.

Nablus are keen to have active engagement with their Partner Cities and develop effective cooperation. By entering into a Friendship Agreement with Sheffield City Council, activities suggested include: establishing links between both municipalities and local communities where they can exchange experience and knowledge in different fields and areas such as improving municipal services rendered to citizens; capacity building, involving the local community in decision-making; exchange of expertise in some fields including

education; resilience and environment. Moreover, establishing connections between similar segments from both societies is another goal - this includes school and university students, youth in general, sports clubs etc.

Given existing links between the Sheffield Labour Friends of Palestine, the Sheffield Nablus Twinning Association and contacts in Nablus there is an opportunity to build upon these connections for mutual benefit and the delivery of specific outcomes.

4. What community or partner engagement has been undertaken and how has it informed the proposal?

4.1 Issues related to Palestine, some of which specifically pertaining to Nablus, have been part of an ongoing dialogue between the Council, the Sheffield Labour Friends of Palestine and members of the wider community over a number of years. Whilst the Council is not required to consult with members of the public on this issue, the Leader of the Council and Senior Officers have also been in regular contact with faith leaders from the Sheffield Jewish community having regard to the EIA carried out in February 2024 (see Section 6.1).

A Communications Plan will also be developed, to support community and partner engagement.

Going forward, we plan to engage with both the Sheffield Labour Friends of Palestine and the Sheffield Nablus Twinning Association.

5. What alternative options did we consider?

5.1 Alternative Option 1:

Do not enter into a Friendship Agreement with Nablus

The alternative option would be not to proceed to enter into a Friendship Agreement with Nablus. Given the existing links with Nablus established through Sheffield community groups and the frequent public representations encouraging the Council to proceed to link with Nablus, it is felt that this would not be desirable.

6. How has equality, diversity and inclusion been actively considered?

6.1 [Pursuant to the Equality Act 2010, [“the Act”] the Council must in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act,

- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not,
- Foster good relations between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not.

An Equality Impact Assessment, which considered the impact of the proposal to befriend Nablus was carried out in February 2024 to inform the International Update report. The EIA recommended a Communications Plan to address any concerns raised by Pro-Palestinian supporters and the Orthodox Jewish community living in Sheffield.

7. Financial and Commercial Implications

7.1 There are no immediate financial or commercial implications of entering into a Friendship Agreement with Nablus. Should specific activities be identified, these will be individually costed and decisions (in accordance with the Council's Constitution) taken as to whether to proceed.

8. Legal Implications

8.1 This decision is a symbolic declaration rather than a legally enforceable agreement and so there are no direct legal implications arising from this report. Any future proposals, such as allocating funding to further the relationship with Nablus or to enter into a more formal agreement, will require future Policy Committee decisions in accordance with the Council's Constitution and the legal implications will be considered at that time.

9. Climate and Environmental Implications

9.1 In preparing this report, there are no immediate climate implications envisaged. There are currently no proposals to travel between Sheffield and Nablus, rather engagement is envisaged to be via email and over Teams.

10. Other implications

10.1 There are no other implications identified.

11. Reasons for decision

11.1 Entering into a Friendship Agreement with Nablus provides the mechanism to find out more about Nablus and to identify any synergies and potential areas of collaboration between our two cities.

Following an initial 12-month period, the Friendship Agreement would be subject to review. If either party felt that there was no merit in continuing the relationship, then there would be scope to step away.

Sheffield City Council is supportive of the community links that have been established between groups in Sheffield and Nablus. Agreeing to enter into a Friendship Agreement between the two cities, presents the opportunity to raise awareness of these activities within the public domain.

APPENDIX

Suggested Wording for the Friendship Agreement with Nablus

DECLARATION OF FRIENDSHIP

between

THE CITY OF SHEFFIELD

(UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND)

and

THE CITY OF NABLUS (PALESTINE)

This is to certify that the Lord Mayor and Members of Sheffield City Council extend the hand of friendship to the city of Nablus in Palestine, and declare their intention to promote friendship and international understanding between both locations and work to achieve the following objectives:

- 1). Encouraging the development of cultural and educational exchange between our citizens;
- 2). To contribute to a global society where the human rights of all are respected.

This Agreement is not time-limited but will be reviewed every 12 months, commencing one calendar year from the date on which it is signed.

The Agreement is made in two counterparts in English and two counterparts in Arabic.

The Parties acknowledge that this Agreement is a statement of mutual intention and is not legally binding.

Signed on [DATE] in the city of Sheffield.

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