

## **Camden Abu Dis Friendship Association (CADFA), and Camden Friends of Palestine (CFoP)**

Deputation to the Audit and Corporate Governance Committee of the London Borough of Camden  
Meeting on 4 April 2024

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1. CADFA is a long-established charity working to promote human rights in Palestine through education, campaigning, and fostering links between the people of Camden and of Abu Dis in the occupied West Bank. CFoP is a group of concerned Camden residents and activists who have come together to call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, an end to the decades-long apartheid in Israel/Palestine, and meaningful action from our Council in support of those goals.
2. We make this deputation request to the Committee as we wish to be heard on agenda item 9 at its meeting on 4 April 2024. Agenda item 9 is the presentation of the 'Principal Risk Update' from the Executive Director Corporate Services, which provides an update on the action being taken to mitigate key principal risks and presents the Council's position as at March 2024. The Committee is asked to (1) note that report, and (2) agree areas for risk 'deep dives' over the following months.
3. We call on the Committee to commission a deep dive into one of those areas identified in the report as representing an increasing risk trend – namely 'Breakdown in Community Cohesion' (see paras 2.23 and 2.24). The report suggests that in response to the Gaza conflict: "the Council has implemented several initiatives to address any impact of these events on community cohesion, emphasising the ongoing importance placed on promoting and strengthening community cohesion." It then identifies the work of the Camden Inter-Faith Network and the Community Tension Monitoring Group. It does not explain why, despite this work, breakdown in community cohesion is now identified as an increasing risk trend.
4. In our view, it is an increasing risk trend at least in part because of the silence and inaction of Camden's local democratic institutions. Since the horrific events of 7 October 2023, the council has issued three cursory press releases (all within two weeks of that event), and sent one letter to the editor of the Camden New Journal. The issue has never been debated or considered formally by any of Camden Council's formal institutions. Most councillors we have written to, or seen at surgeries, have refused to respond to or discuss the substance of the issue at all. They routinely tell us it is not within their remit as local councillors.
5. CFoP's deputation to the full council meeting in March was refused by the Mayor in part because the council had no "influence or control" over the matters raised. Cllr Boyland told us at his surgery on 1 February 2024 that he would take back a proposal to council to convene a forum for the council to hear from concerned residents and groups on all sides, and promised to keep us informed. Not only has he provided no further update, he has failed to respond to four chasing emails.
6. There have been protests, larger each time, outside every meeting of the full council since January. The council did not respond to this by engaging with us, or other groups of concerned residents. It responded by closing the public galleries (for the first time ever) in March, and cancelling April's full council meeting altogether. There is now to be no business considered by the full council at all until July 2024. That is a shocking abrogation of the council's responsibilities to its residents at a time of extraordinary concern and urgency; it exacerbates rather than heals community tensions.
7. Moreover, a deep dive into this issue is appropriate because, in our view, the Principal Risk Update fundamentally misunderstands the nature of the issue and the role of the council in addressing it. At 2.23 the report speaks of the council's inter-faith work, and at 2.24 it speaks of its monitoring (alongside the police) of hate crime in Camden. While both issues are important, the breakdown in

community cohesion as a result of the current Israel / Gaza conflict is not principally an issue of religious tension, or of resulting hate crime.

8. We are local people from all religions and none. We are united by our horror at what unfolded on, and following, 7 October 2023 – and the impact of the conflict on our friends, our families, and the innocent men, women and children in Gaza who have been killed in the tens of thousands over the past 6 months. What we want is an immediate and unqualified ceasefire and the end of all acts of genocide, including most urgently the indiscriminate killing of civilians in Gaza and the denial of humanitarian aid. This is not about religion, it is about the plight of the Palestinian people and the responsibility of the international community (including our own personal responsibilities and those of the council that represents us) to work against genocide, against apartheid, and for the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people for statehood, safety and freedom.
9. Our activism to this end is in a long tradition in Camden. In December 1983 the council adopted a declaration “unreservedly condemning” apartheid in South Africa and occupied Namibia, committing itself to divestment and disassociation from that country, and to international cooperation to promote equality and peace around the world. More recently, in respect of Ukraine, the Council Leader said: “Camden is proud to stand in solidarity with Ukraine...” Then, marking the one-year anniversary of that war, the Leader said: “Camden stands with Ukraine and against anyone who threatens the hard-won freedoms we enjoy – democracy, security and peace... Camden’s response to this has felt personal...”
10. But when the council claims to value “the hard-won freedoms we enjoy – democracy, security and peace”, and then stays silent as such gross violations unfold in front of our eyes in Gaza; it sends a message. It says either that some people matter and others don’t, or that the council simply cannot be believed when it claims to stand for these ideals. Both are dangerous. Both undermine community cohesion. If our council is serious about tackling the breakdown in community cohesion, it has a responsibility to act and to act now. The council must engage, it must listen, and it must speak for its residents. It must stand against barbarity and take its people with it, as it did with apartheid in South Africa.
11. Unlike South Africa, unlike the Ukraine, the council’s approach to the situation in Gaza has been one of utter silence and inaction in the face of the unfolding genocide there, indeed its active refusal to engage beyond the most superficial level. The council seems afraid of talking about the issue, on the obviously wrong-headed basis that talking would heighten rather than heal community tensions. Every month, more and more people are on the streets of London calling for action from their representatives – not for religious or crime-reduction reasons – but for reasons of humanitarian concern and international solidarity. For that, we are castigated by our political leaders as hate marchers or antisemites.
12. Now is the time for the council to listen and to talk about all these issues, to do so openly, urgently, and to involve residents representing all spectrums of opinion within the community; rather than reducing the issue to one of inter-faith dialogue or crime reduction. Its failure to do so is a substantial reason why the breakdown in community cohesion is an escalating risk in the borough. The reductionist and incomplete analysis in the Principal Risk Update demonstrates why a deep dive into these issues is urgently required. Clearly, the issue is not currently understood by the council or Camden’s other political institutions, and the steps being taken to address it are inadequate.