



BRIGHTON & HOVE PALESTINE SOLIDARITY CAMPAIGN

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Protest outside City Council meeting: “Don’t gag local democracy!” Pro-Palestinian campaigners object to decision to block debate by city councillors Mayor of Brighton & Hove presented with petition supporting a more ethical council policy

Campaigners for a free Palestine demonstrated outside the meeting of Brighton & Hove City Council today (Thursday 23rd October). They were objecting to a recent decision by Penny Thompson, the unelected Chief Executive of the City Council, to block a debate by councillors. The debate would have addressed the City Council’s ethical procurement policy with respect to contracts with companies and other providers complicit in Israel’s illegal occupation of Palestinian territories.

Protestors argued that the decision to prevent a council debate on this vital issue was a clear affront to the principles of local democracy and free speech.

Barry Stierer, Secretary of Brighton & Hove Palestine Solidarity Campaign, said in a statement: *“The topic is a contentious one, and a debate by city councillors was likely to be spirited. But this is surely no reason to prevent the debate from taking place. For a mature council, in a city known and admired for its diversity and its respect for difference, councillors must be trusted to debate these vital issues without censure or interference from unelected officials. At least ten local councils in the UK have debated motions on this topic – why not here?”*

At today’s City Council meeting, Councillor Ben Duncan presented the Mayor with a petition signed by hundreds of local residents, expressing their support for a change to the council’s policy so that it does not in future award contracts to unethical companies that are complicit in human rights abuses and violations of international law. In his speech at the meeting, Cllr Duncan explained:

“This petition, signed by approximately 500 people, calls for Brighton and Hove to tighten its ethical procurement policies to ensure that none of the money it spends on goods and services is spent with firms operating unlawfully in or, worse, profiting from, the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories.

The petition was started during Israel’s recent attack on Gaza, in which more than 2,100 people – many of them Palestinian children – lost their lives. Local residents were shocked at the number of casualties and wished to do something to help here in Brighton and Hove. A good place to start seemed to be preventing complicit firms from profiting on the back of locally-raised tax: indeed as many as eight local authorities in the UK have already taken similar actions.

But it’s not really about Palestine, it’s about the ethics at the heart of who this council does business with. Of course we boast an ethical procurement strategy, but what these petitioners are asking is simple: can it be toughened up, and made more ‘ethical’.

I, and the petitioners, hope that the ensuing debate, when this petition is referred to the council’s Policy and Resources Committee for action, concentrates on ways to improve our ethical procurement policy and performance, by only awarding contracts to genuinely ethical providers.”