

Delegated Decision

16 March 2022

**Dissolution of twinning link with
Kostroma, Russia**



Report of Corporate Management Team

Amy Harhoff, Corporate Director of Regeneration, Economy and Growth

Councillor Elizabeth Scott, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Economy and Partnerships

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To formally revoke the twinning charter agreed with the City of Kostroma, Russia (formerly U.S.S.R.)

Executive summary

- 2 Durham County Council entered a formal twinning relationship with the Russian City of Kostroma in June 1968. It was one of the first UK/ USSR twinning links
- 3 The purpose of the twinning arrangement was to create the conditions for dialogue between citizens and community associations and to promote peaceful understanding between the people of our immediate communities and countries. There are no active exchange programmes associated with this twinning agreement
- 4 However, there have been calls for local authorities with links with Russia to undertake action to demonstrate solidarity with Ukraine and condemn Russian military action against its neighbour.

Recommendation(s)

- 5 It is recommended that:

- 5 i) That the Corporate Director for Regeneration, Economy and Growth exercises delegated powers to formally dissolve the twinning charter between Durham County Council and the City of Kostroma.
- ii) The Chairman of Durham County Council writes to the Mayor of Kostroma City Council to inform him of the Council's decision and to condemn military action taken by Russian armed forces in Ukraine.

Background

- 6 Durham County Council currently operates with nine formal twinning agreements with towns and regions across America, Germany France and Russia.
- 7 The twinning Agreement with the Russian City of Kostroma, detailed at appendix 2, was established in 1968 and establishes several agreed actions and activities linking County Durham and Kostroma. These are
- Fixing the last Sunday in April as a friendship day
 - Arrange correspondence and competition
 - Exchange of greetings on special occasions – either locally of nationally, between schools, colleges, institutes and enterprises
 - To exchange exhibits of interest
 - To exchange newspapers and magazines
 - Encourage friendship (pen pals) between school children
- 8 Since the conclusion of the twinning charter in 1968 and a supplementary agreement in 1971, many hundreds of schoolchildren, adults and members of community groups have travelled to and from our partner city.
- 9 The benefits of such visits and exchanges were in terms of foreign language development, teacher professional development and broader cultural awareness.
- 10 Much of what was undertaken involved conversations between learners who offered different perspectives and encouraged debate and respect for differently held opinion in the hope of developing mutual understanding and trust.
- 11 The last civic exchange programme occurred in 2016 and involved the then chairman of the Council. Projects since this date have involved

intensive teacher training programmes, school partnerships and work around climate change.

- 12 The recent invasion of Ukraine by Russian military forces and the impact on the civilian population has prompted consideration of steps which local authorities in the UK can take to demonstrate both solidarity with Ukraine and condemnation of military action by Russia.
- 13 Wakefield and Doncaster Councils have formally announced their intention to end their twinning arrangements with Russian partner areas, while Exeter and Plymouth Councils have paused their twinning arrangements and activities
- 14 Oxford City Council has written to its Russian partner to protest at Russian military involvement in Ukraine.
- 15 Such considerations reflect the impact of the Russian military action on the civilian population of Ukraine and the increasing number of displaced Ukrainian residents. Such actions are at odds with the peaceful, cooperative relationship suggested by the Council's twinning agreement.
- 16 Discussions with all political group leaders demonstrate agreement to dissolve the twinning agreement and to formally communicate this to the political leadership of the city of Kostroma. Such measures are designed to highlight the Councils condemnation of the military action and are not a reflection with the Council's relationship with the people of Kostroma prior to the invasion of Ukraine by Russian Forces

Main implications

Impact on educational programmes and exchanges

- 17 The relationship between our two communities has created good conditions for free and easy communication between learners and educators in schools and at university. Ending our relationship may jeopardise such privileged connections.

Community cohesion

- 18 Without careful presentation, the decision could impact on the way in which County Durham residents interact with Russian nationals working, studying, visiting and living in the county.
- 19 The recent government announcement of the Homes for Ukraine scheme raises the very real prospect of affected Ukrainians being supported in County Durham. Their effective integration into

communities could be harmed by not formally renouncing ties with Kostroma.

Conclusion

- 20 Considering the Russian invasion of Ukraine it is felt appropriate to evoke the current twinning agreement and to write to the partner Mayor.
- 21 Such a communication must clearly explain the rationale for the decision and to recognise the value of twinning relationships.

Background papers

None

Other useful documents

Durham - Kostroma twinning charter

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

The entering into any twinning arrangement is at the discretion of individual local authorities. Chief Officers have delegated authority under Table 1 paragraph 4(g) of the Officer Scheme of Delegation to serve notices or issue determinations in the exercise of any discretionary power or in complying with any duty of the Council.

Finance

None.

Consultation

Consultation on this proposal has been undertaken with the Leader of the Council, Portfolio Holder for Economy & Partnerships and political group leaders.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Dissolving the twinning agreement is considered a proportionate act and a signal of solidarity with Ukraine in the face of the Russian military action. Additional vigilance will be required to assess any damage to community relations with residents of a Russian origin.

Climate Change

N/A.

Human Rights

The purpose of the Council's Twinning arrangements is a determination to develop positive cultural and educational opportunity for residents strengthening equality, dignity and respect. Current Russian military action in Ukraine including impacts on and displacement of civilian populations are incongruous with these aims.

Crime and Disorder

None

Staffing

None.

Accommodation

None.

Risk

None.

Procurement

N/A