

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by the Executive Director of Corporate Services

Corporate Cultural Sub-Committee: 9 December 2008

Subject: Future of Town Twinning

1. Purpose

- 1.1** The purpose of this report is to update the Sub-Committee on current arrangements for town twinning and to seek guidance on how to develop international contacts for the future.

2. Background

- 2.1** The original twinning was between Clydebank and Argenteuil and dates back to 1973. In 1996, that link was extended to the whole of West Dunbartonshire. A number of significant contacts have taken place between the two areas in recent times including participation by young people with special needs in the Ile de France special olympics, pipe band visits, visits by the Youth Council to this area, senior citizens' visits and the participation of a local dance group in a festival of dance in Argenteuil. Official visits by councillors and officers have also taken place. The last meeting of this sort was in Argenteuil in June 2006.
- 2.2** After the local elections in March this year, there was a change of administration in Argenteuil. Initially it was unclear whether that new administration would wish to continue existing twinning arrangements or to seek other twins. As a result, activity ceased over the last few months and there were concerns that the existing twinning would lapse.
- 2.3** In the meantime, contact was made with the Provost by the former Lord Lieutenant, Brigadier Harvie, on behalf of the small town of Beauvoisin (population 3,300) in the Gard département in southern France. This area was seeking a twinning link. As a result of these representations and in view of the uncertainty over the future of the Argenteuil twinning, the Provost made informal inquiries into the possibility of links and made a private visit there, at his own expense, in September/October to make contact with the mayor and community leaders.
- 2.4** Since that time, a letter has been received from the new mayor of Argenteuil, M. Philippe Doucet, advising that his authority will seek to continue the existing twinning arrangement, while also trying to develop new links. A copy of that letter is attached as the Appendix to this report.

3. Main Issues

3.1 The main issue is determining the direction that the Council's international links should now take.

3.2 *Argenteuil*

3.2.1 The new Mayor of Argenteuil has expressed a commitment to continuing with the twinning, although he has ceased the link with Argenteuil sans Frontières, the community-based twinning association which previously dealt with visits by organisations and local groups.

3.2.2 In his letter, Mayor Doucet refers to a meeting between himself and the mayors of the existing twin towns that he will convene in early 2009. A formal invitation is yet to be issued, so it is not possible at this stage to confirm the extent of the invitation or the size of the group to be invited. The invitation may well be for the Provost alone.

3.2.3 This Council previously approved a working visit to Argenteuil by the Provost and another member to be nominated at a future date. (Council Meeting 29 August 2007) That meeting never took place because of the lead-up to and preparations for the Argenteuil local elections. As a result, the authority still exists for a civic visit to take place at that level.

3.3 *Beauvoisin*

3.3.1 In relation to Beauvoisin, it is clear that the mayor and council of this small community are enthusiastic about entering into a twinning arrangement with this area. However, it is normal practice for town twinning partners to be similar in population. The population of Beauvoisin is only 3317. (The population of Argenteuil is 93,961 and of West Dunbartonshire is 91,240.)

3.3.2 The community of Beauvoisin is keen to make links between schools and there could be benefits there for local pupils.

3.3.3 If it was thought unsuitable to create a twinning link between West Dunbartonshire and Beauvoisin, but still desirable to make a link of some sort, the options could include:

- 1) linking Beauvoisin with a community of similar size in the West Dunbartonshire area; or
- 2) linking schools, without establishing a formal link between the communities; or
- 3) forming a friendship link with Beauvoisin.

The details of these options are explored in the paragraphs below:-

1) Linking Beauvoisin with a similar community

It would not be impossible to link Beauvoisin with a community of similar size in West Dunbartonshire. However, the main disadvantage would be that Beauvoisin has its own mayor and council, whereas the only civic links with West Dunbartonshire are with the Council itself. This means the same level of involvement for the Council as for a district-wide twinning. It was partly for that reason that the Council chose to extend the Argenteuil link from affecting only Clydebank to the whole of West Dunbartonshire (May 1996). It might, however, be possible to encourage community links between Beauvoisin and a West Dunbartonshire community if the community itself, through a local association, was willing to promote and develop those links. This could be further investigated.

2) Forming school to school links only

School links might benefit local pupils. Previous attempts to create school to school contacts with Argenteuil have not been successful – partly because it is not the local authority which has responsibility for schools in France. It might be easier to form viable links with a smaller area than Argenteuil. This will, however, depend on the attitude of the local Académie, which has responsibility for Education.

3) Forming a friendship link

A friendship link would be at a lower level than a formal twinning and the parties could agree the ways in which it would operate. In real terms, however, it is hard to see how such a link would function without involving civic and group contacts and exchanges. If this were the case, the costs to the council are likely to be similar to those involved when operating a formal twinning. The partnership between Clydebank and Argenteuil was initially a friendship agreement.

4. Personnel Issues

- 4.1 Increasing twinning activity or establishing additional international links will have personnel issues in terms of increasing workload for existing staff.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1 The existing twinning budget is less than £5,000. The possibility also exists for twinning projects of a cultural nature to be funded through the cultural services budget. Developing twinning activities with one or more partners will inevitably increase pressures on available budgets.

6. Risk Analysis

- 6.1 There are no physical risks involved in deciding policy on twinning activity.

7. Conclusions

- 7.1** It is now appropriate for the Council to decide how it would wish to develop twinning for the benefit of the communities, groups and organisations of West Dunbartonshire in the future.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 8.1** It is recommended that the sub-committee

- 1) welcomes the expressed commitment of Argenteuil to continuation of the existing twinning link and awaits further information on the vision of the new administration in Argenteuil for the development of twinning;
- 2) notes that authority already exists for the Provost and another elected member to visit Argenteuil;
- 3) discusses how best to proceed with the request for a link with Beauvoisin and recommends accordingly to the Corporate and Efficient Governance Committee; and
- 4) recommends to the Corporate and Efficient Governance Committee that it be remitted to appropriate officers, in discussion with the Provost, to develop a strategy for future international links.

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Background Papers

None

Wards Affected: All wards

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