

EXETER CITY COUNCIL

**EXECUTIVE
16 JUNE 2009**

USE OF BEDFORD SQUARE

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to seek guidance from Members on use of Bedford Square by political organisations.

2.0 INFORMATION – BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The current guidelines for Bedford Square were approved at the City Council's Executive on 18 March 2008 (copy attached at Appendix 1).
- 2.2 The objective of the framework provided by guidelines approved in March 2008 was to facilitate events and activities that would provide a focus for the community and that would enliven Bedford Square.
- 2.3 Since approval of the guidelines a wide range of community groups, charities, and political groups have booked and made use of Bedford Square, with the City Centre Manager successfully managing the space.
- 2.4 In managing the use of Bedford Square, the City Centre Manager has worked within the framework provided by the approved guidelines, authorizing events if they:
- a) Create more interest for city centre users;
 - b) Do not raise any health and safety concerns;
 - c) Ensure adequate provision for pedestrian movement through and around the space being used;
 - d) Have a satisfactory relationship with individual retail frontages;
 - e) Are unlikely to cause offence to city centre users, residents and businesses;
 - f) Do not raise public order concerns.

3.0 INFORMATION – CURRENT ISSUE

- 3.1 During January 2009, the BNP used Bedford Square without having made a booking. Following a request from the City Centre Manager, the Police requested that the BNP move on. Following the BNP incident, Unite Against Fascism made a request to use Bedford Square on 7 February and were given consent by the City Centre Manager to do so.

- 3.2 Further requests have since been made by both the BNP and Unite Against Fascism to use Bedford Square. Police advice is that it would be difficult to resist a further request by the BNP to use Bedford Square on public order grounds and it is clear that should a booking be accepted for the BNP, Unite Against Fascism would also wish to book the space.
- 3.3 Bookings from both the BNP and Unite Against Fascism have recently been resisted, along with bookings for any other political organisation, on the basis of being in the critical and sensitive period leading up to the European Parliamentary elections on Thursday 4 June. There is a risk that during this sensitive period, overtly political bookings of Bedford Square may inflame underlying tensions and, in turn, both cause offence to City Centre users, residents and businesses and raise public order concerns.
- 3.4 A view is now sought from Members on how they wish to react to political bookings of Bedford Square in the period after the European Parliamentary elections. Both police and legal guidance is that any attempt to offer anything other than a level playing field on political bookings would be difficult to sustain under legal challenge.

4.0 RECOMMENDATION

- 4.1 Members are asked to express a clear position on whether they wish to continue to support political bookings of Bedford Square, on the understanding that in doing so it will be difficult to sustain a refusal for the BNP to use Bedford Square.

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Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)

Background papers used in compiling this report:

None