

**ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** 20 March 2025  
5.30 - 6.45 pm

**Present:** Councillors Pounds (Chair), Nestor (Vice-Chair), Ashton, Divkovic, Glasberg, Hauk, Payne and Swift

Executive Councillors: Wade (Executive Councillor for Communities)

Also present Councillor Davey (ex-officio as Leader of the Council)

**Officers:**

Chief Executive: Robert Pollock

Director, Communities Group: Sam Scharf

Culture & Community Manager, Frances Alderton

Committee Manager: James Goddard

Meeting Producer: Boris Herzog

<b>FOR THE INFORMATION OF THE COUNCIL</b>
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**25/11/EnC Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for lateness were received from Councillor Divkovic (who joined mid-discussion of Folk Festival item).

**25/12/EnC Declarations of Interest**

Name	Item	Interest
Councillor Ashton	25/14/EnC	Personal: Folk Festival was located in his ward.  Attended the Folk Festival when acting as Mayor of Cambridge 2022-2023.

**25/13/EnC Public Questions**

There were no public questions.

## **25/14/EnC Folk Festival**

### **Matter for Decision**

The Officer's report was presented following a request for a special meeting of Environment and Community Scrutiny in accordance with Section 43 of the Council's standing orders. The information in the report reflects and responds to the request for this special meeting. It focuses entirely on the fallow year of the Cambridge Folk Festival, the basis and timings of the decision and outline plans for 2025.

### **Decision of Executive Councillor for Communities**

Noted the information provided regarding the Folk Festival 2024, decision making and future planning.

### **Reason for the Decision**

As set out in the Officer's report.

### **Any Alternative Options Considered and Rejected**

Not applicable.

### **Scrutiny Considerations**

The Committee received a report from the Director of Communities. Additional comments were made by the Chief Executive, Culture & Community Manager and Executive Councillor for Communities.

Opposition Councillors asked questions covering the following general topics:

- i. A special meeting was requested to discuss the Folk Festival January 2025, so wanted clarification why the meeting was not heard before 20 March 2025?
- ii. Were there any cost savings from the Executive Councillor's decision? Total of costs not to run Folk Festival appeared similar to those to run it, so why was the Folk Festival cancelled?
- iii. When was the decision taken to cancel the Folk Festival?

The Chair said the City Council's constitution, Part 4A Council Procedure Rules para 43, provides that two members of the committee have the right to call a special meeting on a single item of business. Once the request was received, the Chair consulted members of the committee to find a suitable date

that all members could attend ie 20 March 2025. Members of the committee should note that the procedure rules do not entitle the members who requested the special meeting to determine when the meeting should take place.

The Director of Communities said the following in response to Members' questions:

- i. The decision to delay the Folk Festival was made 7 January 2025 but this decision was not announced until 17 January due to commercial sensitivities. Having a fallow year had commercial implications so details had to be confirmed before a public announcement could be made.

The Executive Councillor for Communities added that once a decision was made, Officers had five working days to respond. There were no delays in communication to manipulate the situation. Consistent wording was used in communications ie 'delay' not 'cancel' to avoid confusion.

- ii. Referred to cost details in the report. The expected surplus from the 2024 Folk Festival did not materialise, this led to a readjustment in the budget.

The Executive Councillor for Communities said the following in response to Members' questions:

- i. Was unable to reallocate funding when it appeared the Folk Festival was experiencing financial difficulties. The Executive Councillor had regular updates from Officers. She received a report on 30 December 2024 that the Folk Festival was in trouble and discussed it with the Labour Group in January 2025.
- ii. Folk Festivals across the world were in trouble, not just the city. Dorset Folk Festival went into liquidation 20 March 2025 and many other Folk Festivals were in trouble as costs increased and ticket sales declined. It was also harder to get acts to perform. Many Folk Festivals were permanently cancelled in the UK to date. The country was still feeling the impact of Covid-19 so smaller independent Folk Festivals found it harder to get headliner acts.

The Committee queried if Opposition Councillors had the opportunity to approach Officers for information before committee. It was clarified that Councillors could approach the Director then raise questions in committee or at Full Council. The Chair said a list of questions had been submitted when a special meeting was requested. Councillor Payne added Opposition Councillors had the opportunity to liaise with Officers prior to Committee, but this was the first opportunity to scrutinise the Executive Councillor in a public forum.

The Director of Communities said the following in response to Members' questions:

- i. Cost trends had contributed to Folk Festival decline. There were fewer ticket sales nationally for Folk Festivals. This led to the need to review the sustainability of the Cambridge Folk Festival.
- ii. There was some delay in communications to ensure details were correct and stakeholders were confident that a delay to the Folk Festival 2025 would mean the Folk Festival could go ahead in 2026. Commercial sensitivity meant that certain stakeholders were contacted before a public announcement was made in January 2025.

Councillor Payne specifically queried when it was known the Folk Festival had financial difficulties. It should have been apparent after the 2024 Folk Festival, so why was action not taken sooner ie August 2024 rather than January 2025? The Executive Councillor said four options were listed in the report she was given by Officers in December 2024, two of which were to cancel or postpone until 2026.

The Director of Communities said the following in response to Members' questions:

- i. There were sufficient staff in place to manage Folk Festival arrangements. Business transformation strengthened arrangements and resilience. The City Council staff restructure did not affect the Folk Festival.
- ii. City Council Officers has successfully delivered the Folk Festival for fifty-nine years. They had the skills to continue doing so.
- iii. The Folk Festival was normally cost neutral in the Council budget so the Executive Councillor did not need to be involved. She had been involved

this year due to reasons set out in the Officer's report i.e. expected financial loss.

Councillor Payne asked for specific details on when bookings were planned for Folk Festival acts. Were these being taken in the autumn as normal (for example) or not, so the Folk Festival was cancelled by a fait accompli?

The Director of Communities said the following in response:

- i. A decision to make 2025 a fallow year was taken 7 January. The Folk Festival could have gone ahead at this point if the decision had not been taken. Contracts were drawn up in January each year. Agents were still offering contracts 7-17 January when the postponement decision was publicly announced, so the Folk Festival was not cancelled by fait accompli.
- ii. Two hundred early bird tickets were offered refunds and tickets to alternative 2025 events, forty-five contacts accepted this to date.
- iii. Fallow years were common for Folk Festivals. For example, Glastonbury had fallow years on alternate years.
- iv. A review was required to develop a sustainability plan for 2026.

The Executive Councillor for Communities had received generous and supportive feedback from the Folk Festival community when they learned of plans for 2025-26.

The Chair asked Officers to provide regular updates for Councillors to pass onto residents. She suggested Councillors could contact Officers for further details.

The Committee resolved nem con to endorse the recommendation.

The Executive Councillor approved the recommendation.

### **Conflicts of Interest Declared by the Executive Councillor (and any Dispensations Granted)**

No conflicts of interest were declared by the Executive Councillor.

The meeting ended at 6.45 pm

**CHAIR**