Series of letters between Brian Gerrish and Plymouth City Council in 2005

Brian Gerrish tries to get Plymouth City Council to declare details of expenditure on Common Purpose and the numbers of Council staff who have been 'trained' by CP. No comprehensive reply is forthcoming despite repeated requests for public disclosure.

Plymouth City Council does admit that:

- It uses CP to train Officers.
- The Leader of the Council is CP and his training was paid by the public purse.
- Quote by Corporate lawyer "Given that much of the support that has and continues to be provided to the (CP) programme by way of speaker's time by way of participation at workshop sessions, allied to the fact that I have no historic record of who has attended, other than the two I have advised of, I AM UNABLE TO PROVIDE FIGURES". Therefore Plymouth City Council cannot account for monies spent on CP, yet admits that officers support the course in public time - contrary to the repeated claims of Common Purpose - which claims participation is by a 'private' individual.
- Quote by Chief Accountant "no separate records have been maintained of the costs of Common Purpose, or the time spent by officers in attending or supporting this, then it was NOT POSSIBLE TO IDENTIFY THE COSTS OF THESE MATTERS."
- Despite the non-existance of accurate financial records showing where public money has been spent on Common Purpose courses and by way of Officer's time and effort, Plymouth City Council does admit to spending:

    £15,000
    £3,850 plus VAT each for two people
    £3,950 plus VAT for one person
    £27,061 2004/5

This totals approximately £53,700 exclusive of VAT, but the period of expenditure is unclear.

If Common Purpose is such a wonderful charity, why is this Council so reluctant to give details of expenditure, and why are financial records concerning CP incomplete?

The pattern of obfuscation, and missing money is repeated in Councils, the police and other public bodies across the UK. Common Purpose trained officers and other staff block and hide details of their activity...but why? And why does the taxpayer pay?

FAXED: 01752 304963 3.2.2005

Mike Robinson
Chief Executive
Plymouth City Council
Floor 1 – Civic Centre
Plymouth
PL1 2EW

3 February 2005

Ref: Your MR/AH letter of 19 January 2005

Dear Mr Robinson

Freedom of Information Act

Citizens Rights / Quasi Secret Organisation Commonpurpose within Plymouth City Council

Thank you for your letter of 19 January 2005.

Unfortunately you have not answered the substance of my letter of 13 January 2005, in that I specifically and formally asked:

1. For an explanation (justification) of the use of taxpayers money and PCC Officers time in participation in a quasi secret organisation which promotes undeclared / hidden networking, exchange of information and personal advantages, and which promotes the undemocratic 'selection' of leaders.

2. How many people within Plymouth City Council have been 'trained' by Commonpurpose?

If this information has not been collated corporately previously, I am now asking for the total number of PCC staff to now be collated and declared. I believe the total number is substantial.

3. Why PCC is encouraging officers (and members) to share sensitive / confidential? information behind closed doors, under the so called 'Chatham House Rules' of the Council for Foreign Relations.

4. Why Commonpurpose is allowed to use PCC officers to attempt to recruit new Commonpurpose 'members' from PCC staff, in PCC working hours and therefore at public expense?

I hold factual evidence that this is taking place and therefore your statement that "Commonpurpose members do not recruit individuals to come from within the Council" is incorrect.

5. How much public money has been spent on this organisation by PCC overall?

I would also like to know what Competitive Tendering procedures have been conducted for the provision of so-called 'training' by Commonpurpose?

I look forward to your full and detailed answers on these matters.

Yours sincerely

Brian Gerrish

CC. Vivian Pengelly Shadow Leader PCC
Tudor Evans Leader PCC CP
Gary Streeter MP
DPPAC

Plymouth

Becky Kapp
Chief Executive
Floor 1 - Civic Centre
[illegible]

e-mail: alison.howes@pl[illegible]
http://www.pl[illegible]

30 March 2005

BK/AH

Dear Mr Gerrish

Re: Your letter dated 3 February 2005 – Common Purpose

Your letter dated 3 February 2005 addressed to Mike Robinson has been referred to me as the new Chief Executive. In response to the points you have raised, the position is:-

1. Contrary to your allegation that the Council has not answered the substance of your letter dated 13 January 2005, if one reviews the correspondence passing between the Chief Executive's department and yourself since October 2004, the issues have indeed been addressed.

   My predecessor and my Head of Performance & Policy have advised you, for example, that the national Common Purpose programme, which is designed to develop leadership across private, public and voluntary/community sectors, is one of a number of initiatives through which the Council can develop the skills of it's Senior Officers. Indeed, we have found from those who have graduated from the programme, that their renewed breadth of understanding of issues facing the local community in this context, greatly assists them in their supporting and indeed developing such areas as Community Cohesion, renewal and leadership. It is absolutely vital, in my opinion, that if neighbourhood renewal and community leadership is to be sustained, it must come from within local communities. However, the Council has an important role to play, in partnership with the local communities that it serves, to support these important initiatives. Given the above, this Council shall continue to support the Common Purpose programme and whilst your allegations that they are a "quasi secret organisation" is best levelled at them and not the Council – I have no evidence to suggest that this is the case. For you to suggest that this is a "quasi secret organisation" by the mere fact that programme delegates network is, with respect, ludicrous.

2. As previously advised, over the past couple of years, two Senior Officers have attended and now graduated the Common Purpose programme. I am not aware of any officer's attendance in the preceding year's programme but can confirm that a

Senior Officer is attending this year's programme. As previously advised, a number of my Senior Management Team have supported the programme by attending as speakers or participating in workshop sessions. There is no corporate record kept as to previous years' attendees from the Council, if any. This is perhaps something you should take up with the Common Purpose Organisation themselves.

3. It is my understanding that in order to create an atmosphere conducive to free discussion or exchange, all Common Purpose programme days and meetings are held in confidence unless explicitly stated otherwise. I understand that the programme has been very successful in attracting key speakers and getting them to talk openly because of the confidential atmosphere. The Common Purpose considers it would be detrimental to the programme if trust and confidence was lost by a breach of the rule. Again, you may wish to take this matter up with Common Purpose.

4. I understand that the Common Purpose commonly seek nominations from within participant organisations for attendance in the programme on an annual basis. As an organisation who has supported the programme I am happy to consider nominations. I refer to my response in 1. above as to an example of the benefits that my Senior Officers who have attended the programme have gained.

5. Given that much of the support that has and continues to be provided to the programme is by way of a speaker's time by way of participation at workshop sessions, allied to the fact that I have no historic corporate record of who has attended, other than the two I have advised of, I am unable to provide figures.

I believe that this letter addresses the points you raised and whilst we will address any genuine issues you raise in the future, I should perhaps let you know that I do not intend to enter into repetitive or ineffective correspondence.

Thank you for bringing this matter to my attention.

Yours sincerely

B A Keel
Chief Executive

COUNCILLOR TUDOR EVANS
LEADER OF PLYMOUTH CITY COUNCIL

The Council House
Civic Centre
Plymouth
PL1 2AA

Tel: 01752 304455
Fax: 01752 304867
http://www.plymouth.gov.uk
email: tudor.evans@plymouth.gov.uk

Our Ref: TE/JCK

17th May, 2005

Dear Mr. Gerrish,

Thank you for your letter dated 12th May, 2005.

I confirm that I am a graduate of the organisation Common Purpose and as reflected in the letter to you dated 30th March, I will continue to support the programme.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Tudor Evans
Leader of Plymouth City Council

Cllr Tudor Evans
Leader of the Council
Civic Centre
Armada Way
Plymouth
PL1 2EW

19May 2005

Dear Mr Evans

Freedom of Information Act – Commonpurpose within Plymouth City Council

Thank you for your prompt letter of 17 May 2005 informing me that you are a graduate of Commonpurpose and that you intend to continue your involvement.

Can you please confirm that your Commpnpurpose course was paid from the public purse, and provide the total cost to the public purse of that course.

Since you clearly have no difficulty in declaring your own membership, I assume that Mr Keel Chief Executive of PCC will now also be happy to provide me with the names of the other PCC employees and PCC members who are also 'graduates', and the total of public monies expended by PCC on Commonpurpose training, entertainment and similar in the last 5 years.

Finally, can I suggest that if PCC is currently having to make cuts in services to save some £10m, that expenditure on Commonpurpose should perhaps also be carefully reviewed for possible savings.

I look forward to receiving the information on the cost of your course.

Yours sincerely

B J Gerrish.

Faxed 30495 21/6/05

Cllr Tudor Evans
Leader of the Council
Civic Centre
Armada Way
Plymouth
PL1 2EW

21 June 2005

Dear Mr Evans

Freedom of Information Act – Commonpurpose within Plymouth City Council

Thank you for your prompt letter of 17 May 2005 informing me that you are a graduate of Commonpurpose and that you intend to continue your involvement.

In my letter of 19 May 2005 I asked you to confirm that your Commonpurpose Course was paid from the public purse, and for you to provide the total cost of that course to the public purse.

Despite your card acknowledging receipt of my letter I have not yet had a response from you.

I now require a response and a full answer to my letter of 19 May including copies of any documentation related to public expenditure on Commonpurpose by Plymouth City Council in the last 5 years.

Yours sincerely

B J Gerrish.

Enc. B Gerrish letter dated 19 May 2005 re PCC expenditure Commonpurpose

COUNCILLOR TUDOR EVANS
LEADER OF PLYMOUTH CITY COUNCIL

Our Ref: TE/JCK

15th July, 2005

Dear Mr. Gerrish,

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT – Commonpurpose within Plymouth City Council

I can confirm that, as with any course/programme to which the Council supports through nominating members and/or officer delegates, the costs of my attendance on the programme was met by the Council.

I hope this now finalises the matter.

Yours sincerely,

J. C. Evans

Councillor Tudor Evans
Leader of Plymouth City Council

David Sheppard
Head of Legal Services
Plymouth City Council
Civic Centre
Plymouth
PL1 2EW

8 July 2005

Dear Mr Sheppard

Freedom of Information Act 2000 Demand for information regarding PCC expenditure on Common Purpose

Further to our recent telephone conversation I hereby write to formally demand the release of information detailing:

1. The total expenditure by PCC of public money in the last 5 years towards the organisation Common Purpose, and / or any of its component named courses such as Matrix, Focus, Navigator, and similar, pertaining to staff training, entertainment, donated PCC staff hours, members expenses, or any other PCC support requiring payment for Common Purpose activities from the public purse.

2. Confirmation and details of total expenditure from the public purse to pay for Mr Tudor Evans to attend Common Purpose training, including course fees, travel costs, attendance allowances and similar.

3. Disclosure of the total number of PCC officers, Members and other staff who have undergone Common Purpose Training in the last 5 years.

4. In support of my demand I have attached a list of recent correspondence relating to the above request, which remains unanswered by PCC to date. It is apparent from the correspondence that PCC has continually evaded providing key answers to :

    - The adverse effect on public probity of un-minuted, closed door meetings between public officers, members, the private sector and individuals.

- The total amount of public money spent by PCC on Common Purpose
- The total number of officers and members who are now 'graduates' and entitled to hold meetings effectively in secret.

Although you have said so verbally, I note from our conversation that you are not willing to provide me with written confirmation that you have recently become a Common Purpose 'graduate' yourself.

I look forward to a prompt reply from PCC answering my questions at paragraphs 1,2 and 3 above.

As a member of the general public I remain highly suspicious that PCC is apparently unable to explain how much public money has been spent on the organisation Common Purpose. Presumably though in much the same way that PCC is unable to produce an independently audited set of accounts for Devonport Regeneration Company, which purports to be a legal company, but does not trade as Devonport Regeneration Co Ltd or Devonport Regeneration Partnership Ltd.

Finally I trust that PCC officers and Members will act in their formal capacity as servants of the general public, free from any allegiances they may feel obliged to hold to the organisation Common Purpose, or other Common Purpose 'graduates', or in respect of confidentiality to Common Purpose / 'Graduates' under the so called 'Chatham House Rules' of the Council for Foreign Relations.

Yours sincerely

B J Gerrish.

Appendix: List of relevant correspondence to date.

Full

List of correspondence to date asking for information on Common Purpose to which PCC has not yet given a response. and continue to hide financial expenditure.

1. PCC T Evans TE/JCK undated / received 22 6 05 re-directing my CP enquiry to Head Legal services– request not answered. No financial Information provided.
2. B Gerrish letter T Evans 21 6 05 asking for confirmation that Mr Evans CP course was paid by the public purse.
3. B Gerrish 19 6 05 T Evans asking for information on CP under the Freedom of Information Act
4. PCC T Evans letter 17 5 05 confirming his 'graduate' CP status. No financial Information provided.
5. B Gerrish letter 12 5 05 chasing TE reply to CP information under Freedom of Information Act.
6. B Gerrish letter 12 5 05 BK asking for information under Freedom of Information Act and asking for clarification of the role of CP within the SRB funding process – letter not answered.
7. PCC letter BK 30 3 2005 justification for PCC to allow CP to operate – letter fails to answer key questions and concerns previously made. No financial information provided.
8. B Gerrish letter 18 3 2005 TE chasing a reply to questions asked to Mike Robinson on subject of Common Purpose
9. B Gerrish letter 3 2 2005 MR requesting information on Common Purpose under the Freedom of Information Act – information not provided. No financial information provided.
10. PCC MR letter 19 1 05 providing incomplete information on CP. No financial information provided.
11. B Gerrish letter 13 1 05 MR asking for justification of CP breeches of probity within PCC by secret closed door meetings.
12. PCC MR letter 19 1 05 providing incomplete information on CP and no financial information.
13. BG letter 13 1 05 asking for clarification of CP role within PCC and public business and decision making, and the effect on probity award of funding.
14. PCC MR letter 13 10 04 challenging BG complaints to Head of Performance and Policy
15. PCC CB letter 11 10 2004 deflecting statement of complaint with vague justification of CP. No answers to key questions on loss of (financial) probity
16. BG telecon 8 10 2004 challenging PCCs involvement with CP.

306039

steve.crane@plymouth.gov.uk

3/FOI REQUEST/SC

8 August, 2005

Dear Mr Gerrish

Re : FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST – EXPENDITURE ON COMMON PURPOSE

I write further to the letter from my colleague dated 15 July 2005 and to our recent telephone conversation.

I have examined my file and note that the Chief Executive has previously dealt with points 1 and 3 of your letter of 12 July to the Head of Legal Services. Point 5 of his letter stated :

"Given that much of the support that has and continues to be provided to the programme by way of a speaker's time by way of participation at workshop sessions, allied to the fact that I have no historic corporate record of who has attended, other than the two I have advised of, I am unable to provide figures".

Sub-Section 14(2) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 does not oblige an authority comply with subsequent identical or substantially similar requests.

With regard to enquiry number 2, I have been advised the Leader's Office does not have a record of the costs in respect of the Leader's attendance.

The Council does not hold the information you require. However, in an effort to assist your enquiry, information has been requested from the Common Purpose Organisation to enable further research to be carried out.

If sufficient information is received, and the cost of further research does not exceed the appropriate financial limit, the Council will endeavour to supply what information it can.

If you are not satisfied with the above, an appeal can be made to the Corporate Information Officer, Civic Centre, Plymouth, PL1 2EW.

Yours sincerely,

Steve Crane
Lawyer – Corporate Advice

cc : Richard Woodfield – Corporate Information Officer
Richard Taylor – Chief Executive
Paul Williams – Chief Accountant

Fsc0808.l2

Mr P Williams
Paul.williams@plymouth.gov.uk
(01752) 304942

050812/PW 12 August 2005

Dear Mr Gerrish,

Inspection of the 2004/05 Accounts

I refer to our meeting of 9th August, when you detailed what information you were seeking under your right to inspect the above accounts and books etc to be audited. From the notes I made at the meeting I confirm you raised the following issues:

- **Devonport Regeneration Company (DRC)**
  You expressed concern about the uncertain status of the 'company' - although this purported to be a company it looks like it is actually not. You referred to there being no accounts for the company and it is not trading - PCC would appear to be the accountable body.

  You also referred to correspondence between yourself and the Director for Housing, Clive Turner on this matter.

  You asked for full details of money which had been passed to DRC (and back to PCC in reverse), as well as details of money given to projects which were not directly under the control of PCC.

  You also want to know who received the interest on the income (grant) received and how much this was for the year.

  I provided you with two financial statements which give an analysis of income and expenditure for the year for DRC activities – including details of money spent on individual projects managed by PCC. From these statements it was apparent that £2.5m was paid over during the year to third parties to manage DRC projects (although these projects were not analysed in PCC's accounts). You asked for details of where these payments had gone.

- **Common Purpose**
  You raised a number of issues concerning common purpose, although many of the points were not directly related to the 2004/05 accounts. I am aware that you have raised certain questions with the Council about common purpose costs through requests under the Freedom of Information Act, on which you have already received written replies from the Council.

  As I said to you at our meeting, given that you have already been informed that no separate records had been maintained of the cost of Common Purpose, or the time spent by officers in attending or supporting this, then it was not possible to identify the costs of these matters.

  Further enquiries on accounting for Common Purpose have identified that up until four or five years ago there was a separate budget for Common Purpose (we think this was about £15,000) against which the direct costs of course and conference fees would have been met. The cost of staff time attending and supporting Common Purpose would not have been included though as this would have been contained within the various departments salary costs.

The Common Purpose budget was removed as part of budget savings measures on the basis that any subsequent costs incurred in relation to this would have to be contained within other existing budgets. There have therefore been no separate accounts maintained in recent years for the costs incurred on this activity.

It would appear possible however to identify from our systems any specific payments which the Council has made direct to Common Purpose, and we will endeavour to provide you with this information.

- **Single Regeneration Budget**
  You asked how this was accounted for and would like some analysis of the income and expenditure for the year.

- **Loans and Grants**
  What loans or grants have been paid to:
  - The National Marine Aquarium (also, has interest been charge on the loans and if so, how much was charged and at what rate.
  - Mount Batten Watersports Centre
  - Mayflower Centre
  - Devonport Co-operative Development Agency

- **Business Rates**
  How much was outstanding at the year-end and some analysis (what was one-off or 'ongoing'?). Failing this the top quartile of arrears cases (eg number of cases / amounts).

- How much money was given to RISC – which went into receivership (believed to be last year). Were there loans outstanding which were lost when this organisation went into receivership?

I will research the information you have requested and reply in due course. Please let me know if there is anything you asked for which I have not covered in this letter.

At our meeting, you also expressed to me a number of concerns in relation to the possible inappropriate actions of individuals regarding DRC and Common Purpose. I did not take detailed notes of your concerns at our meeting, however, in view of the serious nature of the allegations, I have sent this letter to the Council's Chief Auditor, Mrs Watts. I would advise you to detail your specific concerns to Mrs Watts (at the above address), who can investigate these matters as appropriate.

Yours sincerely

Paul Williams
Chief Accountant

306039

steve.crane@plymouth.gov.uk

3/FOI RRQUEST/SC

15 August, 2005

Dear Mr Gerrish

Re : FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST – EXPENDITURE ON COMMON PURPOSE

I refer to my letter of 8 August 2005 and to our telephone conversation.

I am advised that the Chief Executive's Department, Support Services Office records shows that two Officers attended the Common Purpose Plymouth Matrix 2004 at a cost of £3,850.00 each plus VAT.

An Officer also attended for the 2005 Matrix programme at the cost of £3,950.00 plus VAT.

I hope this assists your enquiry. However, if you are not satisfied with the above an appeal can be made to the office specified in my last letter.

Yours sincerely,

Steve Crane
Lawyer – Corporate Advice

Fsc1008.l2

Helen Hocking, BA (Hons), CPFA
Head of Finance
Corporate Resources Department
Civic Centre
Plymouth
PL1 2AA

Please ask for : Mr Williams
E-Mail : paul.williams@plymouth.gov.uk
Direct Line : 01752 304942
Fax : 01752 304923
http: www.plymouth.gov.uk

My Ref: PW/SJG Your Ref: ... Date: 23rd September 2005

Dear Mr Gerrish

Inspection of the 2004/05 Accounts

Further to our meeting of 9th August, my letter of 12th August, and your letter of 26th August, I am now able to provide you with the following further information:

- **Devonport Regeneration Partnership**
  From the statements which I have already provided to you it was apparent that £2.5m was paid over during the year to third parties to manage DRC projects (although these projects were not analysed in PCC's accounts). I attach a statement which analyses these payments. Where the statement refers to 'internal Jnl' this is where payments were made to Council departments who are undertaking supported projects. These departments would have had to apply for grants in the same way as external organisations.

- **Common Purpose**
  Payments to the Common Purpose Organisation in 2004/05 totalled £27,061.

- **Single Regeneration Budget**
  The Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) is derived from SRB grant awarded to the Council. The budget is managed and monitored through the SRB Board and financial returns are submitted to the South West of England Regional Development Agency on a quarterly basis. Staff employed by the Council administer the programme and the cost of their salaries is financed from the grant. I attach a statement which provides a detailed analysis of the expenditure financed through the Council's SRB grant in 2004/05

- **Loans and Grants**
  Loans or grants to the following in 2004/05 were:
  - The National Marine Aquarium (NMA)

    No loans were made to the NMA during the year and no loans remained outstanding from previous years.

(cont'd over)