



Subject:	Christmas Programme 2022 Evaluation
Date:	8 th March 2023
Reporting Officer:	John Greer, Director of Economic Development
Contact Officer:	Kerry Mc Mullan, Tourism and Events Development Manager

Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some time in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

Call-in	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report
1.1	<p>The purpose of this report is to provide Members with a summary of activity delivered as part of a Christmas programme in November - December 2022.</p> <p>The report will also give consideration to options for the 2023 Christmas Programme.</p>
2.0	Recommendations
2.1	<p>Members are asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Note the contents of this report and provide a direction on the approach to be adopted for the Christmas 2023 programme and beyond.

3.0	Main report
3.1	<p>On an annual basis, the Council's Culture and Events Units delivers a series of large-scale public events, which are free to access by both citizens and visitors to the city, on behalf of Belfast City Council. This is further supported by the activity of other teams who support a number of annual programmes and activities and the Markets Unit who manage the delivery of the Christmas Market at City Hall in addition to year-round activity at St George's and Smithfield markets.</p>
3.2	<p>Members will recall that in 2021, officers adopted a different approach to the Christmas 2021 programme which replaced the traditional switch - on ceremony. In the context of Covid, the challenge for officers was to design a programme that continued to be cognisant of safety considerations and have the ability to respond to a changing environment whilst meeting the needs of city stakeholders including those businesses impacted by the pandemic. Feedback from city centre traders on the traditional light switch was not entirely positive, with many highlighting traffic, parking congestion and the event itself acting as a barrier to normal trading at a crucial time of year.</p>
3.3	<p>As well as responding to the pandemic the Christmas programme also aimed to meet the development objectives set out in the ten-year Cultural Strategy, including long-term recommendations for events in the city including better strategic alignment across the Council in the design and, delivery of these event-based programmes and above all ensuring the activities were authentic and utilising our local supply chain.</p>
3.4	<p>Cultural animation and creative interventions were identified as fundamental in welcoming people back into the city and played a significant role in creating an authentic and open environment at Christmas.</p>
3.5	<p>As a consequence, in 2021, the Christmas programme consisted of a combination of creative initiatives such as street performance, projections, music, window dressing and lighting installations all inspired by the theme <i>'Once Upon a Time in Belfast'</i>, utilising local</p>

	<p>artists, creatives and designers to create an authentic and engaging experience for all throughout the festive season.</p> <p>3.6 In 2022, the 2021 model of Christmas animation and event delivery was further consolidated through a programme of seasonal animation in the city centre, which supported economic recovery in the city post pandemic and uplifted the city and visitors in the context of the current economic climate.</p> <p>3.7 Benefits of the new approach included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improving the cultural vibrancy of the city - Fostering civic pride - Positioning the Belfast brand - Supporting the local culture, arts and events sectors - Delivering direct economic benefits - Supporting businesses <p>3.8 Christmas Programme 19th November 2022</p> <p>Belfast's Christmas celebrations officially began on Saturday 19th November with the '<i>Christmas in Belfast</i>' opening day event, which took place from 6pm to 9pm.</p> <p>3.9 In 2022, the opening weekend activity was reduced from two nights to one and focused on Saturday night only. This decision was taken based on the findings of the independent evaluation and feedback from 2021, which evidenced that the opening evening (Saturday) was much better attended than the Sunday. By reprofiling the event and animation budget into the Saturday activity only, the programme was uplifted to enhance the visitor experience and increase impact. The event schedule consisted of a range of elements including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Christmas lighting scheme - Lighting projections - Music programme - Procession
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- Window animation
- Street animation
- 2 Royal Avenue
- Christmas Market
- Lord Mayor Role
- Marketing and Communications Activity

Christmas Lighting Scheme

3.10

2022 was year 3 of the existing Christmas Lighting Scheme which began on the 19th November and ran until the 4th January. The scheme was identical to the 2021 programme, with the addition of icicles on Ann Street and the positioning and lighting on 12 additional trees on Donegall place.

3.11

Feedback on the scheme was positive, however there continues to be requests for an extension of the scheme including arterial routes. This currently cannot be facilitated within existing contracts or budgets, however consideration should be given as part of a review exercise in advance of any new scheme from 2023 onwards. This should also consider the strategic context and recommendations of the lighting strategy as well as trends from elsewhere that increasingly targets investment at schemes that can provide year-round animation and lighting.

3.12

Christmas lights are an essential part of dressing the city, in 2019 Council secured a new lighting scheme which featured more energy - efficient lights. In addition, the lighting scheme was turned on each evening between 3pm / 4pm and was turned off at 1am. The pole mounted features operated by DFI operated from dusk to dawn.

3.13

Lighting Projections

City Hall was illuminated from 18th November to 7th January inclusive. A temporary lighting scheme was also devised for 2 Royal Avenue at the former Tesco site. This included mapped projections which operated from 19th November to 1st January. Additional illuminations

<p>3.14</p>	<p>across the city on the 19th of November also included Fountain House above Primark on Donegall Place and the Mayfair building in Cornmarket.</p> <p>Music Programme</p> <p>On the evening of the 19th, a music and animation programme took place across the city across a number of zones:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zone 1 - Donegall Place (From Carroll's to McDonald's (both sides of street) and Fountain Lane) • Zone 2 - Waterstones, Fountain Street, College St, Fountain Mezzanine, St Mary's Church, Queen's St and Castle Street • Zone 3 - Berry Street, Rosemary St, Tesco Metro, Castlecourt Front, Lower Garfield Street, BOI Building (All Royal Avenue) • Zone 4 - Lombard St, Castle Place / Kiosk and front of Bank buildings • Zone 5 - Cornmarket - Dunnes Stores, Ann St, Arthur St, Castle Arcade, Castle Lane and Calendar Street
<p>3.15</p>	<p>A raised platform was in situ on the evening of the 19th (in front of 2 Royal Avenue) with a three-hour set from 6pm to 9pm showcasing local musicians. In addition, a music programme was curated across the Christmas period including several music elements for the opening night including performances at Rosemary Street Presbyterian Church and music on Berry Street and Lower Garfield Street.</p>
<p>3.16</p>	<p>A 4 - week 'weekend programme' of Christmas Animation was also delivered - this activity primarily took place in locations throughout the city centre from 1pm-5pm each Saturday and Sunday in the build- up to Christmas. The music programme celebrated the diversity of the city's cultural, and music offer presenting opportunities to showcase a range of artists. Programmed by the Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival and Zeppo Arts Management, the programme featured 21 high-quality acts ranging from singer songwriters to popular local bands across a range of genres including soul, country, jazz and rock. Audiences numbers and feedback for this programme was very positive, resulting in increased footfall</p>

within the city centre during this time period and an opportunity to provide a platform for a diverse range of artists whilst celebrating our UNESCO City of Music status.

3.17 **Procession**

An external provider (Luxe) was engaged to create an interactive 'White and Bright' cavalcade of props and performers which passed through Royal Avenue / Donegall Place on the evening of the event. This was complemented by a community engagement programme of choreographed costumed performances, creating a real festive spectacle with up to 150 participants and 7,000 visitors across the evening.

3.18 **Window Animation**

US Folk were engaged to produce winter-themed window vinyl's to create a more aesthetically pleasing city centre offering over the festive period. These vinyl's will remain in situ throughout the winter. In addition, the programme also included 'live' window animation on the opening night (19th November) in two of the main retail stores on Donegall Place.

3.19 **Street Animation**

A range of 50+ Belfast - based organisations from the cultural, arts and theatre / performance sectors were engaged to take part in this event and provide the animation over the opening night. The entertainment onsite included a mix of music, dance, street performance, comedy and theatrical performance under the overall creative banner of *Christmas in Belfast*.

3.20 **2 Royal Avenue**

Maywe, the council-appointed provider in 2 Royal Avenue operated an uplifted events programme over the festive period. This included a Winter's Den in 2 Royal Avenue commencing on 19th November. This created a welcoming hub for all to enjoy. Visitors were also able to experience a range of sustainable events including:

- Up-cycling Christmas decoration programme
- Up-cycling Christmas jumper workshops
- Creating own advent calendars
- Sustainable Christmas crackers

- 'Swap - shop'
- Santa's Post Box (open Thursday-Sunday weekly, with late night opening Thursday and Friday evenings)
- Advent Calendars
- Alpine Lodge
- Teddy Bear Hospital and Toy repair café
- Sustainable Wrapping service (cash for Kids drop-off point)

3.21

In addition, a wide range of free events were on offer from 19th November in 2 Royal Avenue including twilight pottery and art markets, fashion swap nights, Christmas carolling events, storytelling, music, festive jazz for seniors, family silent discos, sustainable arts and craft and workshops and a Crufty Christmas Fashion Show in aid of Guide Dogs NI. Throughout the festive period the venue welcomed a range of community-based choirs, musical events and musicians both inside and outside the venue.

3.22

The following statistics were recorded against 2 Royal Avenue Christmas Programming:

- Footfall - 48,639 between 19th November 2022 to 31st December 2022 (an average of 1,131 per day)
- No of Events/Workshops/Markets - 30
- Letters Posted to Santa with Belfast One's Post Office -3,707
- No of community, charities or cultural groups engaged - 25 community groups
- No of school visits - 4 including 1 special school who used sensory area for school trip
- No of Artists/facilitators/makers engaged (so every class, market stall, performance etc) - 93 Artists/ Makers, 14 Facilitators, 355 performers (Large numbers came from St Johns PS Choir 50 and Conversatoire Choir 120, Rock Choir Flash Mob 40, Quire 30 and also include external performers facilitated by Zeppo)
- Markets - included in performers figures above but for breakdown - Twilight Markets had 22 and 32 totalling 54 makers/ artists and Potters Market had 22 makers/ artists. Queer Arts Market had 5 artists/ makers.

- No of presents collected for Cash for Kids – 1,456
- Amount raised for local charities £845 Shelter NI (busking event), £200 The Trussel Trust (Audience donations from Carols and Craic night), £220.81 Guide Dogs NI (Audience donations at Crufty Christmas Event) and St Joseph's Primary School raised £500 carolling in front of venue.

3.23 Council also commissioned US Folk, a Belfast-based agency representing some of NI's top illustrative and design talent. They created an overall look and feel for 2 Royal Avenue's Christmas programme - The Winter's Den – this included a suite of characters and folk illustrations which came to life via a bespoke AR App made especially for Christmas. This ran throughout the Christmas period from 19th November into January.

3.24 **Christmas Market**

The Christmas Market ran this year from Saturday 19th November to Thursday 22nd December. Market Place Europe Limited (MPEL) has held the Continental Markets contract for the past 17 years and were awarded the contract for the next 3+2 years. Changes to the contract this year include a larger seating area, an enhanced Christmas experience with themed and animated walkways. There was over 100 stalls and the new contract also set out the requirement for 40% local traders and 60% continental traders. There was a Santa's Grotto supporting the Lord Mayors Charity and a return of free school educational tours, which was extended this year to out of school hours childcare and youth service providers. MPEL also ran the Jolly Big Business Boost offering a free chalet to a young business. When the Continental Market trades at the front of the city hall the footfall increases into St Georges Market and throughout the city Centre. The Christmas Market and the local Christmas offer in St George's trade side by side very successfully. MPEL offered a free pitch to St Georges Market traders this year and in previous years to further enhance trade for the local traders.

3.25 Key findings from the Economic Impact Report and Visitor Survey from the Christmas Market 2022 include:

- Total attendees remained over the million mark at 1,015,565

- Visitors - Out of State - 225, 963
- Gross Economic impact - 92,304,565
- 85% of visitors felt the market 'met or exceeded' their expectations (top 5 influencing factors included variety, food and drink, festive atmosphere, consistently good and appearance / decorations)
- Just over a third (33%) of people visited the city specifically to visit the market
- 98% of people strongly agreed or agreed that the market has a positive impact on encouraging people to come to Belfast.

Role of Lord Mayor

3.26

The Lord Mayor played a key role in leading the Christmas procession, as well as the official opening of the 2 Royal Avenue Christmas programme on 19th November

3.27

A video message from the Lord Mayor to citizens and visitors to the city was issued online on Monday 19th November to coincide with the opening of the Christmas programme (this was pre-recorded on the evening of the 18th in front of City Hall) with the following statistics recorded against the videography.

Twitter: 2,334 impressions, 99 engagements – likes, comments and shares, 713 views

Facebook: 6,344 impressions, 124 engagements – likes, comments and shares, 2,230 views

Marketing and Communications Activity

3.28

Council operated a digital campaign with pulse screens and online advertising to promote the event taking place on 19th November, as well as weekend entertainment thereafter and seasonal activities in 2 Royal Avenue. Council directed people to www.belfastcity.gov.uk/christmas URL, where the 19th November event information was displayed prominently on the page.

3.29

Promotion took place across digital platforms and via key partners including BID One and Visit Belfast. City Matters went to print before event details were confirmed, but a generic update was provided to highlight 19th November and 2 Royal Avenue in edition to be circulated to just under 160k homes w/c 7th November. A press release was also issued w/c 7th November to promote the finer and confirmed details of the event schedule.

3.30	<p>Economic Context:</p> <p>Following Covid and within the context of a cost-of-living crisis, Council were cognisant of providing support to city traders, with a focus on hope and optimism at Christmas.</p> <p>Council's Christmas campaign had the following principles at it's core:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Sustainability ○ Giving back ○ Sense of Home
3.31	<p>Post Event Evaluation:</p> <p>Belfast City Council commissioned an independent socio-economic survey for the <i>Christmas in Belfast</i> themed - event. Results included the following feedback:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 55% of visitors were from the Belfast City Council area and a further 45% from elsewhere - 77% of visitors have previously attended the event with 23% attending for the first time. - 69% of visitors agreed that it was a good event for the city to host with 19% views that it is one of the best events to take place in Belfast. 0% rated the event as a poor event - 81% of visitors preferred the current event format to the traditional switch on event. - 53% of visitors said that the event improved their view of the city
3.32	<p>Local Supply Chain</p> <p>The 'City Imagining Strategy' approved by council seen a focus on supporting developing local arts and cultural organisations, through funding, commissioning and capacity building. The traditional light switch on's that took place up until 2019 typically engaged less local suppliers, for example in 2019 21 local suppliers were engaged as opposed to more than 40 local suppliers being engaged in 2022.</p>
3.33	<p>Stakeholder Feedback: Current Programme v more traditional Christmas Lights Switch on Event</p>

	<p>Following discussion at a recent committee meeting around the nature of the opening Christmas event, Council Officers have sought feedback from a variety of stakeholders on the future approach:</p>
3.34	<p>Translink are clear that the recent version of the Christmas event (2021 & 2022) is their preference. They stated the older format caused major disruption, particularly to the Glider services, and had health & safety concerns around pedestrian footfall, particularly after the event.</p>
3.35	<p>The Council contracted Production Management Company and external Health & Safety Advisor have very similar opinions when comparing the two formats - they cite a number of difficulties with delivering the old-style event; the open space itself is not conducive to the delivery of a public event. It is a busy City centre with live traffic and heavy pedestrian footfall. This provides not only a challenging environment in which to operate but significantly increases the safety risk for staff and pedestrians, and significant resources to manage. This risk is exacerbated by public non-compliance, particularly during the de-rig. Their preference is for the new style event, also highlighting that for the old style to be delivered safely, (which they acknowledge it can) it would require significant stakeholder buy-in, and it would require a longer build/de-rig (out of hours) which would have significant resource implications. Both also noted how the Market opening adds further complexities.</p>
3.36	<p>An Eventsec manager with several years' experience of the event stated a preference for the new format, with the parade route amended.</p>
3.37	<p>City Events Unit officers commented that the former 'traditional' lights switch on format held prior to the pandemic, was undoubtedly the most challenging event to deliver annually. The city centre space on Donegall Square North is not suitable to host the build and de-rigging of a public event with live or partially live traffic. There are significant risks when live traffic mixes with staff building the event, and particularly with the heavy public pedestrian footfall in the area. Given the inconvenience of the structure build required, the public have been</p>

	<p>seen to take unnecessary risks in crossing the four lanes of traffic. This takes place even with a considerable stewarding presence. This is also a challenge with the de-rig.</p>
3.38	<p>There is also pressure to re-open the roads within an hour of the event ending, a period where many contractors are removing structures and equipment, yet the Donegall Square North is bustling with pedestrians. These issues have been consistent for more than a decade of delivering this format.</p>
3.39	<p>Officer feedback has also indicated that the 2021/2022 event provides a much safer space within which to operate, and with less disruption of traffic and transport services within Donegall Place and Castle Junction, and less event equipment on site, the de-rig is more easily managed. The latter format has entertainment which is more varied in nature and caters for a wider audience than the previous format. There is more scope for using other spaces and buildings within the wider City Centre.</p>
3.40	<p>Feedback from Belfast Chamber (circa 20 businesses) has indicated that retail do not necessarily view the switch on event as boosting trade, while the hospitality sector within the city have a converse opinion. Some businesses have expressed surprise that there was not a return to a normal 'switch on' in 2022. Feedback has also demonstrated a desire for an increased investment in Christmas lighting, strong Christmas marketing brand and drawing on best-practice examples from elsewhere. A meeting with the Belfast Chamber has been scheduled for February to further discuss this feedback in detail.</p>
3.41	<p>Linen Quarter Bid Board feedback has indicated that organisations welcomed a diffuse approach to Christmas lighting with animation across the city centre. Linen Quarter BID welcome a high profile family event to switch on the Christmas lights, as this will help kick-start the season and provide positive marketing for the city centre. However, the event will not necessarily deliver an immediate benefit, as many participants come for the switch-on and then depart again. Maintaining diverse areas of interest and activities across the city centre is therefore deemed important, as this encourages greater dwell time throughout the day.'</p>

3.42	<p>Officers have also conducted research into what format was deployed across other Local Authorities from a benchmarking perspective. Official Christmas Lights Switch On events varied from live performances in a dedicated public space (Newry, Lisburn, Bangor, Antrim, Ballyclare, Cookstown, Magherafelt, Glasgow and Liverpool) supplemented by family friendly activities. Other formats included processional parades taking place in Derry City and Strabane and across Causeway Coast and Glens Local Authorities.</p>
3.43	<p>Further afield, Councils that decided to not have official Christmas Lights Switch-on events included Manchester, which was due to major construction works across the city; Brighton, Leeds and Inverness who cited budget pressures, and York who cited Covid concerns. Alternative approaches include Edinburgh Winter Festival and Cardiff, whose Christmas activity comprises markets, funfairs, ice rinks, and light installations and did not host a standalone lights switch-on event, but rather promoted when the lights would first be switched on, signalling the opening of Christmas markets and related activity.</p>
3.44	<p><u>Proposed solution</u></p> <p>A solution could be found in taking some attributes of the old format, and hosting within the 2021/2022 event space. A 'switch on' element, would take place on a small stage at Castle Junction/Donegall Place, allowing the audience within Donegall Place to view the lighting of the Tree and Festive Lighting within the immediate City Centre, without the requirement to close Donegall Square North. The entertainment throughout the City Centre could then be programmed. However it is important to consider that the costs for a traditional light switch on was £96,300 in 2019. Within departmental estimates we currently have secured £122,864 for Christmas activities.</p>
3.45	<p><u>Financial and Resource Implications</u></p> <p>There are no financial implications to this report. All expenditure is within existing departmental budgets and approvals.</p> <p><u>Equality & Good Relations Implications</u></p> <p>None.</p>

4.0	Appendices – Documents Attached
4.1	None.