

Belfast City Council Christmas Lights Event – Safety Implications

Forward

This Report will consider the safety implications for the Christmas Lights Event with respect to the Stage Format that was utilised prior to 2020 when civic events were impacted by the COVID outbreak and the associated restrictions. It will also consider the safety implications with respect to the Revised Format utilised since 2020 with entertainment being provided at multiple locations in the City Centre.

Introduction

The Christmas Lights Event has been an annual civic highlight over the past number of decades. Until 2020 with the onset of COVID the Event has been hosted at the iconic location of the front of City Hall. Since the early 2000s the Event has coincided with the opening of the Christmas Market. The Christmas Lights Event and the opening of the Christmas Market has been widely viewed as the beginning of the Christmas season.

The Christmas Lights Event Site incorporates a stage and ancillary structures being located on the cobbles to the front of the City Hall grounds, and on the pavement to either side of this area, with the spectators viewing the show from the area to the front of the stage and to the ‘east side’ of Donegall Square North, to the ‘west side’ of Donegall Square North, and on Donegall Place.

History for the Entertainment Arrangements/ Crowd Management Arrangements for the Christmas Lights Event

In the late 1980s the Event attracted a wide demographic audience with a mix of young families to see the ‘switch on’, curious shoppers, and groups of teenagers to see a live band that performed following the ‘switch on’. The numbers attending was not excessive and most of the spectators appeared to enjoy the Event with very few incidents of bad behaviour.

During the 90s the numbers attending increased, and the entertainment on the stage included appearances by performers who had appeared on television talent shows. A greater proportion of teenagers began attending with many behaving in an excitable manner which although generally innocent in nature, was unsettling for the families and young children present.

Unfortunately, in later years groups of youths from differing communities began to attend the Christmas Lights Event and although they were managed by Security Personnel at the Event Site, they arranged fights remote from the Event Site using mobile phones. There were incidents of significant disorder on a number of occasions at various locations including Castle Court.

It was therefore decided that only 'child friendly' acts would be booked for the Christmas Lights Event, and that following the entertainment and the Christmas Lights being 'switched on' there would be two Christmas songs played over the PA and the Event would be brought to a conclusion.

The revised stage offering resulted in the audience again being dominated by young families however numbers continued to increase.

From 2005 onwards a Christmas Market was hosted in the grounds of the City Hall. Initially the Market opened at approximately 7-30 pm at the time of the Christmas Lights 'switch on'. This brought additional numbers to the Event Site and adjacent areas with large queues forming at the entrances to the Christmas Market. The opening time for the Christmas Market has latterly been brought forward to mid-day prior to the 'switch-on'. This addressed the queuing issue.

As stated above, the numbers of spectators attending the 'switch on' itself continued to rise and following concerns regarding congestion in the area to the front of the stage it was decided that the numbers of spectators attending should be managed. The site was enclosed by pedestrian barriers and tickets were issued free of charge upon application in the weeks prior to the Christmas Lights Event. This system worked reasonably well although each year a number of persons who had obtained tickets did not show up at the Event (a problem experienced at many events where tickets are issued free of charge) until the onset of COVID in 2020.

History of Legislative Control of Outdoor Events

During the 1980s safety at outdoor entertainment events was relatively unregulated with very limited Guidance Documentation available.

Following a number of incidents and near misses in the 1980s including fatalities at a festival in Donnington England, the Guide to Safety at Outdoor Events was drafted and issued by the Health and Safety Executive.

The number of outdoor events including civic events in the British Isles increased dramatically during the following years – not all were well planned or well organised.

A number of serious incidents subsequently occurred at outdoor events including over 60 people being seriously injured at the Christmas Lights Event in Birmingham in 2009. There were also incidents at the Christmas Lights Event in Bournemouth in 2009. In 2011 2 people were killed at a civic event in Great Yarmouth where the Local Authority was held culpable for breaches of Health and Safety Legislation.

Since the late 1990s then a number of Safety Guidance Documents relating to Event Safety have been published and the industry has become increasingly more regulated. There has also been a number of documents issued relating to the provision of facilities for persons with access issues.

History of Events on Donegall Square West/ Donegall Place

A number of large-scale entertainment events (other than the Christmas Lights Events have been hosted on the roadways to the front of City Hall in recent years including:

- The Millennium Celebrations on New Years Eve 2000 – A ‘drive in’ stage, generator and associated barriers were located on the cobbles to front of City Hall. No other infrastructure was provided. There was unrestricted access to the Event Site as there were other events taking place in the City Centre that evening. Donegall Square North was closed from 7-00 pm on New Years Eve until 2-30 am on the following day.

- A Radio 1 Live Broadcast on New Years Eve 2001 — A stage was built on the cobbles to the front of City Hall. The Site perimeter was secured using ‘heras fencing’ to manage access (18,000 tickets were issued). Donegall Square North was closed from 5-00 pm on New Years Eve, until 2-30 am on the following day. The pavement to the front of the City Hall grounds was closed for 5 days.
- A Radio 1 Live Broadcast on New Years Eve 2002 — A stage was built on the cobbles to the front of the City Hall grounds. The Site perimeter was secured using ‘heras fencing’ to manage access (18,000 tickets were issued). Donegall Square North was closed from 5-00 pm on New Years Eve, until 2-30 am on the following day. The pavement to the front of the City Hall grounds was closed for 5 days.
- A BBC Live Broadcast 2009 – A stage spanned the grounds of the City Hall and the cobbles on Donegall Square North. A ‘front of house unit’, a universal access platform, camera platforms and tiered seating were built on Donegall Square North. The perimeter of the Site was secured using ‘heras fencing’ to manage access (10,000 tickets were issued). Donegall Square North was closed on a number of occasions mostly after 10-00 pm to facilitate the build. Donegall Square North was closed from 5-00 pm – 3-00 am on the day of the Event to complete the build, conduct the concert and to facilitate the ‘takedown’.
- A Red Bull Formula 1 ‘Show Run’ Event in 2010 – A Formula 1 Garage was built inside the City Hall grounds. Barriers were placed along Wellington Street, Donegall Square North, Chichester Street, and associated junctions, and to an ‘outer cordon’ to secure the viewing areas. Much of the build work was carried out very early on a Saturday morning and the ‘takedown’ work was undertaken very early on the Sunday morning. The roadways were closed from 7 pm until 9-30 pm on the evening of the Event to complete the build and to facilitate the ‘Show Run’.
- An MTV Live Broadcast 2011 – A stage spanned the grounds of the City Hall and the cobbles on Donegall Square North. A ‘front of house unit’, a universal access platform, camera platforms and tiered seating were built on Donegall Square North. The perimeter of the Site was secured using ‘heras fencing’ to manage access (18,000 tickets were issued), Donegall Square North was closed on a number of occasions on the evenings prior to the event mostly after 10-00 pm to facilitate the build. Donegall Square North and Donegall Place were closed from 5-00 pm on the evening of the

event until 5-00 am on the following day to complete the build, conduct the concert and to facilitate the ‘takedown’.

- Red Bull Formula 1 ‘Show Run’ Event in 2018 – A Formula 1 Garage was built inside the City Hall Grounds. Barriers were placed along Wellington Street, Donegall Square North, Chichester Street, and associated junctions’ and to an ‘outer cordon’ to secure the viewing areas. Much of the build work was carried out very early on a Saturday morning and the ‘takedown’ work very early on the Sunday morning. The roadways were closed from 7 pm until 9-30 pm on the evening of the Event to complete the build and to facilitate the ‘Show Run’.
- A concert planned for New Years Eve 2003 had to be cancelled a few hours prior to the Event, due to deteriorating weather conditions. The performances were relocated to indoor venues, This demonstrates that difficult weather conditions can impact on the working environment particularly during winter months.

History of the Road layout to the front of the City Hall Grounds

During the early 1980s there were 4 lanes of traffic flowing from Wellington Street along Donegall Square North to its junction with Donegall Place. Vehicles could either proceed toward Chichester street or turn to the left along Donegall Place. Vehicles proceeding toward Chichester Street also had the option of turning right into Donegall Square East.

During the late 1990s Donegall Place became a ‘one way’ thoroughfare with traffic flowing from Castle Junction toward Donegall Square North. During the 2000s the pavements were widened and eventually traffic was reduced to one lane. Street scaping was undertaken including the provision of street furniture.

In recent years Donegall Square West has been used by Translink as a transport hub with general traffic being largely excluded from the thoroughfare. Buses emerge from Donegall Square West onto Donegall Square North and proceed to other parts of the city. Other bus routes approach Donegall Square North from Wellington Street and from Donegall Place. Closing Donegall Square North for any reason has a very significant impact on Translink operations during operational times.

The roadway on Wellington Street/ Donegall Square North and Chichester Street has been reduced to 3 lanes with the pavements being widened including the provision of car parking and bus stops. One of the lanes is now a dedicated bus lane.

More recently the 'glider' service has been introduced providing a frequent service from the east of the city to and from the west of the city.

Christmas Market

The Christmas Market was first hosted in the grounds of City Hall in 2005. The build for the Market commences in early November with the Market opening on the day of the Christmas Lights Event.

There is much building and stocking activity from very early morning on the Christmas Market opening day/ Christmas Lights Event day, when the stage set up is also taking place.

In recent years the Market has extended with units being located on the pavement on Donegal Square North to the front of the City Hall grounds. Some of these units have been vacated and used as production cabins and dressing accommodation for the Christmas Lights Event.

As stated above the Market initially opened immediately following the 'switch-on' of the Christmas Lights however in an effort to improve crowd management arrangements the opening time for the Market has more recently been moved to mid-day, prior to the Christmas Lights Event. This has proved to have been a success for both the Market and for the Christmas Lights Event.

It should be noted that the pedestrian gates to the front of the City Hall Grounds must be available as emergency exits from the Christmas Market both during the build and 'takedown' and during the Christmas Lights Event.

Structures/ Services Required for a Stage Type Show for the Christmas Lights Event and their Associated Issues

Overview

The build and 'takedown' for the Christmas Lights Event differs from the vast majority of other events hosted in the city in that most other site builds/ takedowns and particularly stage builds/ takedowns are undertaken in a secure space with unauthorised persons excluded. There is generally appropriate working space and 'boneyard' space (storage space for equipment). There are also appropriate arrangements for lorries to deliver and collect equipment etc. in a secure area.

Stage/ Big Screens

The use of a 'drive-in' stage obviates the need for a lengthy build period in an 'active' area. The area must be secured prior to the arrival of the stage. The 'footprint' of the stage requires the inner lane of Donegall Square North being utilised, with a Road Closure Order being required for the period when the stage is in place. Forward signage etc for traffic is also required in the lead up to, and during the Event. The PA, lighting, 'backline' equipment etc. required for the stage set-up can be delivered by truck that would park in the inner lane (now closed) and transferred to the stage area and integrated into the 'show build' accordingly. The lorry will then be driven away and will return at some point after the show when the process will be reversed.

The 'big screens' will be positioned approximately 25 meters to 'stage left' and to 'stage right' of the stage using similar methodology.

Issues

The pavement to the front of the City Hall will be closed with pedestrians having to be redirected across Donegall Square North or diverted across the front of the stage via a pedestrian route formed using barriers. Some pedestrians choose to cross Donegall Square North at points other than those designated for pedestrian crossings.

The inner lane of the roadway on Donegall Square North will be closed to traffic to facilitate the 'footprint' of the stage, the pedestrian diversion route, and trucks parking whilst off loading and collecting equipment. This impacts on vehicle flow in the area.

Event personnel will be carrying out a wide variety of tasks in a confined area and on occasions close to moving traffic.

There is a limited 'window' for delivering stock to the Christmas Market between the completion of the build to the Market and the opening time of the Market, thus deliveries to the Market are taking place on the morning of the Christmas Lights Event and the associated Site Build.

The pedestrian gates leading from the City Hall grounds onto Donegall Square North are emergency exits routes from the Christmas Market and therefore must be maintained as such.

Control Room/ First Aid Point – Double Stacked Portacabin

In recent years a double stacked 'portacabin' has been located on the corner of Donegall Square North and Donegall Place ('west side'). The ground floor cabin has been used as a First Aid Room and the upper cabin has been used as an Event Control Point.

The 'portacabins' are delivered on a 'flatbed' lorry fitted with a 'hi ab'. The area where the structure is to be located is secured using pedestrian fencing and tape. The ground floor cabin is lifted from the lorry into position by 'hi ab'. The upper cabin is then lifted into position again by 'hi ab' and the access steps are then placed in position. The process has to be reversed when the 'portacabins' are removed.

Issues

Pedestrian access to the area has to be halted when the positioning and removal processes are being undertaken. Pedestrians have to be diverted around the location, however despite the use of pedestrian barriers, tape and stewards' compliance can often be challenging.

Pedestrian access routes in the area of the facility are compromised when the 'double stack' is in position.

Again, Event Personnel on occasions are working close to moving vehicles.

Access Platforms

In recent years access platforms have been built on the 'northern side of the pavement' on Donegall Square North (west side) and Donegall Square North (east side). Each of the build areas are secured using pedestrian barriers, tape, and stewards. The equipment is delivered by truck and built in situ with the process being reversed during the 'takedown'.

Issues

Pedestrian access to the areas where the platforms are located has to be halted during the build and 'takedown' processes. Pedestrians have to be diverted around the locations, however, as stated above despite the use of pedestrian barriers, tape and stewards' compliance can often be challenging.

Pedestrian access routes in the area of the facility are compromised when the platforms are in position.

Again, Event Personnel on occasions are working close to moving vehicles.

The Taxi Rank on Donegall Square North (east side) has to be relocated.

Perimeter Fencing

Stillages of pedestrian fencing are delivered by lorry to various positions around the Site during the early hours of the morning of the Christmas Lights Event. Stillages are 'off loaded' and placed in position using a forklift truck. The units will be collected following the Event set into the stillages and loaded onto a lorry using a forklift truck.

Perimeter fencing including access lanes has to be positioned as to form barrier lines on Donegall Square West, Donegall Square North and on Donegall Square East. In order to keep traffic flowing as long as possible a Road Closure Order for the remaining traffic lanes is implemented as late as possible as to facilitate the flow of traffic that will include vehicles transporting shoppers. Buses have to be diverted with the ensuing challenge of advising the travelling public of the route changes.

Issues

As stated above the timing of the Road Closure being as late as practical prior to the Christmas Lights Event commencing presents a number of challenges:

- The use of a forklift truck on ‘live roads’ using banksmen to deliver the stillages to the respective areas.
- Despite announcements being made and the actions of stewards’ significant numbers of attendees who are in the area, run across Donegall Square North once the Closure Process commences but whilst traffic is still flowing, to obtain prime viewing positions.
- Significant resources are utilised clearing vehicles from parking bays in the Event Site and apron areas in the period prior to the Road Closure.
- The Road Closure is extremely difficult to implement due to cars emerging from alleys etc. again providing a pedestrian/ vehicle interface.
- The barrier lines must be built quickly as to secure the integrity of the Site with patrons either inside of the Event Site or approaching the Event Site, and shoppers leaving the Event Site, thus Event Personnel are carrying and moving barriers with significant numbers of pedestrians in the work areas.
- Some persons without tickets obtain access to the Event Site (an estimate of the numbers is factored into the Viewing Capacity and ticket issue).

Additional Control Measures that could be Implemented

When assessing the implementation of additional Control Measures the practicalities, costs, and what is achievable must be considered. In addition, consideration must be given to the ‘knock on’ impacts – by addressing one issue do we simply move the problem to somewhere else?

The following may be considered:

- A ‘cut off time’ for the delivery of stock to the Christmas Market could be agreed that would provide the traders with an appropriate period of time to complete deliveries on the morning of the Christmas Lights Event/ Market opening day and provide a reasonable ‘window’ for the Event Personnel to locate infra structure prior to the early morning build-up of both pedestrian and vehicular traffic in the Donegall Square North area.

This would require careful coordination between the Christmas Lights Event Personnel, and the Management of the Christmas Market.

- The Control Room could be relocated to a suitable office on the upper floor to the front of the City Hall (a City Hall Office has been used in previous years – the Emergency Control Room located to the rear of the City Hall does not provide a ‘hands on’ view of the Event Site. A First Aid Point could be relocated to a less active area or possibly to a Market Cabin to the front of the City Hall grounds on Donegall Square North.

This would result in perhaps one of the most hazardous operations being obviated but would require appropriate alternative accommodation for the Event Control Point and the First Aid Point being agreed.

- The ‘take down’ for the Stage and associated production equipment, the ‘big screens’ and the accessible platforms that would normally take place following the show would instead be undertaken during the early hours of Sunday morning.

The Event Personnel would ‘break’ the barrier lines immediately after the spectators vacated the Event Site but would not undertake any other activities that required accessing the traffic lanes until the early hours of the following morning.

This would enable the traffic lanes to re-open at an earlier time following the Event. The bulk of the ‘takedown’ work would then take place at a time when pedestrian flow and traffic flow would be minimal.

Unfortunately, there is likely to be an increase in costs as equipment would be hired for a longer period, and Event Personnel would be ‘brought back’ during the early Sunday morning period.

Revised Christmas Lights Format

Following the onset of COVID a Revised Format has been adopted for the Christmas Lights Event. Entertainers have been engaged to perform in shop units and from public spaces, and lighting has been utilised to illuminate the frontages of some buildings. A Christmas Parade comprising of floats and performers navigated its way along a designated route (mostly pedestrianised) through much of the commercial centre of the City during the 2022 Event.

Site Build/ Takedown

The Revised Format is relatively risk free. The site build at the various locations is less complex and can be undertaken without Road Closures and poses limited risk to passers-by. The majority of the performances are located in pedestrianised areas or in areas where there are wide pavements.

Issues

Many of the performance sites rely on the cooperation of building owners and the safety arrangements for the respective buildings (the integrity of the electrical supply, the emergency exiting arrangements etc.).

A short distance of the Parade Route I 2022 traversed active roadways and thus required PSNI attendance for a short period of time.

The Site of the Revised Format covers a large area and thus is less easy to monitor.

Stakeholders

A number of Stakeholder Groups were contacted regarding the Format that might be adopted for future Christmas Lights Events. The PSNI, the Fire and Rescue Service, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, the Road Service and Translink all advised that the Revised Christmas Light Format provides little or no issues for their respective organisations. They have also advised that although the Stage Format can present significant challenges, these challenges can be managed. All of the organisations have advised that they recognise the importance of this Civic Event and will work with the Council in its delivery using either Format.

