



<b>Subject:</b>	<b>Festive Lighting Scheme / Future Christmas Programming</b>
<b>Date:</b>	18th August, 2023
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	John Greer, Director of Economic Development
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Lesley Ann O Donnell, Senior Manager, Tourism and Culture Kerry Mc Mullan, Tourism and Events Development Manager

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

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

<b>1.0</b>	<b>Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues</b>
1.1	At the meeting of the City Growth and Regeneration Committee in June, Members were presented with options relating to the Belfast Christmas light switch on and potential follow-on activity across the City. During discussion at that meeting, the Committee directed officers to submit a report to a future meeting regarding the potential for Christmas events and lighting on arterial routes across the city. A further report was then presented in August to the City Growth and Regeneration Committee, and it was agreed that this would be referred to the August meeting of Strategic Policy and Resources Committee in order to allow officers to consider the locations of the proposed reduced festive lighting scheme.
1.2	This report provides information in relation to that request from the Committee.

<b>2.0</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
2.1	<p>The Committee is requested to note:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. the provision of festive lighting and animation on arterial routes would require additional investment and lead time, and therefore it is not possible to provide this additional programme for Christmas 2023;</li> <li>ii. future Christmas event programming on arterial routes could be supported via an existing Council funding scheme such as the Community Festivals Fund, or Vibrant Business Destinations may be the most suitable; and</li> <li>iii. the increase in costs outlined at 3.2 coupled with council's static budget is likely to mean that the current city centre festive lighting scheme will need to be scaled back for 2023.</li> </ul>
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main Report</b>
3.1	<p>At the Committee meeting in March, Members were advised that Christmas Lighting Scheme in 2022 was year 3 of the existing Christmas Lighting Scheme. Feedback on the scheme was positive, however, there were additional requests to consider an extension of the scheme to include arterial routes. Further discussion took place at the City Growth and Regeneration Committee held on 14th June. Officers were asked to consider further the feasibility of such an extension. A further report was then presented in August to the City Growth and Regeneration Committee and it was agreed that this be referred to the August meeting of Strategic Policy and Resources committee in order to allow officers to consider the locations of the proposed reduced festive lighting scheme.</p>
3.2	<p>The installation, storage and maintenance of our festive lighting scheme is managed through a third party that was appointed via a public procurement process. This contract is currently due for renewal and the supplier has indicated that they have seen significant cost increases relating to insurance, energy costs and labour costs. The budget for the Christmas Festive Lighting Scheme has remained unchanged in the last five years and the Economic Development division have no additional budget available to fund the expansion of the lighting scheme. In addition, we have previously had access to an additional non-recurrent budget, given council's financial pressures this has not been allocated this financial year.</p>

3.3	<p>In previous years, additional funding was allocated via council non-recurrent budget that allowed additional features to be added to our lighting scheme. We also previously received funding from DfC revitalisation funding that allowed us to distribute monies via a funding programme to business clusters on arterial routes for them to produce some Christmas related activity.</p>
3.4	<p>Given the Council's current financial pressures and reduced levels of budget within Executive Department budgets, it is not currently possible for officers to secure the additional budget that would be required for any additional activity on arterial routes.</p>
3.5	<p>The aforementioned increase in costs coupled with council's static budget is likely to mean that the current city centre scheme will need to be scaled back by as much as half. This will involve a concentration of lights within the central business district.</p>
<p><b>Logistical/Operational/Financial Constraints – Lighting on Arterial Routes</b></p>	
3.6	<p>To have impact along the arterial routes, it is anticipated the level of additional investment for lighting would be significant. To install lighting schemes suitable mounting infrastructure and power must be secured from building owners, agents, or managers via a wayleave agreement. The cost and the lead time required to secure the wayleave agreements, and install the mounting infrastructure is significant, and it would not be possible for council or individual business clusters/associations to have the agreements and infrastructure in place for Christmas 2023.</p>
3.7	<p>Lights are typically purchased or leased, the Council leases its lights which allows the lighting scheme to be updated with new features, deploy more energy efficient lights, and avoid the costs relating to ownership that are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Purchase</li> <li>- Storage</li> <li>- Maintenance</li> <li>- Depreciation (typically festive lighting schemes have a useful life of 3-5 years)</li> </ul>
3.8	<p>It is very unlikely that constituted associations in arterial routes would have the capacity or resources to manage a 'local' festive lighting scheme – there is evidence of this from the Vibrant Business Destination fund and it is a busy period for retailers - therefore any extension of this nature would almost certainly be implemented as part of the council's contractor remit.</p>

	<p>In addition, in respect of the Revitalisation Scheme, it was reported to be challenging to secure contractors for lighting installations.</p>
3.9	<p>In considering the information contained above, Members should note that given the logistical and financial challenges, and significant lead time to negotiate and secure wayleaves, access agreements and purchase or lease lighting infrastructure any expansion would not be possible until at least 2024. It should also be noted that if council were to be responsible for developing, implementing, and managing Christmas lights and animations along arterial routes additional finance and human resources would be required to recognise the significant work this would involve from several council services.</p>
	<p><b>Animation on Arterial Routes</b></p>
3.10	<p>At the CG and R meeting in June, Members agreed on the approach/format to Christmas 2023 - namely a combination of a Switch-on event and city-centre wide programme of animation and entertainment as per 2021 and 2022 with an allocation for subsequent weekends. Members are asked to note that planning for this event has started, with expenditure incurred. However, it was also requested that a future report be submitted regarding the potential for Christmas events on arterial routes across the city.</p>
3.11	<p>Members should note that the budget allocation for Christmas 2023 is £123,000 as presented at the CG and R Committee meeting in June. Within this budget, there was no allocation for Christmas event programming along arterial routes. Officers have considered the implications of resourcing programming and have concluded that significant additional resource would be required – or alternatively the current allocation for the city centre programming be used for arterial programming in future years. Based on knowledge and experience, officers have estimated that up to £10,000-£15,000 (per location) would be required for an impactful Christmas event programme; to cover elements such as staging, a parade, PA stewarding, event management and traffic management. This is on the assumption that the content is local performance.</p>
	<p><b>Existing Funding Mechanisms</b></p>
3.12	<p>Members should note there is a pre-existing mechanism for groups to secure funding to programme activity during the festive period. The 'Community Festivals Fund' is administered via Culture and the Central Grants Unit. This funding scheme is accessible by community groups but not council. Those groups can apply for funding between £2,500 - £10,000, and this is for arts and heritage activities and/or other cultural events that contribute to the cultural</p>

identity of an area or group and celebrates the uniqueness of that area or group. The current scheme is closed. Any festival must take place between November and March. Council receives applications from a range of community groups and arts organisations.

3.13 At this Committee meeting in October 2021, Members agreed the Vibrant Business Destination programme which provided over £500,000 including £475,000 of funding from the department for Communities to increase the footfall and vibrancy of business destinations across the city. The funding provided allowed groups to form constituted associations and develop and deliver actions plans for their specific areas. The programme aims to fund 10 action plans along the arterial routes. Christmas events and lighting are eligible investments within the programme conditions.

#### **Summary**

3.14 Members are asked to note the following salient points:

- The provision of festive lighting and animation on arterial routes would require additional investment and lead time, and, therefore, it is not possible to provide this additional programme for Christmas 2023
- The Council's Christmas Events Programme based on members agreement in June 2023 to have a Combination of a Switch-on event and city-centre wide programme of animation and entertainment as per 2021 and 2022 (as per March Committee report), with an allocation for activity during subsequent weekends, is well underway. Members will receive a report detailing those plans at October's Committee.
- Future Christmas event programming on arterial routes could be supported via an existing Council funding scheme and the Community Festivals Fund is the most suitable.
- If Members direct officers to develop a programme of lighting and animation for arterial routes for 2024 this would need to be considered through the estimates process recognising the need for additional investment.
- The increase in costs outlined at 3.2 coupled with council's static budget is likely to mean that the current city centre festive lighting scheme will need to be scaled back for 2023.
- Consideration of the locations of the proposed reduced festive lighting scheme.

	<b>Financial and Resource Implications</b>
3.15	The current budget for Christmas lighting and animation was agreed by the Committee in March 2023.
	<b><u>Equality and Good Relations Implications</u></b>
3.16	None.
<b>4.0</b>	<b>Documents Attached</b>
	Potential impact to site locations in 2023