



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Development Committee
Subject:	Christmas Lights Switch-on
Date:	7 March 2008
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Relevant Background Information

Over that last twenty five years or so Belfast City Council has developed the annual Christmas Lights Switch-on event. Initially the event involved a number of school choirs and took place in the middle of November, with a small crowd in attendance. The event is now attended by thousands (last year the audience was estimated at 18,000) and involves a range of high profile national and local celebrities. In 2007 the event is estimated to have generated £367,000 for the Council's £80,000 investment in the Lights Switch-on (a return on investment of £1:£4.5). The event also attracts substantial positive media coverage for the Council and Belfast.

Key Issues

Popularity of the Christmas Lights Switch-on

The level of interest of this event has developed to the point that the switching on of the Belfast Christmas lights is seen by many locals as the start of the Christmas period. The event is normally staged on a Tuesday in mid-November, one week after Remembrance Sunday. It is designed to coincide with BVCB and BCCM retailer campaigns and the opening of the Christmas Continental Market. It is estimated that in 2007 the Continental Market along with a series of carol and Christmas musical events, run by the Council, attracted in excess of 500,000 attendees.

Event Management

A number of management issues have developed alongside the Christmas Lights Switch-on event's increasing popularity. The main issue is the lack of overall access and egress control due to the mid-week timing of the event. This has resulted in significant numbers of young people attending the event without adult supervision. This issue in turn has resulted in crowd pressure points developing and crowd disruption in areas in and adjacent to the site.

Traffic and Transport

Additional traffic management concerns have been highlighted by DOE Roads Service

regarding major road impacts which occur across the city, significantly due to the timing of the Switch-on event. In 2007 this resulted in the normal rush hour traffic not clearing at some major junctions until after 10.00 pm.

Translink Metro has also highlighted concerns regarding the disruption to their city service. Metro have stated that the staging of the event in 2007 resulted in their entire timetable for all Metro services being significantly interrupted and the Metro bus service not returning to the normal timetable until the following day.

2008 Christmas Lights Switch-on

In order to alleviate these issues it is recommended to Members that the Christmas Lights Switch-on moves to a Sunday evening. It is suggested that the event is staged in the current format with a number of major headline acts. The move to a Sunday would permit the Council to physically close the site and thus control crowd access and egress.

A Sunday Switch-on would allow for:

- The creation of a family friendly area for adults with young children and buggies
- A reduction in traffic management and disruption
- Assistance with the operation of the city's Metro bus service
- Increased capacity for BCC to manage the health and safety of the audience at the event.

External Advice

Members are asked to note that the proposal for a Sunday evening has been arrived at after extensive consultation through BCC's Events Advisory Panel (EAP). This body incorporates BCCM, PSNI, NIAS, NIFRS, DOE Road Service, BCC Health & Safety, BCC Security, BCC Corporate Communications and BCC Legal Services.

Resource Implications

Financial

In October 2007 Members agreed to the overall annual BCC programme and its accompanying budgets. This included the Christmas programme budget of £150,000 which covers this event, Christmas carol events and the festive lighting on and around City Hall.

Recommendations

Members are requested to approve the annual Christmas Lights Switch-on move to a Sunday evening.

Key to Abbreviations

BCC – Belfast City Council
BCCM – Belfast City Centre Management
BVCB – Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau
PSNI – Police Service of Northern Ireland
NIFRS – Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service
DOE – Department of the Environment
EAP – Events Advisory Panel