



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Development Committee
Subject:	Christmas Lights Switch-on
Date:	9 April 2008
Reporting Officer:	Marie-Thérèse McGivern Director of Development ext. 3470
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Relevant Background Information

In March 08 Members were presented with details regarding the timing of the Christmas Lights Switch-on. After discussion the Committee agreed a number of options should be presented to Council. Members are reminded that last year the audience at this event was estimated at 18,000 and to have generated £367,000 for the Council's £80,000 investment giving 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 'official 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's increasing popularity. The main issue is the lack of overall access/egress control into the event 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 has resulted in crowd pressure points developing and crowd disruption in areas in and adjacent to the event site.

Traffic and Transport

Additional traffic management concerns have been highlighted by DOE Road Service highlighting 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 to 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 timetable, for all Metro services, being significantly interrupted. With the full Metro bus service not returning to the normal timetable until the next day.

2008 Christmas Lights Switch-on

In order to alleviate these issues the following options for the timing of the event are presented to Members for deliberation.

Tuesday evening from 8.00 – 9.00 pm.

This would mean the event is moved one hour later to allow for the evening rush hour traffic to clear, thus negating the issue of disruption on the roads. BCC would also request that stores within the site close by 7.00 pm. This would need to be agreed by retailers. If this can be achieved BCC would then physically close the site to general public access and provide controlled entry points to the concert site. A family friendly area for adults with young children and buggies would also be created. BCC would also encourage Translink Metro to continue their peak bus service operation until after the event has finished and the audience has dispersed. The event would be staged at the same time as the opening of the Christmas Continental Market, along with the Belfast Wheel.

Tuesday evening from 7.00 – 7.30 pm.

This option would see the nature of the event scaled down with a much shorter programme and content reduced. Access/egress controls would also be put in place.

Sunday evening 6.00 – 7.00 pm.

This proposal would see the event being delivered in the current format with a number of major headline acts. The site would be physically closed thus controlling crowd access/egress. This would in turn allow for the creation of a family friendly area for adults with young children and buggies; reduce traffic management and disruption; assist with the operation of the city's Metro bus service and most importantly increase the capacity of BCC to manage the health and safety of the audience at the event. The event would be staged at the same time as the opening of the Christmas Continental Market, along with the Belfast Wheel. Translink would be requested to operate a peak time service to accommodate the audience at the event.

External Advice

Members are asked to note that the request 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 ImplicationsFinancial

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 recommend one of the above options.

Documents Attached

None

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

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