



<b>Subject:</b>	Major Events Update - Christmas
<b>Date:</b>	5 February 2025
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	Lesley-Ann O'Donnell
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	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>Some time 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</b>
1.1	The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update on activity delivered as part of a Christmas programme in November - December 2024.
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
2.1	Members are asked to note the contents of this report on recent Christmas activity.
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main report</b>
3.1	<b>Christmas Programme 2024 Evaluation</b> Building on the success of the 2023 event, the Christmas Lights Switch-On in Donegall Square North, returned on Saturday 16 <sup>th</sup> November 2024.

This particular event remains a key driver in animating and activating the city. The Switch-On has always been a specific milestone for City centre stakeholders as the official opening to the Christmas period.

Located in a busy, 'live' city centre with high pedestrian footfall, the Switch-On is an operationally multi-faceted event to deliver. Planning began in July 2024, with engagement of primary stakeholders such as Translink, Visit Belfast and delivery agents. There is significant multi stakeholder input involved in the early planning process, and as plans develop other city centre stakeholders are further engaged.

In line with the Cultural Strategy's themes of community and sectoral co-design, an exciting programme was developed. This included cultural sector, community and school groups and further details are within this report. Tickets were fully allocated, and on the evening the site was at full capacity.

In 2024, the Christmas Lights Switch-On followed the same format at the front of City Hall, taking place on Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> November. Due to the nature of the t-shaped event site comprising Donegall Square North and Donegall Place (Fountain Lane and Castle Lane cross), it was necessary to close roads to facilitate event infrastructure installation and de-rig.

The City Events Team engaged extensively with stakeholders such as Translink, MarketPlace Europe, Dfl, public hire taxi and the business sector, as well as with internal council units, to coordinate the build, event delivery and de-rig with as minimal impact as possible to normal business. Various road closures and suspensions were in place 2am Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> through to 4am on Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> November.

#### Attendance:

In excess of 10,500 citizens and visitors gathered to enjoy the event. The event was free and ticketed via Visit Belfast. There was an initial ticket release on the morning of 5<sup>th</sup> November, with a second release to accommodate those who couldn't secure tickets during the morning release. The City Hall Christmas Market opened at 12 noon the same day. During this years event, it was noticeable that there was a significant number of non-ticket holders attending the event. Officers are reviewing the current approach to ticketing and options aligned to potential reconfiguration of the site that are in line with health and safety requirements, need for access to retail and retaining a positive attendee experience.

#### Marketing and Communications Activity:

Council operated a digital campaign with online advertising to promote this year's Christmas Lights Switch-On event, as well as Winter's Den season in 2 Royal Avenue.

Council directed people to the Christmas Lights Switch-On event page on the BCC website as well as the /Christmas URL where it was displayed prominently on the page.

Bauer NI were the official media partner and offered a strong package across Cool FM and Downtown from 2<sup>nd</sup> November 13<sup>th</sup> November, including promo trails, competition package, live reads, an interview with the Lord Mayor, and outdoor broadcast with Downtown's Neal McClelland. Pete, Paulo and Rebecca from Cool FM's Breakfast Team were comperes on stage at the event.

Visit Belfast offered box office and visitor servicing, as well as related marketing activity such as digital screen display and social and digital campaign.

The event was featured in City Matters, circulated to just under 160k homes w/c 6th November and full event details of the Switch-On and Winter's Den were highlighted on page 4 and in the What's On section.

A press release was issued 30<sup>th</sup> October to promote the event. From 30 October, media coverage was secured on Belfast Live, Belfast Telegraph, Irish News, NewsLetter, BBC, Belfast Media Group, Yahoo UK and 4NI. In addition, the media partnership with Bauer NI included coverage across Cool FM and Downtown.

Council took paid-for online advertising to raise general awareness, targeting Belfast and surrounding areas for a two week period in advance of the ticket release. This approach was light touch given the experience of tickets going quickly, and was across a small number of media – Facebook, Belfast Media Group, Belfast Telegraph online and Daily Mirror/Belfast Live.

The Visit Belfast Christmas Campaign began on 16th November and ran until 22nd December. This was a 2-phase campaign with the first phase targeted to the ROI market (70%) and the NI market (30%). In Phase 2, utilising additional funding secured by BCC, we were able to deliver upweighted activity to both the ROI and NI market with a 50/50 split. The objective of the campaign was to capture the "festive energy" of the city and promote day trips and overnight stays using a targeted mix of Video on Demand, Outdoor, Radio and digital elements. Supporting this activity included both paid social media advertising and influencer activity.

This campaign resulted in a total of 63.5 million impacts across the entirety of the campaign.

3.2. Programming:

The 'City Imagining Strategy' approved by Council has a focus on supporting developing local arts and cultural organisations, through funding, commissioning and capacity building.

To this end, *Oh Yeah* were engaged to arrange a performance by *Sasha Samara*, who is a graduate of their creative talent development programme; the MAC were invited to show an extract of their upcoming Christmas production; *Tumble Circus* were engaged to choreograph a circus piece; and the *Rock Choir* were invited to produce a medley of singalong Christmas favourites. *The Belvoir Players* also performed, and by invitation of Lord Mayor, Finaghy Primary School choir sang. Meet and greet performers were also engaged from two local companies.

Every act participating in the 2024 switch on expressed very positive feedback on the experience, with the profile of taking part increasing publicity for those companies that had their own Christmas shows.

The Christmas Lights Switch on in 2023 and 2024 featured local acts. On both occasions, tickets sold out very quickly, and capacity was reached in 2024. In section 3.3.2, audience participating in the survey were asked if they supported council supporting local talent or if there was a preference for the 'big name'. 61% opted for the current position with 31% preferring a big name.

Officers will continue to work on all levels to ensure the Christmas Programme of animation and activation continues to develop, grow and leverage all available civic and visitor opportunities for Belfast for 2025 within the budget available, aligned to the principles of the cultural strategy on providing support for the cultural sector and showcasing homegrown talent. A number of benchmarking exercises are underway to review approaches to festive lights switch on and will be brought back to committee in due course.

#### 2 Royal Avenue:

Following on from 2023's model of uplifting the Christmas programme in 2 Royal Avenue, the Winter's Den opened on Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> November 2024. The Winter's Den season features a selection of free entry festive activities. The venue was dressed by *MayWe*, and included a living 12ft tree that will be replanted in January, art installation by local artist *Carla Hodgson* and reused Christmas décor from previous years.

- Total building footfall across Winter's Den (from Sat 16<sup>th</sup> November to 31<sup>st</sup> December) was **49,434**. This included the an opening weekend footfall of **5,022** (Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> & Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> November)
- 36 funded workshops / events, supported by 17 external events / markets / performances and a further 35 community groups and 10 schools engaged including 14 community / school musical performances

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 markets including approximately 140 makers / groups / artists (Potters Markets, Social Enterprise Market, Christmas Queer Art Fair and Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful Market)</li> <li>• Santa's Post Office (Belfast Bid One) opened 16<sup>th</sup> November – 24<sup>th</sup> December and remains very popular</li> <li>• Sensory area provided on 16<sup>th</sup> November to compliment the City Hall Switch - on including sensory workshops, a snow dome, sensory silent disco, walk about characters and a quiet light switch on</li> <li>• Most popular programmed events this year included festive film screenings, a <i>New Years Eve Ceili</i>, themed workshops and musical performances, family art workshops, <i>Jingle and Jazz for seniors</i> and storytelling. This was further enhanced by a popular community led programme including the Potters Market, Community carolling, Primary School traditional music concerts, Christmas Tea Dance and a concert by the <i>Ulster Sinfonia</i>.</li> </ul>
3.3	<p><u>Belfast Christmas Lights Switch-On 16th November - Socio-Economic Survey results</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A total of 115 face-to-face interviews were conducted with visitors to the Belfast Christmas Lights Switch-On event. A further 123 interviews were completed online by visitors who had booked tickets to the event. 238 interviews were completed in total</li> <li>• The overall estimated direct spend for the Belfast event was £195,585 (2023: £193,950)</li> <li>• The total average spend per group was £76.93. (2023: £86.20) 79% ate out during the event</li> <li>• 52% of survey respondents were from the Belfast City Council area, and a further 40% were from elsewhere in Northern Ireland. A slightly higher than last year but small number of visitors were from GB (2%), ROI (4%) and outside the UK and Ireland (2%). 8% of survey respondents were staying in accommodation away from home</li> <li>• 62% of respondents said they had attended a Christmas event hosted by Belfast City Council previously and 38% were new</li> <li>• 61% (2023:75%) of survey respondents attended the event with children</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 37% (2023:46%) said they had no preference on when tickets became available, with 30% preferring them to be released in the morning and 25% after work hours</li> <li>• Two-thirds, (63%) said they were supportive of Belfast City Council's preference to source local talent for stage acts. Under one third (31%) would prefer a big-name act</li> <li>• 45% (2023:51%) gave the event an overall rating of between 8 and 10, including 17% who rated it as '10 - Extremely good'. At the other end of the scale, 13% gave it a rating between 1-3</li> <li>• 88% thought that events like these encourage people to come to Belfast, while 81% of those living in Belfast said that events like these improve their sense of well-being and community</li> <li>• 77% of visitors said the Belfast Christmas Lights Switch On event improves Belfast's reputation as a host for events like these; and 75% stated it improves the reputation of Belfast as a place to visit</li> <li>• 42% (2023: 62%) of respondents living outside NI confirmed that the event makes them more likely to visit Belfast again, while 62% commented it makes them more likely to recommend friends and family to visit Belfast</li> <li>• 90% agreed that there should be more events like this in Belfast</li> <li>• 93% said that they felt safe during the event</li> </ul>
3.4	<p><b>Festive Lighting Scheme</b></p> <p>The Switch On event marked the turning on of the festive lighting scheme throughout the city centre, comprising a number of cross street features and pole mount features. In liaison with Facilities Management, the lighting of the City Hall façade also took place the same evening.</p> <p>2025 saw the final year of the existing Christmas lights contract. This year there were a number of new sites included. With projections on Church Lane, bank street and castle lane, lighting of Belfast Stories, repair and reinstalment of Anne Street icles and Dongeal Place trees.</p> <p>There was some damage incurred to features on Castle Street as a result of Storm Daragh. The provider was engaged in emergency planning protocol and was on site to deal with issues as they occurred, ensuring that the features were removed in a safe and timely mannor.</p>

	<p>As part of the ongoing development aligned to the issue of the new festive lighting scheme tender officers are working closely with City Hall to ensure alignment in scheme designs and also with the BIDs on business engagement opportunities aligned to scheme development. The tender will run over a total 5 year period and will provide for ongoing development and agility within the scheme that is cognisant of the city lighting strategy and makes recommendations for additional infrastructure to support this.</p> <p>Officers are currently working in partnership with the estates team on the development of new wayleave agreements to come into ownership of BCC as these were previously managed by BCCM.</p> <p>Officers recognise the importance of a partnership approach with the successful appointee and look to developing a future festive lighting masterplan and associated infrastructure planning.</p>
3.5	<p><b>Christmas Market 2024</b></p> <p>The Christmas Market was a huge success this year again and ran from Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> November to Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> December. Markets Officers worked with BCC Events team on the opening of the market and the light switch-on which took place on the same day. Market Place Europe Limited (MPEL) has held the Continental Markets contract for the past 19 years and have been awarded the contract for in total 3+2 years.</p> <p>This year the market attracted over a million visitors and was a celebration of 20 years of the Belfast Christmas Market, to celebrate there were a number of Dickensian themed weekends when all the staff and traders dressed up as Characters from Dickens novels.</p> <p>This year there was a larger seating and food court area and an enhanced Christmas experience with themed and animated walkways. There were over 100 stalls, this included 40% local traders and 60% continental traders. As always there was a Santa's Grotto supporting the Lord Mayors Charity and a return of free school educational tours. MPEL also ran the Jolly Big Business Boost competition and offered a free chalet to a young business selling dog products. 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 gave a free pitch to St George's Market traders this year again.</p>
3.6	<p><b>Financial and Resource Implications</b></p> <p>All expenditure was within existing departmental budgets and approvals.</p>
3.7	<p><b>Equality &amp; Good Relations Implications /Rural Needs Assessment</b></p> <p>None.</p>

4.0	<b>Appendices – Documents Attached</b>
	None.