

Report to: Place and Economic Development Committee, 24th January 2022

Report of: Managing Director

Subject: REVIEW OF CHRISTMAS IN WORCESTER

1. Recommendation

- 1.1 That the Committee notes the review of Christmas in Worcester activity for the 2021-22 season.**
- 1.2 That the Committee agrees to officers exploring the options for extending the existing Christmas light coverage to other parts of the city, with recommendations reported to a future committee meeting.**
- 1.3 That the Committee agrees to officers conducting a review of opportunities relating to Christmas activities to report to a future committee meeting.**

2. Background

- 2.1 This report summarises the review of Christmas activities for the 2021-22 season and makes recommendations for further action and development in future years.
- 2.2 The Christmas in Worcester activities delivered by the Council for the 2021-22 season were as follows:
 - 2.2.1 Worcester Christmas illuminations in the city centre and St Johns
 - 2.2.2 Worcester Christmas Lights Switch on, Saturday 27 November
 - 2.2.3 Worcester Victorian Christmas Fayre, Thursday 2 – Sunday 5 December
 - 2.2.4 Worcester Christmas Gifts Market, Monday 6 – Wednesday 22 December
 - 2.2.5 Free parking after 3pm and on Sundays in all Worcester City Council car parks
- 2.3 These were supplemented by a promotional campaign coordinated by Worcester BID and funded through the Welcome Back Fund. The campaign included social media, adverts in several local publications, online and print coverage in local newspapers and adverts on the radio.
- 2.4 The Visit Worcester site also contained a feature on all Christmas activity in the city from external partners, including the Father Christmas installation at Crowngate Shopping Centre, events at The Commandery, the Cathedral, and others.

3. Review of Christmas illuminations

- 3.1 A new contractor, LITE Ltd, was procured in 2021 for the 2021-2024 festive illuminations contract. LITE Ltd were commissioned to work with the existing lights infrastructure and to design a display which is attractive and suits the layout of the city whilst remaining within the budget which in 2021 was £39,000.

3.2 **City Centre**

LITE Ltd installed cross-street decorations in the city centre streets, lamppost lights in Cathedral Square, and decorated existing trees on Broad Street and the High Street. A 35-foot Christmas tree was installed by the Council's tree team on the Cathedral island along with two 8-foot trees outside the Guildhall. These were lit and decorated by LITE Ltd.

In 2021, the BID installed infrastructure and light crossings in New Street and Friar Street which has been well-received by local businesses and residents.

3.3 **St Johns**

In St Johns, as in previous years, 24 small decorated trees were installed above shops and businesses. New Road roundabout has traditionally had a 35-foot tree installed and decorated but there have been frequent incidences of vandalism and wind damage leading to problems with the lights and issues with the safety of the tree. This year, the team installed a large star illumination on the roundabout and decorated a pre-existing tree with lights.

Once the star was installed, under direction of the leader of the Council, the star was removed, and a new 35-foot Christmas tree installed in its place. The new decorations were in place by Friday 10 December at an additional cost of £5,320.

3.4 **Review**

Feedback about the lights in the city centre has been very positive with many more messages and positive comments received than in previous years. The displays are bright, stretching across the entire High Street and the varied designs in each street provide a point of interest for each location.

The St Johns shopfront Christmas trees were new in 2018 but are no longer as bright as they were. The feedback on the New Road roundabout and action taken to resolve this has been referenced above, and a tree will be installed on this roundabout in future years.

City centre lights have been installed in the same locations for at least ten years, based on existing infrastructure in the city, including lamp columns, tree sockets, and eyebolts in the walls of buildings. It does not provide full coverage of every street in the city centre and does not extend to streets further out of the centre, for example Foregate Street or The Tything.

It would not be possible to light additional areas or extend coverage within the existing budget allocation. It should also be noted that new areas of the city currently in development through regeneration (for example, The Arches) will not have an existing budget allocation for festive decorations.

3.5 **Recommendation**

The recommendation is for officers to explore the options for extending the existing Christmas light coverage to other parts of the city. This review should include the potential for private sector funding and sponsorship. Once the review is complete, recommendations will be presented to Members.

4. **Worcester Christmas Lights Switch On**

4.1 In previous years, the lights switch on event has taken place on a Thursday evening at an event between 4pm and 6pm.

Based on feedback from businesses and visitors, this year, the team decided to move the event to a Saturday, with an earlier start time of 2pm to give people the opportunity to spend more time in the city on the day to visit shops and restaurants.

- 4.2 This was received extremely positively by businesses and residents, with reports of high footfall throughout the day. In addition, a large crowd stayed in Cathedral Square for at least an hour after the switch on of the lights which is not normally the case.
- 4.3 The event was organised by the Tourism and Events team and Youthcomm Radio, with support from Worcester BID, Crowngate Shopping Centre and Cathedral Square Shopping Centre. It was attended by thousands of people with overwhelmingly positive feedback on social media and in person.

5. Worcester Victorian Christmas Fayre

- 5.1 The Fayre is organised by the Tourism and Events team with the management of the market traders outsourced to an external market operator which in 2021 was Cotswold Markets Ltd. The layout of the Fayre was reviewed to address concerns about large crowds. Organisers reduced the number of stalls at the event and ensure there was more space between traders to minimise crowding.
- 5.2 Throughout the planning of the 2021 event, as reported to PED Committee, the team worked on multiple plans to account for any changes in the Covid-19 restrictions. Aware of the need to support the businesses and suppliers involved in the event, the Council agreed to underwrite the impact of any cancellation or significant reduction in scale. This minimised the uncertainty involved and created a positive working environment for partners in the event.
- 5.3 To support local businesses, the team works with the market operator to ensure that stalls are positioned to be complementary to existing retailers and that products outside are not competing with their stock. The team liaises with all businesses in the city centre throughout the event planning process. Many positive comments have been received by local businesses celebrating the boost in trade they experienced.
- 5.4 Feedback received by organisers or on the Fayre social media has been mostly positive from all visitors. Particularly positive comments were received about the layout of the stalls and the atmosphere of the event.
- 5.5 Some feedback was received about visitors to the Fayre not wearing masks. The Council followed all government guidelines in the planning and delivery of the event. At the time of the Fayre, there was no requirement for visitors to wear face coverings at outside events and there were no government guidelines indicating that the event should not take place.
- 5.6 Positive feedback was received about the entertainment at the event. As well as choirs and local musicians, entertainers included walkabout Scrooge, Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson characters, and Victorian police officers amongst others. In addition, Gin Lane returned for its 7th year entertaining the public from their base on The Shambles with a Victorian immersive theatre installation.
- 5.7 **Review**

The layout of the event has worked well this year, so the Fayre team will retain this for future years, although the team will review options for including stalls in The Shambles, Broad Street, and others.

The contract for delivery of the market operations at the event is due for renewal in 2022 and will be procured through a competitive tendering process. The procurement will consider lessons learned from this year's event.

In 2022, the overall cost to the Council of the Christmas Fayre was c.£40,000. This included a reduction of income of £10,000 due to the reduction in the number of stalls and the c.£30,000 cost of installation of Hostile Vehicle Mitigation Barriers to protect the public.

5.8 **Recommendation**

Approximately 125,000 people attend the Fayre each year with a positive and receptive audience which presents an opportunity to generate income through sponsorship and advertising from local businesses, as well as tourism marketing.

The recommendation is therefore to conduct a review of income generation opportunities both at the Fayre and for the wider Christmas in Worcester programme. Subject to agreement, it is proposed that this will be the subject of a report to a future Income Generation Committee.

6. **Worcester Christmas Gifts Market**

6.1 For the first time, 24 wooden chalets were installed on the High Street and these remained in place after the Fayre in a new Christmas Gifts Market. The chalets were installed at no cost to the Council and generated a small amount of income. Footfall figures indicate that the city centre has been busy in December and the stalls have been positively received by local businesses. Traders have reported that weekends are the busiest for footfall and sales but that earlier in the week it has been a lot quieter.

6.2 Officers will carry out a review, in partnership with the market operator, to assess the success of the Christmas gifts market and report to a future PED Committee alongside recommendations for future Christmas in Worcester activities.

7. **Car Parking Offer**

7.1 This year, members introduced an enhanced parking offer to subsidise the costs of providing free parking after 3pm and all day on Sunday in City Council car parks. The team reported a large number of vehicles taking advantage of this offer.

8. **Preferred Option**

8.1 Officers to explore the options for extending the existing Christmas light coverage to other parts of the city. Once the review is complete, recommendations will be presented to Members.

8.2 Officers to conduct a review of opportunities relating to Christmas activities to report to a future Income Generation committee meeting.

9. **Alternative Options Considered**

9.1 If the infrastructure review is not carried out, the team will continue to install lights in the same locations as previous years. This does not account for new areas of the city or enable the lighting of areas which are currently not lit as well as others. Feedback from members this year has already indicated that a review of the St Johns and Foregate / Tything areas is due, and this review presents the opportunity to future-proof the lights infrastructure in the city for future displays.

9.2 The Council currently funds the shortfall in income to cover the costs of the Victorian Fayre. If no additional income generation opportunities are identified, budget will need to be allocated for this every year.

10. Implications

10.1 Financial and Budgetary Implications

Details included in body of report

10.2 Legal and Governance Implications

Procurement and a new contract for the new operator for the Victorian Fayre.

10.3 Risk Implications

There is a risk that no suitable contractor will be identified to deliver the Victorian Fayre. Lessons from the 2022 arrangements will be implemented in order to ensure that the tender documentation provides an attractive proposition.

10.4 Corporate/Policy Implications

There are no corporate / policy implications identified as a direct result of this report.

10.5 Equality Implications

An equality impact assessment will ensure accessibility for events and cultural activities.

10.6 Human Resources Implications

There are no human resources implications identified as a direct result of this report.

10.7 Health and Safety Implications

All events and Christmas light installations are risk assessed and reviewed for health and safety considerations

10.8 Social, Environmental and Economic Implications

The vitality and vibrancy of the city centre is key in attracting visitors to the city, boosting the economy, creating jobs and supporting businesses and residents.

Ward(s):

All

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Background Papers:

PED Committee reports 26 July 2021, 6 September 2021 and 1 November 2021