

81. Events and Culture in the City - Christmas 2023 and Beyond

Purpose of Report

To provide members with a review of the Christmas Market in 2022, reflecting on:

- The visitor experience,
- The financial cost,
- Predictions over increasing attendance numbers and the consequential health and safety concerns.

The Chair expressed thanks to Officers and emphasised that proposals had not been taken impulsively or without extensive consideration. Recognition was given to the affection that was held for the market as a much loved institution, however public safety was the most important consideration moving forward.

The Chair confirmed that detailed and extensive discussions had taken place with the multi-agency Safety Advisory Group and the advice received was that no revisions to the market event plan would safely deal with any increase in visitor numbers beyond those experienced in 2022. It was noted that if the market continued to grow at the current rate, the event would become unsafe. In addition, the visitor experience would be adversely affected and as such, there was a compelling case for changes to be made moving forward. Consideration was given to the wider context, it was agreed that Lincoln was a highly successful visitor and tourist attraction which provided a great base from which to consider a new “Christmas in Lincoln” offer and wider events programme.

Further to discussions between Executive members and Officers, the following points were noted:

- Public safety was the principal consideration moving forward. The market had won awards for safety, but the event would become unsafe in 2023.
- When considering the financial implications, contracts for services had break clauses built in and as such, contractors could claim only for costs incurred at the point of cancellation. There was a compelling case for cancelling early to prevent contractors incurring large costs for the 2023 market.
- Contracts awarded for providing services across all events would mean that many contractors would be retained for other events and in turn, costs would be mitigated.
- The cost of cancellation was anticipated to be significantly less than the £260K net cost of operating the market.
- Although the market generated £13m, only £2m stayed within the local economy.
- Proposals included the use of the full budget allocation of £260K per annum into a new events programme – the largest investment in cultural activity in the Council’s recent history.

- Consideration of a new events programme for the future would include work with local businesses from all sectors to ensure it had the desired impact and covered a range of events for both local residents and visitors from further afield.
- It was anticipated that other partners would step into this space and therefore increase and enhance provision which would create a much bigger ‘critical mass’ of activity – especially around the Christmas period.
- The economic benefit from 320,000 visitors could be distributed over a range of events across the full year and therefore, visitors may spend more if they had time to dwell and meander around the City centre and uphill areas to absorb the atmosphere which the history and heritage of the City offered e.g. the iconic Cathedral and Norman Castle which had both seen extensive investment in recent years.
- The replacement events programme would build content that would be marketed across the region and hence maintain the profile. There would be less of a national/international profile, as that would take the Council back to the issues experienced with crowding at the Christmas market. Lincoln did not have a large capacity events space.
- The Council did not market the Christmas market, and had not done so for many years, as its profile on social media had been sufficient. Therefore, the Council did not have a marketing budget and could not place a value on the equivalent exposure created from the market’s profile.
- Extensive yearlong discussions with the Safety Advisory Group every year always resulted in recommendations for a range of infrastructure to maintain visitor safety, the cost of which was £750K in 2022 for the Christmas market. If the event were to be spread over a range of venues across the city, there would be a requirement to spread resources over a wider footprint or more likely, lead to a much higher infrastructure cost (e.g. CCTV, stewards, lighting, power, public address system, barriers, toilets etc) across a much wider area. The Council would need to make provision for 320,000 visitors with no effective way of managing how visitors moved between these areas. All areas would require safety plans to tackle excessive crowding.
- Stall holders enjoyed the Christmas market as it brought over 250,000 people into a concentrated area over 4 days enabling them to accrue significant income. However, since Covid-19, the Council had struggled to attract the required level of stalls and was 50 stalls short in 2022. If the footprint were to be spread across the whole city centre and beyond, the attraction for those stall holders would reduce as the perception could be that a spread of visitor numbers resulted in less footfall.
- There would be a requirement to reduce stall fees to sell the space and therefore, the cost of the market would increase further resulting in a double impact of less income and higher costs.

Discussion concluded that a new vision for the future delivery of an events and culture programme in the city, which incorporated ‘Christmas in Lincoln,’ was now necessary.

Councillor Neil Murray motioned an additional recommendation for the creation of a mechanism to enable meaningful consultation with Lincoln residents, businesses and key stakeholders for both the creation of a new “Christmas in Lincoln” offer and the wider events programme. The motion was seconded by Councillor Sue Burke, voted upon and carried.

Decision

1. That the issues raised in this report be noted.
2. That the existing budget provision for the Christmas Market be reallocated to provide a wider events programme, working with partners, throughout the year, including a new “Christmas in Lincoln” offer.
3. That businesses, residents and key stakeholders would be consulted with widely to enable their views to be considered in the creation of a new “Christmas in Lincoln” offer and wider events programme proposal.
4. That Policy Scrutiny Committee be invited to review that new programme, once officers had further developed proposals.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

As detailed within the officer’s report.

Reasons for the Decision

If the success of the Christmas Market were to be simply measured in terms of attendance figures, then the market was hugely successful. This was by far the busiest market in its 40-year history.

However, success was not just measured by visitor numbers as there were many factors at work to create a broader barometer of success including:

- Visitor/resident experience
- Commercial success of the market itself
- The safety of those attending – the most important factor here

Whilst noting the success of the market in terms of its attraction to visitors across the wider region and beyond, as organisers of the event, the City Council must be cognisant of the escalating cost of putting the four-day event on, the emergence of a negative visitor experience due to visitor numbers at various times, and the predictions of increasing attendance volumes year on year in what was essentially a very constrained geographical footprint.

The officer’s report considered these elements in detail and ultimately concluded that after 40 years of successful operation, it was time for the Christmas Market to ‘bow out’ to make way for a new offer over the entire Christmas period in Lincoln together with a wider programme of events throughout the rest of the year to attract a wide variety of visitors and hence placing a far less intensive demand on the City’s infrastructure.

The 2022 Christmas market was exceptionally well planned and executed. The City Council deployed some of the most experienced staff/partners in the country to work on overseeing the market and the overall planning process was held up nationally as an example of best practice. Last year saw a significant uplift in visitor numbers from 2021 and whilst the plans for crowd control coped with this increase, they operated at near capacity. Visitors were not in danger, but the visitor experience suffered and hence the reputation of the market, as detailed within the report.

The graph in section 3.5 of the report confirmed that there was a general growth in numbers of people visiting the market year on year and as a result, the market had simply become so popular it has outgrown its current footprint and duration of event.

The City Council had sought the views of partners through the multi- agency Safety Advisory Group, who advised on the safe operation of events across the City. Their advice was that no revisions to the market event plan would safely deal with any increase in visitor numbers beyond those experienced in 2022. The only option was to:

- explore utilisation of a much wider area, and/or
- reduce the number of people attending (ticket event), and/or
- operate over a longer period (which included two Saturdays)

Officers had explored all these options, but none of them were viable in the current location. The event took place on open streets in commercial uphill Lincoln but was bounded by residential areas. The Council could not expand any further into these neighbouring streets without causing significant disruption and further complaints from residents. This resulted in the footprint remaining constrained.

In addition, roads had to be closed, causing disruption in the uphill area over the four days, preventing the City Council stretching the event over more days in the existing footprint. The cost of extending the infrastructure over two weekends (in an effort to spread visitor numbers over those two weekends) would be prohibitive.

The Council also had no control over how many people attended - this was a free to enter event and all were welcome. Ticketing the event in its entirety was impossible due to the many entry and exit points into the market footprint. Castle Square remained the hub of the market. Due to street design and hierarchy, many people either started their exploration of the market from here or arrived in this area quite quickly on their journey around the footprint. This was one of the main areas where crowds developed. By ticketing the Castle – it would limit numbers into the Castle and reduce volumes on the ramp at the exit – but it would significantly impact on crowding elsewhere as visitors would ‘back up’ into Castle Square and beyond. It took time to check tickets/ take payments/ answer queries at the gates – this impeded flow and would cause safety concerns at busy times. This was also the case at The Lawn entrance - ticketing here would lead to queues backing up the Castle ramp into the Castle.

The budget position for the Christmas Market was also explored within the officer’s report.

Officers’ professional advice was that the market was not sustainable moving forward. The cost of operating the market had escalated to in excess of £250K per annum putting pressure on the Medium-Term Financial Strategy. None of the options for crowd control with higher visitor numbers were viable and the visitor experience would start to deteriorate. In addition, the City’s reputation would suffer.

After 40 years the market's success had outgrown its footprint and had a business model that would not recover the infrastructure costs associated with hosting a regional/national event in a medieval setting, as magical as it was.

As indicated throughout the officer's report, the approach to 'Christmas in Lincoln' needed a rethink and this must take place with some urgency to enable the Council to extract itself from the market related contracts already in place and enable partners to step into the space to organise their own offers.

Officers were assessing Christmas in the City in a more holistic way to reflect the desires and ambitions expressed by many businesses and residents feeding back to the Council this year. Whilst further work was ongoing to develop a potential programme, the shape and structure would be moulded around a number of core aspects moving forward:

- Movement to a model of "Christmas in Lincoln"
- Utilisation of partners to also organise activity
- Investment in wider Christmas infrastructure
- Development and curation of a range of cultural events throughout the year
- To support a re-emergence of the Lincoln Cultural Arts Partnership (LCAP)

Note: Meeting adjourned at 19:10