



<b>Subject:</b>	<b>Major Events Update</b>
<b>Date:</b>	16 <sup>th</sup> November 2024
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	Lesley-Ann O Donnell, Senior Manager Culture and Tourism
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Kerry McMullan, 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>Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.</b>	
Insert number <input type="checkbox"/>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Information relating to any individual</li><li>2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual</li><li>3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)</li><li>4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter</li><li>5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained</li><li>6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction</li><li>7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime</li></ol>	
<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>Sometime in the future</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Never</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>

<b>Call-in</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
----------------	--------------------------

Is the decision eligible for Call-in?

Yes

No

<b>1.0</b>	<b>Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues</b>
1.1	The purpose of this report is to update Members on the Christmas Programme and the bid for the Fleadh Cheoil.
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>
2.1	Committee is asked to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Note the contents of this report.</li><li>• Approve attendance of the Lord Mayor and senior officials at the 2025 US Comhaltas Convention and the early release of budget to Ards CCE to allow early booking of flights and accommodation.</li></ul>
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main Report</b>
3.1	<b>Christmas Programme Update:</b> <b>Background:</b> The Christmas Lights Switch On event will take place on Saturday November 16 <sup>th</sup> and will be a free of charge ticketed event. With the stage providing family-oriented entertainment including local musicians and performers culminating in the switch on of the lights by our Lord Mayor.  As in recent years, 2RA will provide a programme of Christmas - themed activities across the six weeks of Christmas to supplement the Switch On and provide a focus throughout the festive period.  Members will be aware that a report to committee in June 2023 recommended several adjustments to the Christmas light switch on to mitigate identified health and safety risks - these included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Event build in the early hours involving staggered road and lane closures.</li></ul>

- The careful co-ordination of deliveries of equipment and stock of the Christmas market to facilitate an appropriate cut off to allow for the build of the stage and rig.
- The stage and all associated equipment and infrastructure should remain in situ following the event to allow roads to reopen immediately after the event. This will allow of a de-rig to take place on Sunday morning during a less busy period.

Members should be aware that the mitigation outlined above has increased some costs related to both equipment rental and security. Any expenditure will be found from existing corporate budgets.

Planning is very well advanced, with temporary road closure applications submitted in August and many performers contracted.

#### **Proposed Event Programme 2024:**

The wider event schedule will consist of a range of elements including:

- The Official Switch - On event
- 2 Royal Avenue
- Christmas Market
- Festive Lighting Scheme
- Marketing and Communications Activity

Belfast's Christmas celebrations will officially begin on Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> November with the Switch- On. This event will take place from approximately 6:30pm to 7:30pm. The stage programme will consist of:

- Walkabout performers entertaining the audience at each three entrances, Donegall Place & Donegall Square East & West .
- Proposed stage programme: a variety of short acts celebrating the best of Belfast performers both professional companies and community organisations, all supported by Council. This will include:
  - Compered by a media partner with "switch-on" of the lights by the Lord Mayor.
  - Young musician to open the event (bagpipes)
  - A local singer with live band, sourced from the Oh Yeah Music Centre, a Lord Mayor's Charity.

- Musical excerpt from Christmas Performance.
- A Christmas Theatre excerpt
- A special Circus performance
- Rock Choir – carols and uplifting rock songs.
- A primary school choir

## **.2 Royal Avenue Programme:**

Following the success over the last two years, there will be an allocation of the Christmas programming budget allocated to the 'Winter's Den' activity in 2 Royal Avenue, beginning on Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> November and running throughout the Christmas period. The programme will be delivered by the operators of the venue- MayWe Events.

The 2RA Christmas programme will also include a variety of sustainable festive workshops, festive Christmas carolling and musical sing – a longs, Jazz afternoons for seniors, family theatre and performances, celebrations from around the world including art, storytelling and dance, baby sensory sessions, autism and disability friendly events such as sensory workshops, activities and storytelling.

Additionally, the programme launch will support the Christmas Light Switch -On at City Hall on Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> November by offering a sensory space for families with a dedicated sensory area, sensory decoration making workshop, a relaxed silent disco and walk about characters. An 'alternative tree lighting' ceremony will also take place in the venue for those unable to manage the crowds at City Hall.

This event programme will be supported by external events including, Santa's Post Office, Christmas tea dances, choir performances, a festive Ceilidh, traditional performances and markets including the Potters market and Twilight markets.

MayWe will also work with the Lord Mayor's chosen charities where appropriate.

The Maywe budget allocation also includes all staffing, branding and decoration, technical support and late - nights openings.

## **Christmas Market:**

The Christmas Market will run this year from Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> November to Sunday 22 December. Market Place Europe Limited (MPEL) currently hold the Continental

Markets contract and this year will be celebrating 20 years of the Belfast Christmas Market and hope to have some Dickensian themed weekends and additional activities.

There will be over 100 stalls and the new contract also sets out the requirement for 40% local traders and 60% continental traders. There will be 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' offering a free chalet to a young business. 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 has offered a free pitch to St Georges Market traders this year and in previous years to further enhance trade for the local traders.

#### **Marketing and Communications Activity:**

Council will operate a digital campaign with pulse screens and online advertising to promote the fact that there is an event taking place on 16<sup>th</sup> November, as well as weekend entertainment thereafter and seasonal activities in 2 Royal Avenue. Council will be directing people to [www.belfastcity.gov.uk/christmas](http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/christmas) URL, where the switch on event information will be displayed prominently on the page. As information is finalised on the event schedule, online messaging will be strengthened.

Promotion will take place across digital platforms and via key partners including BID One and Visit Belfast. City Matters went to print before event details were confirmed, but a generic update was provided to highlight the Switch On date and 2 Royal Avenue in edition to be circulated to just under 160k homes in early November. A press release will also be issued to promote the ticket release and the confirmed details of the event schedule.

#### **2024 Approach to Ticketing:**

As with 2023, our approach to ticketing involves a number of strands, for which we have engaged Visit Belfast due to their service offering. The site capacity is for 10,000 in a comfortable manner. Therefore, the ticket allocation will be slightly above this figure to allow for a percentage of 'no shows'- normal industry practice even for paid

for events. There will be a staggered release (both a morning and evening release) as per 2023, to accommodate working parents.

There will be a further allocation of tickets held back for those with no access to computers, tablets and smart phones, to call in to collect tickets. Each year, there is an accessible platform erected, with spaces booked by telephoning Visit Belfast. Tickets will be capped to 5 per booking. Furthermore, Visit Belfast will provide visitor servicing and support staff on the evening of the event to assist with ticket queries and the scanner technology used to expediate entrancing on to the site.

**Christmas Lighting Scheme:**

2024 will be year 5<sup>th</sup> and final year of the existing Christmas Lighting Scheme which will begin on the 16<sup>th</sup> of November and run until the 2<sup>nd</sup> January.

The installation, storage and maintenance of our festive lighting scheme is managed through a third party that was appointed via a public procurement process. This contract is currently in its final year and due for renewal from 2025 onwards, The supplier has seen significant cost increases relating to insurance, energy costs and labour costs.

The budget for the Christmas Festive Lighting Scheme was unchanged in the previous 4 years and has historically been supported through additional non-recurrent budgets. Whilst there has been an uplift allocated to lighting for 2024, this has covered increasing costs outlined above, repairs to previously damaged sites, a small number of new additional sites and the offset of previous non recurrent funding.

The provision of festive lights covers the city centre with a combination of cross - street and pole mounted features. New sites included in the scheme this year are; Church Lane, Anne Steet and 2 Royal Avenue. Officers are currently conducting final site visits at the Belfast Stories site, Berry Street and Lower Garfield Steet to provide additional lighting on the Royal Avenue area.

Officers are also investigating alternatives for Arthur Street and Anne Street due to ongoing building works. Officers are currently developing the new tender terms to be progressed for provision from 2025 onwards.

**Lighting on Arterial Routes:**

Council previously received funding from DfC revitalisation funding which allowed Officers to distribute monies via a funding programme to business clusters on arterial routes for them to produce some Christmas related activity. Given reduced levels of budget within Executive Department budgets funding has not been provided for any additional activity on arterial routes. It should be noted that there would also be significant cost and the lead time required to secure the wayleave agreements and install the mounting infrastructure.

**Existing Funding Mechanisms:**

Members should note there is a pre-existing mechanism for groups to secure funding to programme activity during the festive period. The 'Community Festivals Fund' is administered via Culture and the Central Grants Unit. This funding scheme is accessible by community groups but not council. Those groups can apply for funding between £2,500 - £10,000, and this is for arts and heritage activities and/or other cultural events that contribute to the cultural identity of an area or group and celebrates the uniqueness of that area or group.

The fund is currently supporting the following Christmas activities:

- Féile An Phobail - Féile na Nollaig 2024
- Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich - Fleadh Feirste 2024 – Christmas festival
- Shankill Winter Festival

Other 'Winter Festival' activities include would be:

- Forward South Partnership - Holyland Winter Festival
- EastSide Partnership - CS Lewis Winter Fest 2024 Belfast
- 'Bring a Little Light lantern festival' from Wandsworth Community Centre.

The current scheme is closed. Any festival must take place between November and March. Council receives applications from a range of community groups and arts organisations.

**Shared Prosperity Fund:**

At the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee on the 20<sup>th</sup> September, Members agreed to include opportunities for additional animation, lighting enhancements and marketing in a bid for Shared Prosperity Funding. Officers are speaking with BIDS on the potential for provision of additional lighting / dressing in the city centre to address areas where lighting is poor, this work will be ongoing to ensure appropriate provision of wayleaves and eyebolts. Additional marketing and promotion could also be commissioned but all of the above would be subject to receipt of a letter of offer in relation to Shared Prosperity Funding.

**3.2 Update on Bid for Fleadh Cheoil**

**Bid Submission**

Council in partnership with Ards CCE continues to bid for the 2026 Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann. Our latest revision of the Bid Book was been delivered to Comhaltas HQ to meet the 30<sup>th</sup> August deadline for the 2026 iteration of the event, with an announcement expected during early March 2025.

**Ongoing Engagement**

Lord Mayor, Chief Executive and Senior BCC Officials attended the recent Fleadh Cheoil in Wexford from 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> August 2025 to participate in a series of engagement, networking and lobbying events with Members of Ards CCE, raising the profile of the Belfast bid.

Additionally, the Events Team attended an operational Familiarisation Day visit with internal and external colleagues on Friday 9<sup>th</sup> August to further consolidate operational learnings within a new ground footprint context in Wexford – this included observing Campsites, Visitor Servicing, Security, Ancillary and Volunteer provision. The Events Team have previously attended the two consecutive years of the event in Mullingar to scope operational requirements and have met with Sligo representatives, a previous host of Fleadh Cheoil.



Learnings have been considerable and this will further be consolidated by a follow up session with Members of the Wexford FEC scheduled for Friday 4<sup>th</sup> October. It is anticipated that this operational familiarisation will be further developed for next year, with invitations extended out and a more close shadowing role likely with members of the Wexford FEC.

Moving forward, it is anticipated that members of the Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann will visit Belfast in the coming weeks, ahead of the final decision of the host city for 2025. The itinerary will be in-line with previous visits by the Ard-Chomhairle to Belfast.

### **Draft Governance**

A draft governance structure in line the official fleadh guidance manual is being developed. Operational learnings from Sligo, Mullingar and Wexford have also helped to inform this governance model. This model will no doubt be altered over time to suit the needs of the organising team. However, the Terms of Reference have taken into consideration the plans outlined in our bid book and recognise the various considerations laid out in the manual. Similarly, attention is being given to the lessons learned from Fleadh visits and Executive feedback.

A dedicated Project Plan document has been developed by the Events Team and is now in place to commence 'Task and Finish' work on specific aspects of operational planning with both internal and external stakeholders.

### **Resource**

Roll out of the governance structure, the 'standing up' of the working groups and implementation of the Project Plan is now very much dependent on Fleadh dedicated resource coming into post in the coming months. Work is currently being expedited to secure additional staff resource asap and a report will be presented on short-term staff requirements to SP&R later this month.

### **Ards CCE**

Officer engagement with Ards CCE is ongoing - Officers are meeting with the branch regularly on attendance required at the various conventions across Ireland, the UK

and the United States as part of ongoing lobbying and engagement. Ards CCE have also been working with the Events Team to map potential venues and programming content for Belfast Fleadh Cheoil.

On Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> September, the Lord Mayor hosted Ards CCE in the Lord Mayor's Parlour to celebrate their recent success of 4 All Ireland medals at the recent Fleadh Cheoil in Wexford.

Lord Mayor and Chief Executive will attend the Annual Comhaltas Christmas Dinner in Dublin and the GB convention in February as a final lobbying opportunities ahead of bid announcement.

The US Comhaltas Convention 2025 is to be held at the beginning of April 2025 inclusive. This is an important date in the Comhaltas calendar in terms of US votes and connecting with diaspora markets which will play a key role in securing visitors to Belfast for future event iterations. Under the conditions of the current in-year Funding Agreement with Ards CCE, the branch are responsible for making their own travel and accommodation arrangements. This includes for the US Convention at the beginning of April 2025.

To facilitate the early booking of flights and accommodation and ensure value for money, approval is sought to part release some of next years Ards CCE annual funding agreement early and within the financial year 2024 / 2025 (circa 25K). This is subject to drawn down and satisfactory verification of the current year Funding Agreement before release of any additional monies. As per the last two years, it is proposed that Ards CCE will attend with Lord Mayor, Chief Executive and a senior Council Official.

**4.0 Financial and Resource Implications**

4.1 The cost of delivering the programme is £300k for Christmas Lights and £153k for event delivery, This will be funded from existing budgets. As noted subject to a timely letter of offer there is the potential for supplementing this with Shared Prosperity Funding.

4.2	Attendance at US Comhaltas Convention 2025 by Ards CCE will be forward funded from part release of next years Ards CCE annual funding agreement.
5.0	<b><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment</u></b> There are no Equality, Good Relations nor Rural Needs Implications associated with this paper.
6.0	<b>Appendices:</b>  N/A