

Information / Discussion Paper

Overview and Scrutiny

Monday 30 October 2023

Christmas in Cheltenham 2023

This note contains the information to keep Members informed of matters relating to the work of the Committee, but where no decisions from Members are needed.

1. Why has this come to scrutiny?

1.1 Members have asked for a report about plans for promotion of Christmas in Cheltenham and delivery of Christmas events in the town to help them “understand what the plans are, what remains to be done and where the risks are. To include an update on the ice rink (power and recovery).”

2. Summary of the issue

2.1 The Christmas trading period is extremely significant in the retail and hospitality sector. High Street Christmas shopping is a big part of the festive season for millions of people and staff Christmas parties provide an important economic boost for the hospitality sector.

2.2 Across the UK in 2022, November and December accounted for almost a quarter of the total year’s sales in non-food stores, over £41 billion of sales, with £24 billion of these being in December¹.

2.3 Christmas is a competitive time in the place marketing profession. Destinations will compete with each other to attract visitors both from the local area and wider region. Shoppers are discerning and will have a range of reasons for choosing a location in which to do their Christmas shopping, for example, convenience, ease of access, and places which have a festive atmosphere, Christmas events and markets, or a good range of shops. An effective place marketing promotional campaign, supported by a programme

¹ Source:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/retailindustry/datasets/poundsdatatotalretailsales>

of festive activities can encourage these shoppers to choose to visit Cheltenham.

2.4 Acknowledging the importance of the season to the local economy, the council's place marketing and inward investment team, via the [Visit Cheltenham](#) brand, have a comprehensive promotional campaign with the tagline "Christmas – spend it somewhere special" and details of this are included in section 3.1.

2.5 Cheltenham Borough Council, its partners, and the wider business community also carry out a wide range of activities to generate footfall to the town over the Christmas period, including the Christmas Ice Rink in Imperial Gardens. Further details of these activities, including an update on progress with the ice rink, are in section 3.2.

3. Summary of evidence / information

3.1 About the Place Marketing and Inward Investment service ("Marketing Cheltenham")

- The Place Marketing and Inward Investment service area sits within the Communities and Place Directorate and has been defined as a service since July 2022 following the initial phase of the wider organisational review.
- The council has taken ownership of tourism promotion for the town since 2017 when the Visit Cheltenham brand was developed by an external agency commissioned by the council. Since then, the team's remit has developed to include responsibility for events, economic development and inward investment.
- The service is part-funded by base budget contribution from the council and part-funded by generating commercial income via advertising, sponsorship opportunities, delivery of commercial events and the Marketing Cheltenham partnership scheme.
- Throughout the year, the team works closely with Cheltenham BID to deliver and promote a wide range of activities designed to benefit the town, as both partners share an objective to boost the economy and support local businesses. Marketing Cheltenham promote BID activities and events, adding value to their marketing and increasing visitor numbers.
- The BID also commissions the council to deliver a series of town centre events on their behalf. The council's events manager allocates time to BID work and works closely with the BID team to ensure objectives are delivered and the town benefits from well-organised and strategically

planned events.

- The Visit Cheltenham brand is an important part of the marketing mix for the town. In 2022, there were almost 2 million page views on the Visit Cheltenham website and the brand has around 60,000 social media followers across all formats. This compares favourably with similar towns and provides a powerful way to share key messages about the town and the many events, attractions and businesses here. There is significant engagement from both visitors and residents.

3.2 Strategic Engagement

- Many organisations within Cheltenham will deliver activities during November and December designed to encourage footfall to their businesses and seek to benefit from the Christmas trading period.
- The council engages with stakeholders within the town to ensure a strategically planned programme of Christmas events and activities is offered to visitors and residents. A good example of this is the partnership with Cheltenham Trust as early engagement took place to ensure that the launch of Christmas in the town centre, the opening weekend of the ice rink, the Cheltenham Races, and the Pittville Pump Room switch on party did not take place on the same day. This leads to multiple opportunities for residents and visitors to celebrate the start of Christmas and boosts footfall to each of the individual events, avoiding audience confusion.

3.3 Christmas in Cheltenham marketing campaign

- A £17,300 marketing budget has been allocated from council resources to promote Christmas in Cheltenham. This has been enhanced by a contribution of £5,000 from the BID and in-kind support from several partners, leading to a campaign which is worth significantly more and maximises the return on investment for the town.
- The Marketing Cheltenham team promotes the whole town offer at Christmas, with all event organisers and businesses encouraged to add their events to the Visit Cheltenham website for free.
- A comprehensive marketing campaign has been developed to promote all Christmas events and activities, shopping, and food and drink options. The campaign will target visitors and residents and will include:
 - Dedicated web pages,
 - PR campaign with local, regional and national press,

- An event leaflet distributed via businesses and through letterboxes,
 - Sponsored social media posts,
 - Frequent newsletters to Visit Cheltenham subscribers,
 - Heart FM Radio campaign,
 - Posters on bus rears and digital screens in Cheltenham venues,
 - Christmas giveaways in association with Cheltenham businesses.
- It is anticipated that this campaign will reach hundreds of thousands of people within the region and beyond.

3.4 Christmas activities in Cheltenham

Events and activities organised by, or in partnership with the council:

3.4.1 Cheltenham Ice Rink.

- Organised by Cheltenham Borough Council, the ice rink will return to Imperial Gardens from Friday 17 November 2023 – Monday 1 January 2024 (not open Christmas Day).
- In 2021, over 43,000 ice rink tickets were sold and the event, along with the associated market, contributed an additional £3 million to the local economy from people shopping and eating in the town.
- In 2023, prices start from £11.50 for adults, £10.50 for concessions and £9.50 for children. Family tickets are discounted, and carers are free. The ice rink is fully wheelchair accessible. Discounts are also available for schools and large groups.
- There are dedicated SEND sessions (fewer tickets sold, more relaxed atmosphere) and pre-school sessions.
- Tickets went on sale on Monday 25 September and key dates like Christmas Eve and weekends are proving popular. Tickets are available here: <https://www.visitcheltenham.com/ice-skating>.
- A catering concession opportunity has been promoted to local businesses as both a service to ice rink users and as income generation for the event. It is important that local businesses benefit from the opportunities the ice rink will bring and therefore the concession will only be permitted to offer hot and cold soft drinks alongside cold snacks, encouraging visitors to attend local businesses for a more comprehensive offering or hot meals.
- The environmental impact of the ice rink is, understandably, under considerable scrutiny, and officers are putting in place measures to mitigate or reduce this as much as possible. This includes the use of HVO instead

of traditional diesel and a modern Stage 5 generator which will reduce emissions when compared with older technology. Officers have also commissioned the innovative use of a mobile battery to restrict the requirement to operate the generator overnight (reducing the noise impact locally). At the moment battery technology is so expensive it's not a viable option for most events but fortunately, the council have been able to partner with "Konik", a subsidiary company of Noriker, who have recently moved into the Quadrangle.

- This combined use of battery and HVO represents a significant innovation in event delivery and the impact of this will be included as part of the comprehensive review of the ice rink impact undertaken during and after the event.
- Residents' concerns are at the heart of the planning for this event and every effort is being made to minimise or avoid entirely any disruption and inconvenience throughout. Residents have been sent a letter which details the plans for the event and includes contact details for officers. During operation, 24/7 security will be in place onsite to respond immediately to any emergencies.
- The announcement of the return of the ice rink has been met with a lot of positive feedback from both Cheltenham residents and those in the wider region. It is a popular attraction, providing an excellent reason to visit the town over the Christmas period.
- Key risks:

Risk	Mitigation
Supplier failure	Due diligence has been carried out and references obtained for suppliers.
Lack of ticket sales	A comprehensive marketing campaign has been put in place to ensure that residents and visitors are aware of the event. Tickets have been set at a fair price for the attraction, based on comparable events around the country. Offers are available for families, groups and concessions. Peak and off-peak times have been set to make visits outside of the busiest hours slightly cheaper.
Power supply and emissions	An innovative power supply solution has been selected, working closely with industry experts to reduce both emissions and noise impacts.
Damage to Imperial Gardens	Trackway will be installed to protect the ground from compaction during build and break. Heavy plant to sit on trackway pad throughout. Re-turfing is already

	booked and is scheduled for w/c 8 Jan. Bed planting is scheduled for w/c 5 February.
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3.4.2 Christmas lights in the town centre.

- The council provides an annual grant of £47,000 to Cheltenham BID to commission and deliver the installation of Christmas lights for the town centre and provide entertainment for the launch event. The BID must at least match this to enhance the scheme and is contributing in excess of £50,000 this year.
- Following a procurement process, The BID has selected The Festive Lighting Company to supply the lights for the main shopping areas and vehicular routes of the town from 2023/24-2025/26.
- The scheme will be unique to Cheltenham and will enhance and be sympathetic to the Regency surroundings of the town. It will also offer points of interest to be included in a town-wide light trail.
- The lights will be switched on from 4pm until 11pm each day from Thursday 16 November to Tuesday 2 January 2024.

3.4.3 Christmas launch event – town centre.

- Thursday 16 November 2023
- Organised by Cheltenham BID (via the council's events manager), the town centre Christmas launch will not take the form of a traditional switch on, but instead will be a community-oriented event which is longer in duration and encompasses more of the town than previous years.
- This will benefit businesses by encouraging more dwell-time and will reduce the infrastructure pressures associated with switch on events.
- The event will incorporate a wide variety of entertainers arranged at various locations throughout the town, The Quadrangle, High Street and The Promenade.

3.5 Promotion of the wider Christmas offer.

3.5.1 Please read on for a selection of other activities taking place in Cheltenham which are promoted via the Visit Cheltenham Christmas Events Guide: www.visitcheltenham.com/whats-on/monthly-highlights/christmas

- Christmas Light Trail (Cheltenham BID)

- Elf Trail (Cheltenham BID)
- Roaming performers at weekends (Cheltenham BID)
- Christmas markets (various organisers and locations)
- Christmas Lights Switch On Party at Pittville Pump Room (Cheltenham Trust)
- Brewery Quarter Christmas Launch
- Regent Arcade Christmas Activities and Entertainment
- The Cheltenham Trust Christmas programme
- The Christmas Meeting and New Years Day races (The Jockey Club)
- Everyman Theatre Pantomime (Mother Goose)
- Playhouse Theatre Pantomime (Aladdin)
- Santa Express (GWSR steam train)
- Spectacle of Light (Sudeley Castle)
- Many in-house events at local businesses including afternoon teas, breakfast with Santa, live music, comedy, shopping evenings, and much more.

4. Next Steps - possible next steps for the committee to consider eg potential witnesses, further report, site visit etc.

4.1 As with any programme of activity carried out by the council, the Christmas programme will be monitored throughout, and a review carried out which can be made available to members upon completion.

4.2 Tourism provision for Cheltenham is the subject of Overview and Scrutiny in February 2024 so an update on the outcomes of the Christmas programme will be provided there.

4.3 Officers would encourage members to promote Christmas in Cheltenham to constituents to encourage them to shop, eat and visit local.

Background Papers

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Accountability

Cllr Max Wilkinson, Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Culture, Tourism and Wellbeing