

COUNCIL – 28 JUNE 2021

CHRISTMAS LIGHTS AND FESTIVAL

Christmas Lights

The Christmas lighting scheme in Fore Street reached the end of its three-year contract in 2019. Plans to engage in early 2020 with the Chamber, local businesses and the wider community to discuss ideas how the Christmas lighting display and celebrations could be improved and funded in the future had to be abandoned due to the Coronavirus pandemic. The old lighting scheme was therefore extended by one year in 2020 and no light switch on event took place.

As it has not been possible to discuss the new lighting display and celebrations, and the funding towards this with the community, it would be premature to proceed with a new scheme and be tied into a three-year contract. The recommendation is to approach the previous lighting contractors, City Illuminations, and request that the lights are extended for yet another year.

The cost of the lights last year was £3000 for the hire with switch on at installation, and would have been an additional £750 for switch on attendance. The Council's Christmas budget is £8000 dependent on receiving £300 in donations. As well as covering the Christmas lighting display it covers all associated Christmas Festival activities, and also includes the Watermark gobo festive projection at approximately £1100, discounted to include the poppy for Armistice Day, which is an additional charge of approximately £200.

Christmas Festival

Background

The Christmas Festival normally takes place at the end of November. The Friday generally consists of the pre-schools decorating the community Christmas tree, lantern workshops in The Watermark which have proved to be a popular attraction, followed in the evening by the Christmas light switch on event which is always well supported and draws in huge crowds into the town.

The evening comprises late night shopping, street entertainers, a parade including Santa's express train, festive markets and a funfair in the car park organised independently. The Saturday is lower key and is usually more focussed around Watermark festive activities, with the vintage cars doing a charity presentation in Erme Court.

The event is mainly organised by Town Council staff and commences in August with the application for the Fore Street road closure for the Friday evening, plus seeking sponsors and confirming bookings, with the help of the Lions Club organising the market. The evening is managed by staff and their families and some councillors.

Due to the uncertainty of the coronavirus the situation is still not certain with respect to mass gatherings, and if celebrations were to go ahead consideration would need to be given how this could be managed safely by the staff and volunteers.

In recent years some aspects of the event have encountered logistical issues. The parade has become increasingly difficult to organise, relying on dwindling carnival floats due to lack of HGV drivers plus Ivybridge not having a float itself, and the Santa Express train costs have become prohibitive due to stringent health and safety requirements.

The previous Chamber of Trade representative had met with the Ivybridge Chamber of Trade and the Plympton Chamber, who are a very active organisation and have good reviews about their festive celebrations. The Plympton Chamber advised that they dispensed their parade a number of years ago due to similar difficulties, and had focussed their festivities around stalls and entertainment. It has been suggested that Ivybridge could follow a similar format, exploring the opportunities for Christmas craft and food markets. Food stalls are becoming increasingly popular and favoured in many other towns, such as Totnes.

Fore Street Market

Should Members recommend the change in format, and for a larger market then there would need to be changes to the duration of the road closure if it were to be held in Fore Street. For this to be a feasible location for an increased market, and to encourage stall holders, the street would need to be closed for longer than the usual 3 hours, with a suggested time of 2pm to 10pm. Householders and businesses in the location are affected by the road closure which prevents access to their properties, but are always notified of the impending road closure for the Christmas Festival by hand delivered letter. However, as this proposal would be a significant change by increasing the length of time for the road to be closed, a questionnaire to all those who would be affected is proposed asking for their views.

An option could be to implement the road closure but operate a two-way system from the top of Fore Street to Hartley Court to allow access to Glanvilles Mill Service Road and Hartley Court, with the stalls laid out in the lower half of the one-way stretch of Fore Street.

If the results show that the majority are opposed to the extended time of the road closure and wish to have an alternative location, then it would be proposed to hold the market in Erme Court car park, and permission by the landowner has already been granted subject to the necessary health and safety paperwork being provided.

Erme Court Market

The Erme Court option does have its pros and cons. Pros are that it would not be subject to a stringent time constraint and cause disruption to deliveries and householders, and there would be more space for the public to move around, plus it could encourage Watermark footfall and other shops in Erme Court. Cons however are that it would reduce parking and take people away from Fore Street and lose the

impetus of a potential light switch on, however most public generally tend to only stay in the street until the countdown and switch on has occurred, and then disappear.

Recommendations

Members are requested:

1. to consider extending the Christmas lighting contract for another year;
2. to consider whether the lights are switched on at the time of installation, or a Christmas light switch on with a countdown and associated festive celebrations takes place, bearing in mind Covid restrictions may be in place or implemented;
3. depending if members wish to hold Christmas celebrations as in Point 2., to consider changing the format of the festivities by ceasing with the parade and train, and instead focussing on craft and food market stalls alongside the usual entertainment;
4. should the format be changed to be market focussed, to provide a questionnaire to Fore Street/Glanvilles Mill businesses and householders proposing:
 - (i) an extended time of 2-10pm for the Fore Street road closure to encourage more stallholders;
 - (ii) provide the option of the full length of Fore street being utilised, or a market at the lower half of the street, and operation of a two-way system at the top;
 - (iii) no extended road closure, and for the market to be located in Erme Court car park;
5. to consider not investigating whether the Christmas celebrations are held in Fore Street, and automatically make arrangements for a market in Erme Court car park.

Mrs Julie Gilbert
Assistant Town Clerk