

Community, Leisure & Recreation Committee

Date:	8 February 2022
Title:	Christmas Activities Feedback 2021
Contact Officer:	Becky Reid, Market Town Coordinator

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide feedback on the Christmas events and activities held in 2021.
2. To agree the shape and dates of the 2022 Christmas event.

Background

3. Following the success of the different approach we made to Christmas as a result of Covid Restrictions in 2020, the decision was taken at the CLR meeting in October 2021 to use the opportunity to trial something new again for Christmas 2021. Therefore, the decision was taken to deliver a hybrid of the one-night, large events we have run pre-Covid, and the smaller events of 2020, that ran on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays over 3 weekends in December. This ambition was to draw people to the Town Centre (and therefore the Town Centre businesses) more regularly, support our local economy in the run up to Christmas. We also hoped it would allow more residents of Thame to participate in varying ways, with events being available at different days and times.
4. The light switch on event launched the events on Friday 3rd December. This was a shorter and smaller event. The rest of the month's events included a street-food market, 3 gift markets, Santa's grotto, a Carousel, a Christmas Crafternoon and live music performances. Alongside these events we had the return of the Tree of Hope, a selfie-station (this time a Polar Bear), our second 'Window Wanderland', a 'Santa Hat Search' to find 25 hats hidden in windows around the town centre, and a 'best window display' competition for town centre businesses. The event was again run in partnership with several local organisations and supported by sponsorship from local businesses. Feedback was obtained via an online survey promoted on Christmas in Thame Facebook page, distributed to event participants via email, and to the public in general through social media, website and newsletter. There were only 24 official responses to the survey. Anecdotal feedback was also gathered. The feedback received was generally very positive. This report summarises the main points of feedback.

Feedback and Review

5. **Overall feedback:** when we were initially talking about the idea of changing the event there was a lot of positivity and not one person we spoke to felt that a smaller light switch on would be a negative thing. Many expressed that they would much rather have a selection of activities over December as they often couldn't make the light switch on.
6. **Printed booklet:** The booklet again received positive feedback with respondents finding it helpful to see all that was happening in one place that could be referenced again. The survey results showed that 95% of people had received them this year. This is probably due to the fact that this

was the second year people had received a booklet so there was more awareness to look out for them. The additional stock that was left at Waitrose again was taken very quickly.

7. **Popularity of Events:** The Light Switch on event was the event that most attendees specifically planned to attend with 85% of survey respondents coming for this. The Street-food market was next most popular with 33% specifically attending as a result of seeing it promoted.

Specific Feedback about the Light Switch On event: Feedback on the smaller event was mixed. Some people really loved it and enjoyed the atmosphere and community spirit. However others felt it lacked sparkle and they wanted a return to the pre-Covid larger event, or at least with more on offer – especially food stalls. Whilst people can go and buy food from businesses in the town, for those who want to come for the event, they want the convenience of being able to get something to eat while they are there, so re-introducing food stalls should certainly be considered for next year. Some could not hear or see the presenters and felt that if that was the main focus of the even, the lighting and audio needed to be improved. Businesses received more footfall than usual as there were no competing market stalls. Not Just Autoparts sold Christmas lights and were able to sell all of the stock they had. There was a great response and positive feedback for ‘Big Gift Give’ which generated a great response for the local charities who were part of it. This is something we should certainly consider repeating. A really positive outcome was that the OX9’ers raised over £1,000 on their Mulled Wine stall.

8. **Feedback on other events:**

- **Street food market:** the traders were happy and want to make this a monthly event. People who attended also liked it but fed back that it was not really an ‘event’ and would benefit from live music, more stalls, seating, and a drink provision as they said that none of the vendors sold drinks at all.
- **Carousel:** this lacked atmosphere as it had no music and also packed up early due to low numbers (which meant one person who fed back missed it as they came down for the last half hour before going on to the pantomime and ended up with a very disappointed child. However, it worked well with community stalls and if we consider something similar next year we need to ensure that these are expanded and music is provided to generate more of a sense of occasion.
- **Santa’s Grotto:** The Round Table were really pleased with the Grotto set up. They raised £444.95 and would be happy to do this again. They are hugely supportive and are keen to engage with any ideas we have.
- **Craft Fair:** The Last-Minute Local Gift Fair was very popular and is something we should definitely consider repeating, especially as an ongoing event that raises some income for us as a Town Council. We don’t have other regular providers, but this is something to consider further – even if just annually.
- **Christmas Crafternoon:** This event seemed popular despite the rising Covid Cases at the time. It was easy to run from TTC point of view and so something to re-run easily if Churches are interested.
- **Live Music:** Music groups involved were very positive, but the event was not well attended at all. OX9ers did not make much from their Mulled Wine stall this day. It was
- **Sundays:** all of the events that ran on a Sunday (Grotto, Carousel, Live Music) were not well attended compared to Saturdays. It is suggested that Sundays should not be considered for events in future years.

9. **Feedback on other elements:**

- **Town Trail:** The ‘Santa Hat Search’ was popular and the large prizes meant that more people engaged than before. It was challenging to complete so next year we need to

consider more clues from the start, but it did encourage people to get out and explore the town during December so we should certainly take this approach again.

- **Schools engagement:** as we were not choosing who turned on the lights through our town trail we engaged schools in identifying a pupil each to take part. This was really successful, and they were able to use it to celebrate achievements these children had made during the past year.
- **Selfie Station:** this is something that again worked well, but the Polar Bear was not as popular as the Nutcracker which certainly had more 'wow' factor. So choosing the right thing is important.
- **Window Wanderland:** This was not as popular as before but is now very easy to run with the support of schools. A local Estate Agent is keen to support it more fully so if we take this approach next year it could be a much bigger element of Christmas. Planning would need to start early though.
- **Tree of Hope:** Schools engaged well with this again, and the Library are hugely supportive. It is a nice thing to run, but we need to review if they feel it is worth doing again or if there is something else we could do instead.
- **Window Display competition:** this year more businesses actively took part and engaged in promoting the competitions and getting people to vote for them. This is certainly something to build on.

10. **Partnership:** Delivering the events this year again relied heavily on partner organisations, charities and businesses being willing to get involved to deliver activities and events. There was a huge response to sponsorship, in fact more than we could accommodate – the appetite from businesses is much bigger than it has been in previous years. Advertising to cover the cost of the booklet was easy to secure. The local Churches are very willing to do the same again in future years. Engaging and involving music groups was also easy but they have fed back they would rather run events closer to the Town Hall and on a Saturday. This definitely seems the way to go forward with events in future as more can be achieved for the community with less input from TTC, allowing a great offer as well as supporting local organisations and groups.

Future thoughts

11. Extending the 2020's 'Advent' approach in 2021 by spreading the arrangements throughout December meant more could happen, and, as it turned out, more could continue despite Covid restrictions being re-introduced due to the nature of smaller events. This also addressed the issue of the extreme weather events we have been increasingly seeing over the past 2 years, in not putting 'the one big event' all on one date. The winter months may again bring challenges of a Covid variant, but it is doubtful that it will ever be as severe as the lockdown in 2020. The experience and learning from running multiple events in 2021 suggests that returning to pre-covid events is not the way to go, but that running such an extensive programme is also not the best way forward. Instead, we need to take our learning from 2021 and continue to refine and improve.
12. In going ahead consideration should be given to:
 - Re-introducing elements of the Light Switch on from pre-covid – specifically the food stalls. If we do have craft stalls, engage with local craft community rather than external stalls, but also encourage more late-night shopping in the town as a whole.
 - Continue to run additional events through December, but not as regularly. Instead explore one event a weekend that combines the different elements we ran this year into grouped events – therefore providing more of an attraction, and more encouragement to take part. The 'deadtime' of Sunday afternoons in December, with their limited town football should be avoided.

- The help and support of councillors in staffing was both highly appreciated and proved crucial in keeping staffing overtime costs down, and would need to be an agreed factor for any events in 2022.
- A repeat of the local producers Gift Fair at full capacity (25 stall holders instead of 17) and an expanded Street Food Market to increase revenue to over £1,000 for these events.
- The repeat of a booklet that is delivered to homes with a calendar of Christmas events taking place all in one location.

Event Date

13. It is proposed that the events open with the Switch-On on Friday 2 December 2022

Income and Expenditure

14. Below are the figures (excluding VAT) for the Income and Expenditure for the Christmas events 2021.

Expenditure	
Publicity, Printing, booklet delivery	1,808.69
Lights Switch On	1,523.78
Christmas attractions	1,431.72
Grotto	261.24
Window Wanderland	600.00
TOTAL	£5625.43

Income	
Christmas Budget	3000.00
Sponsorship*	2150.00
Advertising in Booklet	900.00
Carousel tickets	148.00
Street food market	300.00
Last Minute Gift Fair	412.50
TOTAL	£6910.50

*Excluding Sponsorship for the Christmas Tree

Recommendation:

The Committee is asked:

- i) To receive feedback on the Christmas events and activities held in 2021.*
- ii) To agree that the Christmas Lights Switch On event this year will be held on Friday 2 December 2022.*