

Edinburgh's Christmas – new company appointed by council to save the day

The council has appointed a new contractor to take over the running of its Christmas events from next month in place of the original company which stepped away from the festive contract only two weeks ago.

Some of the discussion took place in public at an online meeting of the council's Finance and Resources Committee on Monday morning, but most – which was considered commercially sensitive – was discussed in private. Opposition councillors fought to have most or all of the meeting held in public, but the legal advice given during the meeting was to only discuss generalities in public and the rest behind closed doors.

The new company to which the council has awarded the contract is Unique Assembly Limited – an amalgamation of two well known events companies, Unique Events and Assembly Festival. This is the same company which already won the contract to deliver the Hogmanay events in the capital this year, and was only registered in August.

The programme, which will preserve the core festive attractions for the city this year, includes the popular Christmas Market and funfair attractions in East and West Princes Street Gardens and on the Mound; an ice rink on George

Street; new lighting and projections on George Street; charity installation Festival of Kindness in St Andrew Square; and a selection of free festive events and shows for families at the Ross Bandstand, such as the traditional Nativity Carol Concert.

The company was looking for a two year contract but have been granted a “one plus one” which can be broken by the council after year one if the company does not deliver.

Council Leader Cammy Day said: “I’m delighted that we’ve been able to find a solution so quickly, ensuring Edinburgh’s world-famous Christmas celebrations can go ahead this year.

“We will, of course, conduct a full review into why this happened but our absolute priority is to ensure that we provide high-quality festive celebrations for the city – and that these should be delivered in the spirit of the feedback received in our consultation with residents, businesses and stakeholders.

“I’d like to give my thanks to Unique Assembly for reacting so quickly to our request and I’m sure we’ll enjoy many benefits by working closely with this experienced team of local event producers.

“There’s no questioning the popularity of our Winter Festivals or the benefits they bring to the Capital – the enjoyment and wellbeing of our residents, but also the economic impact for our businesses and the city as a whole.

“Crucially, the new plans will deliver on the key elements of our public consultation, including reduced use of green spaces, more accessible and family-friendly attractions, greater use of local traders and a more even spread around the city centre.

“I have no doubt Unique Assembly will help us make it yet another great festive period for our capital city.”

The council had awarded the deal to Angels Event Experience in June – and the company had been subcontracted to provide the Christmas Markets in previous years – but it is clear that at a certain point council officers realised the company would not be able to fulfil its part of the bargain.

Some discussion took place among councillors today over whether the procurement process itself had been to blame, and the Director of Place, Paul Lawrence seemed to indicate that this might have been the case, saying that it might be necessary to look at the process in the future.

The Director of Place informed elected members through an All Party Oversight Group (APOG) that the contractor was not able to meet the terms of the contract. He said it was not until things got very challenging that “an alternative approach” had to be taken, but that the intimation to elected members was sent as soon as possible.

SNP Group leader Adam McVey said that when the council met in June to discuss the matter it was stated that briefing to councillors was key, and yet opposition councillors were not in his view briefed adequately throughout.

SNP Group Finance spokesperson Cllr Lesley Macinnes said: “We heard extraordinary information in the public session. We learned that the Council Leader was aware of issues with the delivery of the contract and failed to act, and kept information from councillors. This was directly contrary to the agreement of councillors in June that demanded regular information to monitor progress.

“The big lesson learned from previous years is that this contract needs to be closely monitored. It’s now clear Labour were again asleep at the wheel and their incompetence may cost the city millions of pounds.

“Committee agreed the Administration has shown contempt for Council and, in their failure to do their job and

unwillingness to take responsibility, have failed the Edinburgh public.

“The SNP set out action to ensure that Edinburgh’s Christmas in Edinburgh is one for everyone to enjoy and we hope that with the collapse of plans this year, the event can now go ahead reflecting our residents’ views. We want to see local businesses thrive through these events and worked to protect them but we also proposed a tough stance towards the previous contractor. We hope this strengthens Edinburgh’s position going forward for future years.”

Unique Assembly have already acted in anticipation of gaining the contract, principally as time was of the essence.

Three planning applications were lodged hastily with the council at the end of September in order to save Edinburgh’s Christmas.

The main contractor which was appointed to produce the event, Angels Event Experience Limited, withdrew from the deal they had entered into with the council on Monday 26 September. By Thursday 29 September, a mere 72 hours later, a new company, Unique Assembly Limited had pulled a rabbit out of a hat and submitted detailed applications for planning permission on three sites.

It was a “mad scramble” to get all the documentation in place in time to meet all the consequent deadlines, but necessary as the event is due to begin on 19 November. As soon as the

breach of contract was notified to the council the next step was to phone Unique Events to see “if there was any way we could recover it”.

The experienced event producers, Unique Events and Assembly, had already formed a new company in August 2022 as a vehicle which they would use to produce Edinburgh’s Hogmanay. Following a decision by an emergency meeting of the council’s Finance Committee on Monday, this same company will now also produce Edinburgh’s Christmas.

If they had not stepped in then there might have been no Christmas events in the city at all this year which Unique felt would have been “catastrophic”.

The planning applications were lodged before it was made known publicly that Angels Event Experience had withdrawn from the contract (and then later admitted they would remain involved in a lesser capacity).

A decision was made behind closed doors on Monday by the council’s Finance Committee who have approved a contract (the details of which are unknown) with the new company.

The applications were made in the name of Unique Assembly Limited registered at Companies House on 3 August 2022. This company is registered at an address in Edinburgh with two directors named – Lesley Dougherty and William Burdett-Coutts. Mr Burdett-Coutts is well known in Edinburgh as the man behind Assembly Festival Ltd, running all the Fringe shows from the Mound, Assembly Roxy and George Square. Lesley Dougherty, also well known as a director of Unique Events, is noted at the same business address. There is mention in the company papers

that the new company is a combination of the two well known Edinburgh names.

Unique Events Limited have the contract for Edinburgh's Hogmanay, but the details of the Hogmanay events are not yet known – although we understand that the core events will be announced “imminently”.

In relation to Christmas the plan is to stick to the hard standing areas in Princes Street Gardens and another site on George Street where the Star Flyer will also be sited.

In the gardens rides will include Chair-o-planes for adults and children, Cups and Saucers, Dodgems, a Dragon Coaster, Flying jets and a Santa train. So much the same as in previous years except that grassy areas will be avoided.

The first application is 22/04917/FUL | Temporary use of public gardens /hardstanding for big wheel /associated rides /attractions (5 No.); including carousels /fun flyer /techno base; food /craft concession stall; public toilet /waste facilities; entrance features; boundary treatment; ancillary offices /stores; info signage. Maintenance of pedestrian routes. Temporary /recurring for 5 years. | East Princes Street Gardens Princes Street Edinburgh

The second is 22/04921/FUL | Temporary change of use and siting of performance units, catering units and other associated moveable structures for Edinburgh's Christmas Festival. Recurring Period of 5 Years. | West Princes Street Gardens Princes Street Edinburgh

And the third is 22/04920/FUL | Erection of ice rink including viewing /seating; sculpture; star flyer; bar and covered seating area; 5 food trader stalls; offices; first aid area and toilets; ancillary storage and generator. Pedestrian walkway retained to southern edge of site. Temporary Period (5 Years). | Christmas Market George Street Edinburgh

The planning applications remain open online until 28 October for comment.

The members of the Finance Committee who took the decision based upon a report by the Director of Place, Paul Lawrence (and which has not been made public) are Councillor Mandy Watt (Convener), Councillor Graeme Bruce, Councillor Phil Doggart, Councillor Joan Griffiths, Councillor Euan Hyslop, Councillor Lesley Macinnes, Councillor Alys Mumford, Councillor Vicky Nicolson, Councillor Neil Ross, Councillor Alex Staniforth and Councillor Lewis Younie.

Angels Event Experience

Whatever the original plan was, that is now at an end, and we assume that the council may yet sue the company for breach of contract. In terms of the agreement, Angels Event Experiences took on the production of Edinburgh's Christmas and in return were due to pay the council £1 million annually in the next five years.

When the news broke that this would no longer happen, one of the directors of Angels Event Experience, David Kohlert, told The Edinburgh Reporter: "With more than 25 years of experience in running Christmas events across Europe, and almost a decade here in Edinburgh, we felt we were well qualified to take on Edinburgh's Christmas and were delighted to be awarded the contract.

"Unfortunately, having teamed up with a local partner, our preparations were not going according to plan and it became increasingly apparent to us that we were not going to be able to implement our events as originally proposed. As a result, we took the difficult decision to pull out of the contract with the Council.

"We took this decision to protect Edinburgh's Christmas and to allow a new supplier to come on board in enough time to

deliver the celebrations for the city.

“By remaining involved in a smaller capacity, it will allow the much-loved Christmas markets to go ahead and for over 70 local businesses to trade over their most important time of year.

“We’re truly sorry for the disruption this has caused and will do everything in our power to make sure this year’s events are a success for the people and businesses of Edinburgh.”

Angles Event Experience have been involved in the running of the markets in Edinburgh for almost a decade on behalf of Underbelly, but it seems that the obligation to pay back to the council around £1 million each year for five years became too onerous for the company which will continue to run a similar operation in London’s Hyde Park.



Edinburgh Christmas 2021, Santa Land, East Princes Street Gardens