

Issues over Christmas contract process will be reviewed

“Significant issues” have been exposed around how the council awards and manages contracts, opposition councillors have said following an emergency meeting held mainly in private to save the festive period events.

The capital’s winter attractions will go ahead despite plans being thrown into chaos in recent weeks by the first contractor’s decision to walk away.

The council said Angels Event Experience (AEE) asked to be released from the £5.5million contract when it became apparent they were unable to follow through with a commitment to bring in some new Christmas attractions – including a zip wire on George Street and a Christmas show in George Square.

Council leader Cammy Day said that there will be a “full review into why this happened”.

AEE will have ‘limited involvement’ to ‘ensure the 70 stallholders and local businesses who had been expecting to trade can still do so’ – and it’s been reported the firm could still stand to make a “substantial profit” despite not fulfilling the contract they had entered into with the council.

At crunch talks on Monday councillors on the Finance & Resources committee agreed to award the contract to Unique Assembly, a local firm which is already involved in producing the city's Hogmanay celebrations, and who have pledged to deliver the 'core' elements of the festival, including the Princes Street markets, free events at Ross Bandstand and an ice rink on George Street.

But councillors said the frantic events of the last two weeks have raised serious questions about the council's procurement processes, whilst there was anger about elected members being kept out of the loop.

At the emergency meeting, Edinburgh City Council's Director of Place, Paul Lawrence, presented a report which has not been made publicly available, but he apologised for not updating councillors about the situation sooner.

Mr Lawrence explained that "differences of opinion" and "matters of contention" about what would be delivered led to the original plans falling through.

Following the collapse of this contract the Conservatives have called for more information to be given to elected members on how procurement systems work around big projects like the city's Christmas festival.

Tory group leader Iain Whyte said after the meeting: "It's pretty clear that the procurement here hasn't served us well and hasn't delivered what was hoped for.

"Councillors really do need to scrutinise this more closely going forward to ensure that any future contracts really deliver for the city."

Cllr Whyte said while he felt most councillors were "kept in the dark," but he didn't necessarily agree with others that the blame lay at the council leader's door.

"I think officers were trying to solve problems here and it obviously got to the stage where it all blew up and things weren't going to deliver," he added. "Perhaps officers should have alerted councillors earlier that there were difficulties."

The Green Group's Alys Mumford, also a member of the Finance & Resources Committee, said: "This has revealed significant issues with how the council procurement processes operate, which will need to be examined in the coming months."

"We're grateful to council staff for jumping into action to find a solution which still honours the principles which the people of Edinburgh highlighted as being important in our Christmas celebrations, but there are serious questions to be asked about how much the administration knew, and how they allowed this to go on for so long without other parties, local councillors, and the finance and resources committee being updated."

Meanwhile, the SNP launched a scathing attack on the Labour administration for what they describe as "incompetence" which they said "may cost the city millions of pounds". In terms of the original contract the council was to receive income of around £1 million per year over five years. The terms of the new contract are not known.

The group's finance spokesperson Cllr Lesley Macinnes said: "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."

"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.”

Cllr Lewis Younie said Liberal Democrat councillors “are relieved that a contract has been agreed which will deliver Christmas in Edinburgh”.

However, he added: “We are deeply concerned that disaster was only narrowly averted, and so we will be pressing for sustained and forensic scrutiny over the entire process that nearly cancelled Christmas.”

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter

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Edinburgh Christmas 2021, Santa Land, East Princes Street

Gardens