

# **Councillors warn against making same mistakes over Christmas contract**

**Edinburgh Council is at risk of repeating the same mistakes that nearly resulted in the Christmas market being cancelled last year, councillors have warned, after it emerged there could be even less time to find an organiser for this winter.**

Plans for the city centre festive village were thrown into chaos in September with the firm awarded the contract walking away from its £5.5million deal with the council over disagreements about the feasibility of proposed attractions – including a zip wire along George Street.

Another company was brought in at the eleventh-hour to save the market, but the fiasco sparked criticism of the contract tendering process used by the local authority and a debate around how events can be better scrutinised and delivered in the future.

The council has admitted there are lessons to be learned following the difficulties – but fears have been raised it could run into the same problems again this year.

Unique Assembly stepped in in October to take on the market

following the decision by Angels Event Experience (AEE) to pull out of the contract only granted in the summer, which would have paid £5.5million over five years to the council. The contract included the delivery of market stalls and amusements at East and West Princes Street Gardens and other locations in the city centre.

Councillors have yet to decide whether to extend the arrangement with UniqueAssembly for another year or look for a new operator.

But the decision will not be taken until the Culture and Communities Committee on 7 March – and if councillors then vote against continuing the existing arrangement it would leave even less time than last year to find a new contractor and get plans in place.

The issue was raised at the Finance and Resources committee on Thursday as Cllr Marco Biagi said: “The tender last year was issued on the 3rd of March, the very first lesson learned is we need to give more time for these decisions to be taken.

“Culture and Communities isn’t meeting to discuss next steps until the 7th of March so isn’t that going to put them in an incredibly difficult position to take a decision and indeed to learn the biggest lesson of last year?”

A report recognised there was a “narrow timescale between contract award and delivery of Edinburgh’s Christmas in 2022”.

However, it added: “The contractor only raised concerns about its ability to deliver the agreed outcomes following the award of the contract.

“In addition, there were some challenges within the internal governance arrangements between the contractor and its partner organisations which may have also contributed to these difficulties.”

But Cllr Phil Daggart questioned why adequate “interrogation” of AEE was not carried out before they were confirmed as the preferred bidder.

He said: “We’re expecting [culture and communities committee] to take a decision on the 7th of March around a one year extension.

“If the recommendation is no, or if the committee says no, then we run into exactly the same problems we’ve run into for 2022 and I’m not quite sure how we’ve got lessons learned if that’s the case.”

Paul Lawrence, executive Director of Place at the council, said even if councillors do decide to look for a different company to run the Christmas market it would be “possible for other operators to step in”.

Mr Lawrence said he had already spoken to other “interested operators” and added: “Clearly time would be a factor.”

Addressing the issues that arose last year, he said: “We got an offer, we appraised it, we had doubts about the deliverability of some of it but we marked it, it went forward for decision in the way that the procurement exactly should have done.”

He said there were some concerns around certain aspects of the bid “but it was an offer and we had to treat that offer on its merits and that’s what we did”.

“We did all we could to try and help them deliver what was in the contract,” Mr Lawrence added.

Cllr Biagi said a repeat of the same problems with the Christmas market poses “tremendous reputational risk to the council”.

He said scrutiny and oversight of the contract “stopped after the tender was awarded,” adding: “That seemed to be where it

all went wrong.”

The Finance committee agreed to bring forward a report providing “further detail and reassurance around the procurement brief and processes”.

Meanwhile officials are mulling over alternative models for the delivery of Edinburgh’s Christmas, with options including the council running it – potentially putting an end to outsourcing the festival altogether – and switching to a ‘dialogue based’ tendering process which would allow more discussion and scrutiny of plans before a contract is signed.



Edinburgh’s Christmas PHOTO Unique Assembly Robin Mair  
by Donald Turvill

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