

Recommendation to continue Christmas contract with Unique Assembly

The company which stepped in at the eleventh hour to deliver Edinburgh's Christmas market is set to have its contract extended – despite the attractions bringing in no money for the council last year.

Unique Assembly has been recommended to organise the festival again this winter and councillors will make a final decision this week.

Council bosses have set out the lessons learned and changes proposed for 2023's offerings following an "extremely challenging" time last year.

It comes as the local authority is considering an overhaul of the capital's popular festive events, with plans to further explore "supporting local traders and sharing the celebrations around the city".

Preparations for the arrival of Christmas market stalls and amusements at Princes Street Gardens and George Street were left up in the air in October after Angels Event Experience (AEE) walked away from its contract with the council with less than two months to go.

After the firm was released from the deal – which was expected to bring in over £1 million a year for the council – an

emergency contract was entered into with Unique Assembly – a company formed for the purpose of running Edinburgh’s Hogmanay, but which also took over the management of Christmas.

A report to the Culture and Communities Committee on Tuesday said that despite “significant pressure” on Unique Assembly – a consortium of Unique Events and Assembly Festival created specifically to run Edinburgh’s Christmas after it was threatened with cancellation – the festival was “successfully delivered, attracting large audiences and positive media coverage for the city”.

It noted the partnership stepped in “with only seven weeks to deliver an event which would normally take nine to twelve months planning and preparation”.

However, officials have revealed the council will receive no income at all for last year’s Christmas market as a result of “high set up costs, last minute appointments and honouring of existing commercial arrangements with stallholders and operators”.

Councillors agreed to refer the report to the Finance Committee this Thursday when members will be asked to extend Unique Assembly’s contract for one year.

If agreed, the council will look to take a range of actions based on ‘lessons learned’ from 2022, which include ensuring a greater number of Edinburgh based businesses have the opportunity to participate, investigating the opportunity to reinstate the Torchlight Procession with a new route and finale event, and expanding the Christmas community programme at the Ross Bandstand.

Another goal is to expand Christmas attractions to other locations within the city centre and into other parts of Edinburgh.

Paul Lawrence, the council's Executive Director of Place, said: "The Old Town, Royal Mile and the High Street itself are obvious places to think about in the city centre.

"There are some operational challenges to that but it's certainly something on our radar to try and bring the Old Town and then beyond more into the wider Christmas offer.

"Whether we can do it this year or whether it has to await a newer contract in 2024 is perhaps a discussion to be had but it's certainly very strongly something which officers would like to at."

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter.

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Edinburgh's Christmas produced by Unique Assembly opened on Friday 25 November and on Saturday welcomed 80,000 visitors
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