

Council agree new approach for Winter Festivals in Edinburgh

A fresh approach to delivering Edinburgh's Christmas and Edinburgh's Hogmanay has been agreed which the council says will avoid the contract chaos of previous years.

The new model will make more room for negotiations with contractors before deals are finalised.

It comes after the company responsible for organising festive stalls and amusements around the city centre last year, Angels Events Experience, in a coalition with Taylors Leisure Limited, said their joint venture company Visionar was unable to follow through on parts of the agreement – including a commitment to install a zip line on George Street – and walked away with just weeks to go until the winter festival kicked off.

Councillors debated how the event could be better planned and managed in future at the Culture and Communities committee on Thursday.

Elected members followed advice from council officers that it would be inadvisable for the council to run Edinburgh's Christmas itself. Officers said the authority didn't currently have the money or "skills or expertise" to take on this

project.

Members also voted against [an SNP plan](#) to set up a new arms-length organisation in partnership with an existing commercial operator to oversee delivery of events in the capital, including the Christmas markets on a joint venture basis.

David Waddell, senior culture and events officer, said whilst running the events in-house – the model used in Edinburgh until 2010 – would give the council “full control” it would come with “significant set up costs”.

He said: “We’re not currently set up to deliver that so we would need to make sure that that’s suitably resourced and it also means that the council would be responsible for all the financial risks.”

The alternative procurement approach supported by officials, he added, would bring “significant operational and financial benefits” and allow negotiations to take place between the council and potential contract bidders which are not possible under the existing tender process.

He said: “There’s a period of negotiation and a process that allows us through the development of the final offer that’s come into us to shape that and arrive at a point that we set out to achieve.”

Mr Waddell said this would “transfer some of that element of control” to contractors however added with “careful contract management” this could be mitigated.

He told the committee that time was the “single biggest lesson learned” from last year’s fiasco and said it was crucial to not rush the process and “get what we set out to achieve”.

The SNP group had tabled a plan for the winter festivals to be run as a joint venture between the council and an external events operator with both parties holding equal shares in a

new company to “maximise benefit while delivering viable, sustainable events”. SNP Group Leader Adam McVey told The Edinburgh Reporter that the plan was to run a company where both parties received equal return, but the set up would be “a seconded model between a creative company and the council”.

But Paul Lawrence, executive Director of Place, said this would bring financial risk to the council at a time when it is “so strapped for cash”.

He said: “Our professional advice is if we can get the outcomes without importing the risk to the council, our recommendation is that’s what we do.”

SNP councillor Finlay McFarlane remarked the council could appear “toothless” when it came to ensuring contractors met their commitments.

He said: “When we set very clear expectations and goals, what we end up with never seems to be quite right. Why do we end up with plastic trees and crash barriers on the High Street?

“Can we not be more bullish as a council? We have a historic UNESCO World Heritage Site city that we’re allowing a commercial company to come in and, presumably, make quite a lot of money off of.”

Mr Lawrence replied: “It may be if we are overly bullish the amount of people who will be interested will be limited and that will limit our choice, that’s a good thing and bad thing.”

He said the negotiated procurement model would give the council the chance to “strongly set out our stall out and then talk to providers and challenge them creatively and then have a detailed product”.

The Labour administration’s 2022 council manifesto promised to “end contracts with large scale events organisations for

events such as the Christmas Market and Hogmanay” which culture and communities convener Val Walker said she still supported.

However, she said the council was “not in a position right now to take that decision,” adding: “We are cutting services.

“I don’t want us to incur any extra cost at a time at a time where we could provide to the cultural sector and to the wider Edinburgh community.”

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter.

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