

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENT AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS & LEISURE COMMITTEE		
DATE:	18 MARCH 2015	AGENDA ITEM:	13
TITLE:	'READING WINTER ON ICE' - OVERVIEW		
SERVICE:	ECONOMIC & CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT	WARDS:	ABBEY
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1. PURPOSE AND SUMMARY OF REPORT

- 1.1 To provide an overview of the 'Reading Winter on Ice' event, hosted at the Forbury Gardens between the 9th December 2014 and the 4th January 2015.
- 1.2 To seek approval for officers to progress discussion with Billy Williams & Sons for the granting of a 3 year license to deliver the 'Reading Winter on Ice' Christmas event at the Forbury Gardens (2015-17).

2. RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 That the Committee notes the overall success of the 'Reading Winter on Ice' event 2014, which was delivered at no cost to the Council.
- 2.2 That Committee approves the proposal for officers to negotiate terms for the granting of a 3 year license to Billy Williams & Sons for the delivery of 'Reading Winter on Ice' at the Forbury Gardens (2015 - 17) as set out in section 5 of this report.

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 6.1 Establishing a successful events programme within the Forbury Gardens serves to significantly increase awareness of and visitor numbers to the historic Abbey Quarter which is an integral component of the current Abbey Quarter bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund.
- 3.1 Christmas activity within the Forbury Gardens is endorsed by and planned in direct consultation with the town centre Business Improvement District (BID)

that is managed by the Council's arms-length economic development company Reading UK CIC. The event when viewed collectively with the town's broader programme of Christmas activity, serves to promote Reading as a vibrant place to visit over the festive season, contributing to the towns economy.

4. PROPOSAL (BACKGROUND):

4.1 A number of towns/cities across the country have, over time, established successful festive attractions, including Christmas event activity and markets.

4.2 Whilst these might appear to be financially rewarding, the measure of success is not always financially focused, with many authorities subsidising and investing heavily in providing/establishing the activity in order to realise broader benefits, such as:

- Raising the profile of the town.
- Providing cultural/leisure activity for the town's residents
- Increasing tourism and benefits to the wider local economy.

All of these potential benefits were taken into account in seeking to develop proposals for delivering a new Christmas event in Reading at Forbury Gardens, whilst being cognisant of the need to protect the Council's financial position.

4.3 Officer research identified that many such events struggle to reach a financial break even point over the first three financial years. In planning and delivering activity in Reading officers sought to work with a third party organisation who had the relevant experience and were willing to fully fund the activity in the knowledge of identified risks and associated financial liabilities. This removed Reading's exposure to financial loss, with a profit share arrangement in place, should profit be achieved.

4.4 In planning for Christmas 2014 officers conducted a 'soft' market testing exercise to identify potentially appropriate operators and established dialogue with an event operator who had a proven track record of delivering a diverse range of activity and was capable of staging and financing an attraction of the required scale, including a centre piece ice rink.

4.5 The operator invested in excess of £170k in the delivery of the Reading Winter on Ice event in December 2014. Under the terms of the contract with the Council, in the event that a profit was generated, a proportion of this would be payable to the local authority. The Council would share no responsibility for any financial loss.

4.6 The 2014 event neared financially breaking even, incurring a small operating loss of £9.5k, taking into account all the costs incurred by the operator, including reinstatement of the site. This is a significant achievement for such an event in its first year of operation. The financial shortfall has been attributed entirely to increased fuel use resulting from the fact that it was unseasonably warm throughout the event, requiring greater energy than anticipated to ensure the ice remained frozen. Conversely there was a cold snap at the time the ice needed to be defrosted requiring increased energy to heat and thaw the rink. It should also be noted that equipment and

infrastructure purchased specifically for the event such as lighting and decorative materials, will be reused in subsequent years to reduce future operating costs.

- 4.7 Through consultation and collaborative working, the event was recognised by the Reading UK CIC team as adding value to the town over the Christmas period, enhancing the Business Improvement District's (BID's) Christmas offer and serving as a centre piece in their promotion of the town and attractions over the festive season.
- 4.8 The focal point of the event was the 360 sq m real ice rink which was accompanied by other activities including: themed amusement rides, festive chalets offering a range of seasonal foods, a bar operated by the Oxfordshire Brewery and a programme of musical performances from within the site's band stand.
- 4.9 The rink was ceremoniously opened by the Mayor of Reading, Cllr Tony Jones, Lead Councillor for Culture Sport & Consumer Services, Cllr Paul Gittings & Joey Essex of TOWIE fame. The opening event was, in part, sponsored by Heart FM and their presenters broadcast from the Gardens.
- 4.10 The opening event, on a rainy 9th December evening, was attended by in excess of 3,000 people. The hysteria surrounding the opening of the ice rink by Joey Essex (& Councillors) drew significant local press coverage as well as the attention of the Daily Mail.
- 4.11 Get Reading reported on the 22nd December 2014 that 'This year is the first year Reading has had an ice rink and it has certainly been a hit'. News of the ice rink was the 6th most read article on the Get Reading website for the whole of 2014.
- 4.12 Visitor numbers: Over the subsequent 27 days it is calculated that a further 10,000 people attended to skate with a further 90,000 general visits. The total number of visits over the festive period (9th December - 4th January) is calculated as being in excess of 100,000.
- 4.13 Footfall numbers within the Gardens at this time of year would traditionally be anticipated as a fraction of this (less than 200 per day) and the event can clearly be demonstrated as attracting greater visitor numbers to the site and delivering the broader Council objective of increasing awareness of and visits to the Gardens and wider historic Abbey Quarter.
- 4.14 As evidenced by the large number of visits and substantively positive comments in local press and left on local news forums and social media the event has been very well received by local people. More generally, feedback and enquiries received by officers and the operator relating to the event were positive with a genuine sense of excitement and appreciation that such an event had been staged.
- 4.15 The event was also used as a platform/backdrop for the delivery of other seasonal event activity such as the British Heart Foundations Santa Jog.

- 4.16 The Reading UK CIC / BID team have published some feedback relating to Christmas activities across the town centre, highlighting the success of the ice rink and the 10,000 skaters. Bobby Lonergan, Reading Business Improvement District manager, said: "The combination of the festive lights displays and the Christmas events programme have made our town centre an attractive place to be and helped support Reading's economy at a crucial time of year".
- 4.17 It was correctly anticipated that there would be significant interest in the reinstatement of the Gardens following the event and the speed with which this took place. The operator made a bonded payment of £10,000 to the local authority prior to the start of the event to adequately cover the anticipated cost of required post event reinstatement.
- 4.18 Reinstatement works commenced immediately as the site began to clear from Monday 5th January 2015, with signage placed on site advising of the works and providing contact details in the event of any enquiries. These works have progressed extremely well with repairs to lawn areas extensively complete pending grass growth, which is currently largely weather dependant and continues to be monitored. Whilst officers are confident of the success of the works, the deposit held by the Council will not be released until such time as officers are satisfied with the quality of reinstatement.
- 4.19 The event substantively covered costs in its first year, bucking the general trend for newly established events to operate at a greater loss or require financial subsidy.
- 4.20 The operator has advised the Council that they would be keen to talk with the local authority regarding plans for December 2015.
- 4.21 The UK CIC / BID team are keen to build upon the success of this year's event and ensure that future activity is intrinsically linked to the town centre offer for maximum benefit to the town, residents, visitors and Reading businesses.
- 4.22 Based on the this high level of interest in retaining the event, as well as the very positive public feedback and visitor numbers, there is real scope to further develop and improve the event for 2015 and beyond.

5 PROPOSAL

- 5.1 It is proposed that officers enter in to discussion with the event operator (Billy Williams & Sons) regarding terms for the granting of a 3 year license for the delivery of the 'Reading Winter on Ice' event at the Forbury Gardens (2015 - 2017). The manner in which the 2014 event was delivered, coupled with its evident success, is considered by officers to provide an evidence base for the credibility and quality of the operator. The terms of any future licence will further ensure that the Council's interests are protected.
- 5.2 The surety provided to the operator by the granting of a three year agreement will give them greater confidence in further, future investment and will assist in attracting and retaining the participation of the appropriate calibre traders.

- 5.3 A longer term license would also serve as a statement of intent by the Council, in terms of ambition for the town over the festive season and help ensure that public interest and awareness can be consolidated and grown, maximising the benefit and enjoyment for Reading's residents and visitors.
- 5.4 The activity will continue to be coordinated with the Reading UK CIC/BID team to ensure a cohesive Christmas offer that is mutually beneficial.
- 5.5 It is proposed that, subject to a successful negotiation, the license be granted under delegated powers held by the Council's Chief Valuer, following consultation and agreement by the Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport & Consumer Services in consultation with the Director of Environment & Neighbourhood Services and the Head of Finance.
- 5.6 It is proposed that following the end of the three year license, the opportunity is competitively tendered, to invite alternate operator interest. This will ensure that the Council continues to receive best value from the use of its assets, both in terms of service provision and Income.

6. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

- 6.2 Priority 3 of the Council's Corporate Plan sets out the need to ensure Reading is an attractive, safe and well kept town. A key element of delivering this is providing more culture, leisure and sporting opportunities for local people and using assets such as Forbury Gardens
- 6.3 The event directly contributes to raising awareness of and developing an audience for the Abbey Quarter, which is an integral component of the current Abbey Quarter bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund.

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

- 7.1 Promotion of future activity will be essential to ensure success; as in 2014, this would initially be in the form of press releases and feed through to targeted multi-media and social media campaigns, alongside the BID's promotion of festive activity throughout the town as a whole. As in 2014, future events would be opened by a celebrity (yet to be finalised), ensuring significant pre-event press coverage and opening night audience.
- 7.2 All press & publicity to be coordinated through both RBC's Media Communications team and Reading UK CIC/BID.
- 7.3 The license for the use of Forbury Gardens would be subject to the obtaining of both planning and licensing consent. Both processes are advertised locally and invite public comment.

8. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT (EIA)

- 8.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to – eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;

advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

- 8.2 There are no identified issues relating to this proposal that would require an EIA.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 The proposed use of the site would require both planning and licensing consent to be obtained.
- 9.2 The Council's Chief Valuer (Bruce Tindall) has delegated authority to grant licences/leases up to a value of £50k per annum.
- 9.3 Appropriate break clauses to be included within license to protect the interests of the Council, should the event operator fail to meet undertakings and or obligations.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 To be established as part of negotiation with the operator, such negotiation to be overseen by the Council's Chief Valuer to ensure best value is achieved for the Council. In this regard the Chief Valuer has advised that the Council would be seeking a guaranteed minimum rent with an uplift based on an agreed percentage of profit.
- 10.2 The requirement for the operator to meet all operating costs and make a deposit payment, to be included within the license to protect the financial interests of the Council.
- 10.3 It is proposed that following the end of the three year license, the opportunity is competitively tendered to invite alternate operator interest. This will ensure that the Council continues to receive best value for the use of its assets both in terms of service provision and Income.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Additional press / media coverage (local & National):

- <http://www.getreading.co.uk/whats-on/family-kids-news/hear-screaming-girls-go-mad-8261168>
- <http://www.getreading.co.uk/news/local-news/12-most-read-getreading-stories-8367238>
- <http://www.heart.co.uk/thamesvalley/events/readings-winter-on-ice-forbury-gardens/>
- <http://www.getreading.co.uk/news/local-news/gallery-ice-skating-forbury-garden-8331419>
- <http://www.getreading.co.uk/news/reading-berkshire-news/berkshire-weather-cold-snap-expected-8355785>
- <http://www.getreading.co.uk/whats-on/family-kids-news/real-ice-rink-takes-centre-7926640>

- <http://www.getreading.co.uk/whats-on/family-kids-news/joey-essex-declares-forbury-gardens-8261128>
- <http://www.berkshireeventsguide.co.uk/events/reading-winter-on-ice/>
- <http://www.ents24.com/reading-events/forbury-gardens/reading-winter-on-ice/4059784>
- <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2867750/Joey-Essex-shows-surprising-ice-skating-skills-launches-festive-attraction.html>
- <http://www.getreading.co.uk/news/reading-berkshire-news/towie-star-joe-essex-reading-8255382>
- <http://www.getreading.co.uk/whats-on/family-kids-news/first-reading-santa-run---8285655>
- <http://www.getreading.co.uk/news/local-news/fiances-cyclists-killed-purley-take-8267807>