

Report to:

**TOURISM, ECONOMY AND COMMUNITIES
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Relevant Officer:

Philip Welsh, Head of Tourism and Communications

Date of Meeting

18 November 2020

BLACKPOOL ILLUMINATIONS

1.0 Purpose of the report:

1.1 To provide the committee with an update on the Illuminations service including a progress report on the extended 2020 Illuminations season, sponsorship and other external funding, and plans for future development.

2.0 Recommendation(s):

2.1 To consider the performance of the Illuminations service and to identify any further areas for scrutiny as appropriate.

3.0 Reasons for recommendation(s):

3.1 To ensure constructive and robust scrutiny of the report, which had been requested by the Committee.

3.2 Is the recommendation contrary to a plan or strategy adopted or approved by the Council? No

3.3 Is the recommendation in accordance with the Council's approved budget? Yes

4.0 Other alternative options to be considered:

4.1 None

5.0 Council priority:

5.1 The relevant Council priority is

- "The economy: Maximising growth and opportunity across Blackpool"

6.0 Background information

6.1 Introduction

The Blackpool Illuminations have been an integral part of the resort's tourism economy for more than 140 years.

The display, which comprises more than a million lamps and 100 miles of festoon, is traditionally staged for 66 nights from the start of September to early November.

It extends the tourism season into the late autumn, attracting an estimated three million visitors each year and generating around £300m for the local economy.

The Illuminations team is based at LightWorks (close to Blackpool Airport) where it provides a complete in-house manufacturing and installation service.

While the main focus is on provision of autumn Illuminations display, the team also manages the installation of Christmas lights for Blackpool and other towns, as well as developing assets for various light festivals including our own October Lightpool Festival.

The net cost of the Illuminations service is circa £1.7m, a figure that has reduced over the past 10 years due to improved efficiencies.

6.2 2020 Illuminations

This year, for the first time in history, the Council planned to extend the Illuminations season by two months to run through Christmas and New Year, ending on 3 January 2021.

This was intended to give our tourism businesses an opportunity to recoup some of the losses incurred during the initial lockdown period between March and early July.

While that move proved enormously successful in the opening weeks with significantly increased volumes of visitors across most nights (reflected by a marked increase in public donations at the collection points at the gateways to the Promenade), the gradual increase in COVID restrictions began to have a heavy impact on visitor numbers.

The introduction of Tier 3 restrictions in Blackpool on the eve of the October half-term resulted in a collapse in consumer confidence leading to mass cancellations of hotel and attraction bookings for the holiday period.

On 31 October 2020, the Prime Minister announced a month-long national lockdown to take effect from 5 November 2020.

As a result, the illuminations display has been suspended until 2 December 2020 at the earliest at which stage the Council will review the possibility of switching them on again to run until 3 January 2021. The Blackpool Tower will remain illuminated throughout the lockdown period.

This year's Illuminations display, which has been presented under a theme of *Bring On The Light*, is a celebration of the unstinting work of the NHS, key workers and other outstanding individuals during the coronavirus pandemic, with the famous Golden Mile featuring a display of hearts and rainbows.

Seven "Corona Heroes" including a consultant, two nurses, a hospital catering manager, two extraordinary fundraisers, and a therapy dog and his owner switched on the Illuminations in a virtual switch-on event staged in association with MTV on the night of Friday 4 September 2020. The streamed event was watched by around quarter of a million households around the world.

A further 48 Corona Heroes have illuminated images of themselves included within that section. They were chosen from hundreds of nominations from across the UK.

6.3 COVID-19 Impact

During the coronavirus pandemic, the Illuminations team has adopted new working practices to ensure a COVID-secure environment.

These measures included the introduction of social distancing measures, particularly for those working in small teams on the installation process, the hire of additional vehicles and purchase of materials that comply with new Government guidelines.

Due to high volumes of visitors in the opening weeks of the Illuminations season, a team of marshals was deployed in the tableaux section on The Cliffs to assist with social distancing.

6.4 Sponsorship and External Funding

The annual Illuminations display is partly dependent on external income including sponsorship, advertising and donations from public and business. The combined target for the current financial year is circa £168k.

Year-to-date, the team is on course to achieve that target with good gains made on sponsorship with new clients including Coral Island, Fox Brothers, Access Fylde Coast and The Sooty Show. Existing sponsors include Beaverbrook's, Genting, Houndshill, Beach House and Cubbies.

Earlier this year, a business development manager role was created within the Illuminations service. A key responsibility for this role is to identify and secure sponsorship and other

income generation opportunities in support of the Illuminations.

Given the difficult trading conditions since the onset of COVID-19, the post-holder has made good progress securing new clients for this year and identifying several opportunities for next year.

6.5 Lightpool Festival

This annual festival was launched in 2015 after a successful bid to the Coastal Communities Fund. It enabled us to bring more innovative light-based technology into the Illuminations including the use of 3D projection shows on to the front of The Blackpool Tower buildings.

Since then, the festival has become an integral part of the October half-term holiday weeks featuring new projections, art installations, an illuminated tram parade, live performance and community-based projects such as Glow Football.

It has grown from a few days at the outset to two weeks in duration and is supported by the Arts Council. The festival is also a part of the Light Up The North network which comprises light festivals in major towns and cities across the north of England.

This year's festival was postponed due to the pandemic, but detailed planning is already underway for next year.

6.6 Christmas Lights/External Work

The Illuminations service has been contracted to deliver Blackpool's town centre Christmas lights for the last three years. Discussions are currently underway with the Town Centre BID company for staging of the 2020 display.

The team has also worked on Christmas lighting displays for several other towns and cities in the north of England including Chorley, Lytham, Lancaster and Morecambe.

This year, it has also worked with Crewe Council to develop a new winter lighting festival, Lumen Crewe, as well as installing pieces at Durham and Worcester.

This development of the commercial arm of Lightworks is a work in progress, but presents a good opportunity to use our in-house knowledge and expertise to create an additional income stream that can be invested in our own Illuminations product to make it more sustainable and reduce dependence on Blackpool Council funding.

Note that the work undertaken in other areas tends to be on small-scale lighting schemes and therefore not intended to compete with Blackpool's Illuminations.

6.7 New Investment

Where appropriate, the service continues to invest in new equipment and processes to reduce costs of manufacture and increase efficiency.

This includes the introduction of robotic carving and cutting equipment, and 3D printing. The service is currently bedding in this new technology and will secure increased efficiencies as the manufacturing process evolves.

6.8 Towns Fund

The Government has announced that Blackpool will receive more than £39m in the first wave of new Town Deals. This will facilitate a number of capital infrastructure projects, including investment in the Illuminations.

The original bid to the Towns Fund included a request for up to £4m in the Illuminations (spread over five years).

This creates an excellent opportunity to invest in upgraded lighting infrastructure on the Promenade and town centre as well as creating new light-based art installations developed in conjunction with recognised artists.

As the final Town Deal offer is around £10m less than that original bid, each project will be required to submit a business case prior to any funds being allocated.

6.9 Does the information submitted include any exempt information? No

7.0 **List of Appendices:**

7.1 None

8.0 **Financial considerations:**

8.1 See section on "Towns Fund".

9.0 **Legal considerations:**

9.1 None

10.0 **Risk management considerations:**

10.1 None

11.0 Equalities considerations:

11.1 None

12.0 Sustainability, climate change and environmental considerations:

12.1 A number of measures have been introduced in recent times to make the Illuminations display more sustainable.

As part of the Council's wider agreement with power suppliers, EDF, the Illuminations are now powered by renewable energy.

In addition, investment in LED technology continues to reduce our overall power consumption and lighting components are manufactured to a bespoke Illuminations specification which increases lifespan and reduces waste.

The Illuminations service continues to provide Christmas trees for individual wards and is working closely with the Parks service to provide more sustainable options such as planted trees and the option of faux trees rather than natural ones.

13.0 Internal/external consultation undertaken:

13.1 None

14.0 Background papers:

14.1 None