



## Report of Town Clerk

### Christmas Lights and Cultural Activities – A Way Forward

#### Access Public

#### Background

##### 1. Current position

- a. Three types of decorative lighting are currently used in Berwick; architectural lighting, lighting designed to enhance community spirit or feeling, and festive lighting of the main retail areas.
- b. All festive lighting installation and maintenance is currently funded by Berwick-upon-Tweed Town Council (BTC), supported by volunteers from the Berwick Rotary Club who install the lights on the Christmas tree in Marygate (which is supplied by a local landowner) and provide assistance to the contractor paid for by BTC who does the installation work on the lights owned by the Rotary Club on the Royal Tweed Bridge.
- c. Neither council nor Berwick Rotary appears to have adequate ongoing provision for renewal of individual items (the motifs used on lampposts) or the features (e.g. the Town Hall display and the neon sign atop the Scotsgate Arch) of the displays and the extent to which BTC has control of maintenance costs is limited.
- d. There is no clear plan going forward as to how motifs will be replaced or how displays will be developed. This is particularly significant now because of the damage suffered as a result of Storm Arwen. It also provides an opportunity to think about the purpose and future of decorative lighting as a whole alongside festive lighting.

##### 2. Festive Lighting

- a. Typically festive light displays are used to either promote a sense of civic pride, or to drive retail and tourist footfall, or a mixture of both. No clear purpose has been identified in these terms, nor has the potential for community development to be driven by vernacular displays, for instance on people's houses or business premises. These displays have seen significant growth in recent years, and have potential both as drivers of traffic or footfall and as drivers of community engagement and activity.
- b. Until now there has been no significant community involvement or engagement with festive lighting, either in terms of defining its purpose or raising funds for its continuation, beyond the hard work and commitment shown by Berwick Rotary.

### **3. Funding of festive lighting**

- a. Possible sources of funding.
  - i. Retail sponsorship has already declined nationally, and may well be an unlikely offer in a town with a service retail economy. There are real issues of engaging national firms, with local managers having little or no autonomy, and independents may already be feeling the pinch.
  - ii. Community and charitable fund raising is an option, but clear guidance is required from council as to whether it wishes to enter this area of activity. Officers have previously explored a Christmas Lights lottery using our exemption as a small lottery organiser, but Northumberland County Council (NCC) have already entered that pool with their county wide lottery, and that may provide a low impact opportunity to fundraise. To do this we would have to create or invite residents to set up a Christmas lights committee and register for the Northumberland Lottery; a short cut process might be to facilitate the setting up of such a voluntary body via the Town Council, with councillors serving as trustees.
  - iii. Business sponsorship – No significant expressions of interest have been received and there is currently no capacity to market the sponsorship opportunity. Even if capacity existed, we would regard there as being a low probability of success without a considerably enhanced offer.
  - iv. Continued BTC funding is available at current levels, but the advice of the Responsible Financial Officer is that there are limited reserves for this purpose, and no good reason to borrow over medium to long term as equipment doesn't last long enough to make this viable.

### **4. Understanding the reasons for providing lighting**

- a. Civic pride / sense of place,
- b. Economic development by using lighting to boost retail activity and tourism,
- c. Community pride and sense of belonging, especially if there is a substantial community involvement in funding and implementing lighting, and
- d. Culture – there is a potential overlap with Berwick as a place of culture and art, in a way that sees festive lights as a subset of lighting as a feature of the town.

### **5. Timescales**

- a. Short term: 9 – 18 months.
- b. Medium term: 1 – 3 years.
- c. Long term: 3 – 7 years.

## **Issues**

### **6. Community festive lighting – what is it for?**

- a. In the last five years festive lighting has been extended to some parts of the commercial or central areas of Spittal and Tweedmouth; no feedback exercises have been undertaken to identify whether this has any discernible impact.

- b. Out with the main thoroughfares of Spittal and Tweedmouth, differing places within Berwick have differing opportunities to erect trees, or to have lights provided to them, and differing levels of engagement with the concept – it is evident that some provision has been on the basis of perceived equity in different parts of the town rather than impact or outcomes. There is no evidence that impact, outcome or engagement is taken account of in current plans. In effect, it is as if the town council simply puts a display into each area, without communicating what it is doing or why. This is not always congruent with how some of these schemes originated.
- c. In Prior Park, for instance, the origins of the current provision of a tree and a small display of lights on that tree appears to lie with the local residents, who encouraged the social landlord that covers much of the area and local authorities to provide a lighting connection, which has since been damaged.
- d. All pressure since 2015 for the provision of a tree and lights in Prior Park has come from the local councillors; no effort has been made to test local engagement with the idea, or to seek to use it to promote a sense of community. The lack of communal events associated with these installations reflects the lack of engagement.
- e. Similarly, councillors for the Highcliffe / Eastcliffe area have protested that there is little or no provision there. There is an opportunity here to seek to test whether Christmas lighting in the community can be used to develop the sense of community; in Highcliffe / Eastcliffe there is already a community hub we could partner with based at Northern View who might be able to use lighting in association with engagement activities. By testing engagement here, and through activity in Prior Park we could test whether the offer of lighting and a programme of Christmas activity might foster sufficient sense of community to energize the sense of place and civic pride for residents and justify such activities.
- f. Officers are not proposing any further changes in 2022 other than these two experiments to community festive lighting, since evaluation and feedback is required.
- g. It is important to recognise that informal lighting displays by individual residents are also an important part of the modern celebration of the festival, and council is asked to consider whether council wishes to encourage these displays of vernacular art, and support charity fund raising in association with them via social media and other publicity.

## **7. Culture and lighting**

- a. The use of architectural lighting in Berwick-upon-Tweed is chequered. The installation of lighting displays on the Royal Border Bridge was an undoubted success in terms of impact and brand image for the town, but the bridge is both inaccessible, and affected by the demands of running the national rail network over it. As yet there is no clear pathway to either repairing, upgrading or refurbishing the lighting display’.
- b. The history of festive lighting on the Royal Tweed Bridge is similarly chequered; issues of reliability and the vulnerability of motifs to wind damage have been encountered for several years.

- c. Both bridges present opportunities for architectural uses of lighting, as well as festive, and there is evidence, via previous under bridge installations, of an awareness of this.
- d. The best opportunity to provide a new, high quality lighting display to enhance Berwick’s brand would appear to be a combination of programmable architectural lighting with a cultural scheme allowing artists to design lighting installations around themes or events. Officers have already considered the potential of Berwick enabling local and visiting artists to use new facilities within Berwick as part of their personal development – such a use of architectural lighting seems both reasonable and an exciting possibility.
- e. There are other potential locations for architectural lighting that might be included in a scheme for local and visiting artists; Berwick has a number of features that might lend themselves to light installations. This scheme would be beyond the capacity of the Town Council to fund, but would represent a synthesis of features intended to boost visitor footfall and cultural training and activity that could form a bid for the funds available under the culture and creative zone.

**Proposals**

- 1. That council delegates authority to the Town Clerk to facilitate a Christmas lights committee,
- 2. That council delegates authority to the Town Clerk to approach the Culture and Creative Zone Advisory Group with regard to cultural lighting,
- 3. That council delegates authority to the Town Clerk to formally approach NCC with regard to obtaining their support for a new approach to lighting, and
- 4. That council delegates to the Town Clerk authority to seek indicative schemes from manufacturers as to what could be delivered in Berwick with appropriate financial support.

Author	GD
Checked by	SC / JS
Town Clerk sign off (if required)	GD