

**CHRISTMAS LIGHTS WORKING PARTY COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE
WITNEY TOWN COUNCIL**

Held on Monday, 13 November 2023

At 4.00 pm in the Virtual Meeting via MS Teams - Virtual Meeting

Present:

Councillor T Ashby (Chair)

Councillors:	R Crouch G Doughty	D Edwards-Hughes R Smith (In place of A Bailey)
Officers:	Adam Clapton Polly Inness Mark Lewis Derek Mackenzie	Deputy Town Clerk Communications & Community Engagement Officer Head of Estates & Operations Senior Administrative Officer & Committee Clerk
Others:	No members of the public.	

1 ELECT A CHAIR

Cllr T Ashby was elected as Chair of the Working Party.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor A Bailey, Councillor R Smith attended as a substitute.

3 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest from members or officers.

4 WORKING PARTY TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Working Party was presented with the draft terms of reference which contained the objective, timeframe and constitution. Members were happy and agreed their acceptance.

Resolved:

That, the terms of reference as presented, be agreed.

5 CHRISTMAS LIGHTS CONTRACT 2024 & BEYOND

The Working Party received and considered the scoping document prepared by the Head of Estates & Operations (HE&O).

The HE&O explained that the two most recent contracts had each been for 3 years. Members discussed and agreed that this was a sensible term in order to balance the need for the council to vary the display and balance the potential cost implication that would come with a single year contract. Members discussed the idea of having a display that was modular so that it could be rotated around the town over the 3-year period.

Members discussed issuing a communication out to residents to obtain their views on what they like about the current lights and what would they do differently? It was agreed that Councillors T Ashby & R Smith would review this prior to publication.

A discussion was held regarding the decision of other councils to reduce or even in some cases remove their Christmas Light displays, members agreed that they would like to retain a display in the current geographical locations as they felt it added to the spirit of wellbeing the town and encouraged shoppers.

The H&EO outlined the area covered by the lights and as suggested in his report encouraged members to join him on a walkabout on 27 November after the switch on to review the existing display so that members can agree what works well and what does not. The Deputy Town Clerk advised that lights were also located in the short section of Welch Way up to Marriotts Walk as this was missing from the map circulated as part of the report.

Consideration was given as to whether the council could purchase lights however this would be expensive, give little option to change the display and cause with storage and ongoing maintenance issues.

The only lights that the council owned were those that were constructed as part of the Children's light design competition. Those totalled eight, with seven displayed on the front of 34 Market Square (Como Lounge), with the current year winner on the Town Hall. The council passed a decision to offer the "retiring light" to the individual or their family that designed it originally. The approximate cost of manufacture of each light was £600 and members would like to see this continue, however consideration could be given to these being a smaller unit and potentially displayed in a different location.

Members agreed that energy efficiency should be a key criterion for the tender as it is important to work toward achieving the council's climate targets. Members were disappointed to hear that during the replacement of lampposts by Oxfordshire County Council that the timers the Town Council had installed at a cost of £7,500 had been removed; these timers ensured that the lights only operated during hours of darkness. Without these, the lights will be operational 24 hours per day and though the lights were LED this would lead to an unnecessary additional expense (approx. £1,400) to the council. The Deputy Town Clerk advised that Officers were currently discussing with OCC to reach a solution to replace the timers and/or compensate the council's additional energy costs, however it is highly unlikely that timers would be installed in time for this year's display.

Members were asked to treat this information confidential to allow Officers to investigate the matter fully.

Members would like to see a continuation of the town displaying two trees and welcome the sponsorship of these by local businesses. The Deputy Town Clerk advised that one already had agreed sponsorship and Officers were seeking another business to sponsor the tree outside the Corn Exchange. Business had been reluctant in the past to participate in sponsorship or other

Christmas based events, but it was hoped that if they were approached earlier in the year this would give the opportunity for them to participate and therefore reduce the cost to the council.

Members asked that the new tender allows for the positions to be amended. The HE&O confirmed this was possible as long as trees can be placed in a safe location and near to an electrical outlet. This would also allow Officers to protect assets following any potential amendment to the street scene following the proposed redevelopment of the High Street from 2025.

The HE&O advised that the budget proposal of £45,000 plus £10,000 contingency was based on expected inflation amounts and to cover the potential costs of infrastructure/ network improvements. Members believed this was a sensible budget amount and should be included in the budget for 2024/25.

Members asked Officers to investigate the costs that other similar sized councils spend on their displays, and it was agreed that the HE&O and Chair of the Working Party would both investigate this and report back.

Recommendations:

1. That, the Scoping Report be noted and,
2. That, the general breadth and scope of the current Christmas lights display (and trees) be retained for the future contract from 2024 and,
3. That, Officers compile a social media survey to obtain residents views, approval from Councillors Ashby & Smith before issue and,
4. That, energy efficiency is made a key criterion for the new Christmas lights tender process and,
5. That, the contract is requested for a 3-year period and,
6. That, the option of a modular display is explored as part of the tender process.
7. That, Officers continue to investigate the removal of the timers by OCC and report back to the Working Party and,
8. That, the HE&O and Chair investigate other councils Christmas Lights spend and,
9. That, HE&O to draft list of considerations ahead of the working party walkabout review of the existing lighting on 27 November and HE&O to compile summary of the WP thoughts following the walk and,
10. That, that a budget of £45,000 per year with a contingency of £10,000 is considered by the Policy, Governance & Finance Committee on 20 November for inclusion in the 2024/25 Budget setting and,

The meeting closed at: 5.06 pm

Chair