

## **COUNCIL EVENTS UPDATE – SANTA TOURS**

### **AGENDA ITEM No. 7**

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**MEETING:**                **EVENTS SUB-COMMITTEE**

**DATE:**                 **12<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY 2025**

**REPORT BY:**         **HEAD OF LEISURE AND EVENTS**

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#### **1.0 Purpose of the Report**

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide Members with an overview of the 2024 Santa Tours event, including details of a number of incidents and issues on the night, and to request that Members provide feedback and guidance as to any changes that they wish to see implemented to assist officers in the planning of the 2025 event.

#### **2.0 Background to the Report**

##### **Summary of the Santa Tours Event**

- 2.1 The Council provides an annual Santa Tours event each year on Christmas Eve.
- 2.2 The Santa Tours is a unique, long standing, and iconic event for the town and very highly valued by the residents of the town.
- 2.3 Each Christmas Eve, Santa tours the streets of the Parish with his team of a driver and a navigator, who help keep him on track. They stop in as many streets as possible to dispense Christmas cheer to children (of all ages). The tours generally take place between 3.45pm and 8.45pm. However, officers and staff are on site from approximately 11am until 10pm, to undertake the setup and takedown of the event (not including rigging and de-rigging the vehicles).
- 2.4 Volunteers are on site from around 2.45pm until 9.15pm, with the finish time depending upon any unforeseen circumstances on the night.

##### **Santa Routes**

- 2.5 Santa has a schedule which shows the approximate times residents can expect to see him in their street / area. The map, routes and approximate times are posted on the Council website and Facebook page and are also printed in the Newton News. Copies of the 2024 routes and times are attached at Appendix 1. Routes 1 to 6 are shown as the navigator and driver see them, while Routes 7 to 12 are shown as they would appear in the Newton News and Council website.
- 2.6 The times are an estimate and the public are reminded all the time to listen out for Santa's bells and music. While the volunteers are asked to try to keep to the timetable, inevitably, Santa can be held up by bad weather and may be late or sometimes even early depending upon how busy each street is. He can also have difficulty accessing some narrow streets and cul-de-sacs or streets with a lot of parked cars. As such it is requested that residents congregate at locations that are easy for him to access on his sleigh, and to listen for his bell and keep an eye on the Council's Facebook page.

- 2.7 A recent addition to the event has been live updates on the night on Facebook via 'Santa trackers'. The tracking data is not accessible to the public 'live' as the Council's website would not be able to host and maintain the amount of traffic it would generate on Christmas Eve night, without crashing. As an alternative, a member of staff periodically updates each routes location and posts this on the Council Facebook page.

## **Santa Vehicles**

- 2.8 In order to cover the whole Parish there are currently a total of twelve tours / routes, each requiring a vehicle. The Council currently has five suitable vehicles, ranging in size, from a L200, which is the size of a large car, to a tipper flatback vehicle. None of these vehicles are excessively large, however the flatbacks are getting towards the upper size limit with the increasing amount of traffic in the area on Christmas Eve causing difficulties in accessing narrow streets or areas with a lot of parked cars. These Council owned vehicles are well maintained and readily available for dressing prior to the event taking place. However, at least one vehicle is not dressed until Christmas Eve in order to allow for any other Council services which have to be undertaken in the lead up to Christmas e.g. burials.
- 2.9 Consideration is given to any new L200 type vehicles that are purchased by the Council as to whether they are suitable. However, changes in the design of newer vehicles by manufacturers are creating difficulties. For example the Santa frames have to be clamped on the sides of the vehicle to allow for the sleigh sides to be added, and this can damage the paint work and in many cases the bodywork over the wheel arches now flares out meaning the Santa frames cannot be attached.
- 2.10 The shortage of suitable Council owned vehicles means that the event relies on the Council sourcing an additional seven vehicles from local organisations. These vehicles can vary significantly in size, condition, make and model.
- 2.11 When loan vehicles are offered, the same consideration has to be given to the style of the vehicle, and many are unfortunately not suitable. There are limitations as to what the Council can do with someone else's vehicle without the risk of damage occurring.
- 2.12 The companies loaning the vehicles do so on the understanding that the Council will insure them for the period the Council holds them. This is an additional cost to the Council.
- 2.13 The vehicles will be on site anywhere up to 2½ weeks depending upon the companies requirements (many close down for the Christmas period therefore they are stored in the depot building for the whole time). The vehicles are derigged by works staff on the first working day following the Christmas period.
- 2.14 It is becoming increasingly difficult to find companies who will loan the vehicles. In the past, vehicles have come in from as far away as Tow Law. It is a regular occurrence that appeals need to be made on social media for companies to loan the vehicles.
- 2.15 In the past vehicles used to be hired from Northgate on a short term loan basis. However, they stopped short-term leasing and only leased vehicles to companies for a minimum of six months, but in most cases, longer. Research has been conducted several times to see if hired vehicles can be reinstated but to date no company has been found locally which can loan seven vehicles on a short-term lease. It is just too expensive for these companies to have these types of vehicles sitting around not in use.

## **Santa Tours Staffing and Volunteers**

- 2.16 The event is organised by the Town Council with planning, management and administration being undertaken by the Head of Leisure and Events and Events Clerical Assistant with support on the night from the Works Team Leader.
- 2.17 However the successful delivery of the event on the ground relies on the goodwill, support and dedication of volunteers giving up their time on Christmas Eve which could be spent with family, with many volunteers having young children themselves.
- 2.18 Each of the twelve tours requires a Santa, driver and navigator; a total 36 volunteers.
- 2.19 The volunteer teams vary from year to year depending upon who can assist each year. The event is planned in such a way that each route has at least one experienced person on them.
- 2.20 Volunteers are contacted in September to ascertain if they are available for Christmas Eve, and then the push starts to find new volunteers to fill in the gaps. This is done via social media. Many volunteers come back year after year with some having done so in excess of 25 years. These volunteers come from all over the area, with many no longer living on the town or having never lived on the town.
- 2.21 When using new volunteers it is unknown as to the suitability or reliability of these volunteers. Officers would recommend introducing a vetting system for new volunteers, in the form of a face-to-face meeting in late November, early December.

### **Drivers**

- 2.22 Drivers often use vehicles that they have never driven before, and in most cases much bigger than they are used to. As previously stated these vehicles are all different, some manual, some automatic and some semi-automatic, and can take a while to get used to. The streets on Christmas Eve are extremely busy with visiting family and in some cases families from outside the area who perhaps used to live in Newton Aycliffe travelling in to see Santa by parking up. The vehicles have external additional lights on them which can be very off putting when trying to manoeuvre in tight streets. Music is playing loudly, which again can be off putting, and they have to consider children being attracted to vehicles, some of whom are not supervised by parents and may run out in the road at any time.

### **Navigators**

- 2.23 The role of the navigator is to read the routes and help to map out each tour. Almost all locations in the Parish are planned to be visited over the 12 routes other than addresses which do not have roads, for example Ross Walk. The navigators try to keep the routes on time but there is no way of knowing where or if people will come out to see Santa. A lot depends upon the weather. For example 2024 was very mild and most routes reported an increase in people coming out to see them. Sometimes the tours end up ahead or behind the planned schedules and this is why in all advertisements it is stated listen for the bells and music. Navigators assist Santa with crowds and if necessary they foot the ladder for Santa to come off the vehicle as per the guidance on the routes. Navigators also, when the driver decides it is not possible for them to gain access into a location will walk into a cul-de-sac trying to encourage people to come to the unit.

## **Santa**

- 2.24 While most of this role is engaging with families and spreading Christmas cheer, Santa also assists the driver when he is trying to get into tighter locations and they are another set of eyes when parking up.
- 2.25 No matter what the weather, whether it is snowing and icy, mild, wet and windy, Santa is on the back of the vehicle making a magical night for all.

### **3.0 Summary of the 2024 Santa Tours Event**

#### **3.1 Planning of the Event**

##### **3.1.1 Sourcing of Volunteers**

Initially, officers contacted the 36 volunteers who had taken part in the 2023 event. This was undertaken in September via email and letter, with a deadline to let officers know if they were available of 7<sup>th</sup> October 2024.

25 volunteers confirmed they were available. After consulting the reserve list and making a request for volunteers on Facebook officers managed to fill the remaining 11 empty positions and had 8 volunteers on the reserve list.

At the end of November a couple of volunteers pulled out for various reasons including medical issues and these positions were filled from the reserve list.

On 10<sup>th</sup> December officers confirmed the arrangements, times, venue etc with all the volunteers.

On 17<sup>th</sup> December a driver and navigator dropped out, one due to work commitments and one due to ill health, and again these positions were filled from the reserve list.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> December another driver pulled out for personal reasons.

The volunteers are asked to arrive before 3pm on Christmas Eve, and by 3.15pm this year, the event was missing two people. Officers tried to ring these volunteers and other people on the reserve list but nobody picked up.

Whilst officers were ringing around, other volunteers were ringing friends and family to see if they would step in. Eventually an older gentleman, who was originally the navigator on Route 12, managed to persuade his Grandson who was only 18 to take his place. He moved over to be Santa on Route 4, while another volunteer's elderly father came to the rescue and volunteered to be Santa on Route 5. Both men were in their 70's. These routes would not have been able to go out without the good will of these people coming to the rescue at 4pm on Christmas Eve.

Several routes were then behind schedule not leaving the depot until 3/4hrs later. Facebook was updated but some residents do not have social media and there was no way of letting everyone know.

### **3.1.2 Sourcing of Vehicles**

As highlighted earlier the Council requires seven vehicles to be loaned from outside organisations in order to successfully run the event.

On 12<sup>th</sup> September officers contacted all the companies/organisations that had loaned a vehicle in 2023. Two were no longer able to provide a vehicle. Five vehicles were sourced from Aycliffe Fabrications, Sabre Rail, Gardner's Yard, Ferryhill Town Council and Ashcourt.

Officers managed to source two new vehicles, one from Fracks Transport and one from Ashcourt (this was to be their brand-new vehicle). Officers then had two vehicles on the reserve list, from Securicorp and Cam-Tec

In early December, Ashcourt informed officers that their new vehicles delivery date had been postponed and would only be able to loan one vehicle. This was replaced with the Securicorp vehicle.

At this point officers had one reserve vehicle on the list; from Cam-Tec.

On 21<sup>st</sup> December officers collected one of the vehicles, but discovered the engine management light was on. Officers took the decision not to use this vehicle as there would be no way of recovering it if something went wrong and it was unknown if it would be covered by the Council's insurance.

Officers contacted Cam-Tec, who got back to advise that their vehicle had three warning lights on, and so was out of use. At this point, officers made a post on Facebook requesting help from local companies, and rang round a number of companies who might have had an appropriate vehicle.

Finally at around 3pm, Focus Cladding contacted officers to advise they had a vehicle they would be able to loan for the necessary period. It was advised that the vehicle was an extended, long wheel base flat back, which is longer than the other vehicles, but could be adapted and used for the event.

Due to the length of the vehicle officers took the decision to use a volunteer driver who was a professional heavy goods vehicle driver for this vehicle. The allocation of vehicles to routes was also amended to try to have the vehicle used in locations which had the biggest streets. Unfortunately, there were still some streets that this vehicle was simply too large to enter.

## **3.2 Issues During the Event**

3.2.1 There were a number of reported problems on the night during the Santa Tours:-

- One tour returned early having misread the route instructions and missed off a number of streets.
- One route reported being overtaken on the pavement as the route was in progress.
- Another route reported access to an area being blocked by a parked car which had just overtaken them.
- Several routes were unable to access areas due to parked vehicles.
- One route reported being verbally abused by residents due to not being on time.
- A large number of residents took to social media during the event complaining about the volunteers and staff, all of whom can later see the comments if they are on social media.
- A resident turned up at the Council Depot and Council Offices looking for Santa who had mistakenly missed an area.

- 3.2.2 In previous years some routes have come under attack and had to leave areas for their own safety.
- 3.2.3 There are increasing problems every year with the varying sizes of the vehicles used, with the larger vehicles having difficulty accessing some streets particularly those streets with narrow roads and many parked cars.
- 3.2.4 Another issue is that volunteer drivers are generally driving on a car license and usually do not have a lot of experience driving long wheelbase units, many of which are totally different from cars.

### **3.3 Public Expectations**

- 3.3.1 The public expectation around the event is growing, and residents expect to be able to have instant information at their fingertips on the night.
- 3.3.2 Due to the nature and size of this event it is simply not possible to invest in affordable technology keep up with the growing public expectations. In a time when you can track the progress of a package which you have just ordered, expectations have become unrealistic.
- 3.3.3 It is simply not possible for Santa to be tracked over all twelve routes without major capital investment in technology and the capacity of the Council website, bearing in mind this would be all for one night of the year.
- 3.3.4 It used to be that residents listened to the bells and came out to search for Santa. Now people are expecting Santa to come to them, almost to their door. Not many areas congregate in preparation for his arrival. If the weather is bad many people stand at their door and wave.
- 3.3.5 In addition, the days when the town's streets were easy to access, with limited parked vehicles, are long gone. These days most households have at least one but in most cases two vehicles. Newer housing developments are also not always in keeping with the nature of the old town, where households often look out onto a nice green area with no vehicle access. Vehicle parking is becoming increasingly an issue for many parts of the town. This stops access to all locations meaning some residents miss out on a visit. These people may not even know that the route was unable to visit as they live a lot further into the area Santa cannot access.
- 3.3.6 As the town continues to grow more pressure is being added to the already stretched routes, and it is feared that the time will come when it will not be possible to get to all locations, either due to limited time (no one wants to keep their children up too late on Christmas Eve, so extending the times is not an option), or difficulties in sourcing additional volunteers and at a time when it is becoming more of an issue to cover the existing routes.
- 3.3.7 An anonymised summary of public comments received via the Council Facebook page is attached at Appendix 2.

### **3.4 Considerations and Possible Changes for the 2025 Event**

- 3.4.1 No-one wants to change the way in which Santa tours Great Aycliffe on Christmas Eve. This event is part of what makes the town so unique and special.
- 3.4.2 However, in light of the growing town, the increasing number of parked vehicles and narrow streets, the increasing difficulties in sourcing vehicles and volunteers, and increasing public expectations, consideration needs to be given on how to maintain and protect the magic of Santa touring Great Aycliffe on Christmas Eve, whilst adapting the event to the changing circumstances.
- 3.4.3 If it were not for the two very late step in volunteers last year (after the routes should have left) two routes would not have gone out at all, making a lot of children very disappointed. Increasingly public expectations are not being met due to issues that cannot be resolved including the growing town, inaccessible areas, and volunteer and vehicle shortages. It is feared that the time of not being able to effectively deliver this event may be fast approaching.
- 3.4.4 Looking ahead to future years, Members may wish to give consideration to finding an alternative way to deliver this event or similar opportunities for residents to see Santa on Christmas Eve.
- 3.4.5 Two initial suggestions from officers are:-
  - 1. Changing the format of the tours, so that Santa does not to go into all streets but stops at various locations around the town at designated times so that people can come to whichever location / time suits them best. This would be implemented in a way that no household in Great Aycliffe is more than 500 metres away from one of the stops.
  - 2. Having free 'Visit Santa' location(s) on Christmas Eve. For example at the Oak Leaf Sports Complex or a Santa at each park.

### **4.0 Matters for Consideration**

- 4.1 Members are requested to consider the information provided regarding the 2024 Santa Tours event and provide feedback and guidance to officers to assist in the planning of the 2025 event.

### **5.0 Policy Implications**

- 5.1 Consideration of this report will assist the Town Council with the delivery of the following Strategic Aims:
  - No.1 - To provide good quality governance and management of the Council.*
  - No. 2 - To manage the Council's finances and assets in a responsible manner.*
  - No. 3 - To provide accessible, affordable leisure facilities and opportunities.*

### **6.0 Staffing Implications**

- 6.1 The event is planned and administered by the Head of Leisure and Events and Events Clerical Assistant with support on the night from the Works Team Leader.
- 6.2 There are no proposed changes to the staffing of the event for 2025.

## **7.0 Financial Implications**

- 7.1 Currently all volunteers are offered a £20 gift card as a small token of thanks for giving up their time on Christmas Eve.
- 7.2 Not all volunteers wish to receive this gift, but a budget has been set aside to cover £20 x 36 volunteers totalling £720.
- 7.3 Traditionally, the Council purchased a gift in the form of a bottle of spirit, but this became very labour intensive and not all volunteers benefitted from this form of gift.
- 7.4 In recent years, each route has been sponsored by a local company or organisation who very kindly donates £100 per route towards the cost of running the event. In 2024 all routes were sponsored.
- 7.5 Should any changes be made to the format of the Santa Tours then this may change the financial implications for the Council. However this would not be known until guidance is given as to the preferred format in future years.

## **8.0 Crime and Disorder Implications**

- 8.1 The report highlights some issues experienced with negative comments and anti-social behaviour in the form of verbal abuse of the volunteers this year.
- 8.2 Members may wish to consider taking these issues into account in considering the planning of the 2025 event.

## **9.0 Equal Opportunities Implications**

- 9.1 None.

## **10.0 Environment, Biodiversity and Climate Change Implications**

- 10.1 None specifically relating to the issues in this report.

## **11.0 Risk Assessment**

- 11.1 It is not considered that the matters contained in this report pose a risk to health and safety of staff or to the financial or public standing of the Council to a degree that a risk assessment should be appended to this report.

## **12.0 General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR)**

- 12.1 Is any personal or sensitive data required for this proposal which may have any implications for GDPR? **NO**

## **13.0 Recommendations**

- 13.1 It is recommended that Members:-
  - i) Receive the report.
  - ii) Consider the information provided regarding the 2024 Santa Tours event and provide feedback and guidance to officers as to any changes that they wish to see implemented in the planning of the 2025 event.

**Responsible Officer**      **Judith Thexton, Head of Leisure and Events**