

SANTA TOURS – PROPOSED CHANGE TO THE FORMAT OF THE EVENT

~~AGENDA ITEM No. 11~~

MEETING: RECREATION COMMITTEE

DATE: ~~26TH NOVEMBER 2025~~

REPORT BY: HEAD OF LEISURE AND EVENTS AND
SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM

1.0 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to request a change to the format of the Santa Tours event on Christmas Eve to mitigate and address a number of operational difficulties and health and safety concerns raised by the Council's independent Health and Safety Advisor, and ensure that as many people as possible can participate in and enjoy this longstanding, iconic and much-loved event.

2.0 Background to the Report

- 2.1 The Council's Events Sub Committee previously considered a report in February 2025, following the 2024 Santa Tours Event which outlined the planning and organisation of the event, and the concerns, risks, and difficulties that officers have in running the event in its current format.
- 2.2 A copy of this report is attached at Appendix 1 and while it is not intended to repeat any of the information contained within this report, a summary of the key difficulties and concerns is summarised below:
- *Difficulties sourcing volunteers and vehicles, which often leads to vehicles and volunteers still being sought right up until the day of the event and sometimes, in the case of volunteers, on the evening of the event.*
 - *The experience and competency of the volunteer drivers in operating large vehicles, and the difficulties in training or familiarising the volunteer drivers with the vehicles, many of which are donated and only received by the Council in the days leading up to the event.*
 - *Difficulties checking the roadworthiness of the donated vehicles, beyond checking that they have a current MOT.*
 - *Difficulties vetting, training, and briefing last minute volunteers.*
 - *The growing town.*
 - *The increasingly narrow streets and housing estates, and significantly increased volumes of parked cars making it very difficult for Santa vehicles to safely access many estates.*
 - *A number of 'near misses' in recent years, including cars overtaking the sleighs on footpaths, access and egress of vehicles being blocked, and abuse of staff and volunteers from residents both in person and online.*
- 2.3 Members will be aware from the recent item on the October Recreation Committee that the sourcing volunteers and vehicles remains a real concern. Whilst the Council has now been able to fill all roles, it is still severely lacking in numbers of 'reserves'. History also shows that there is a 'drop out' rate of around 5 people.

2.4 It was agreed at the Events Sub Committee Meeting that:

- i) *The Santa Tours event continue in its current format for 2025.*
- ii) *Officers prepare a news article to be published in the Newton News, outlining a summary of the difficulties encountered in planning and running the event in terms of sourcing vehicles and volunteers, the growing town and managing public expectations, and outlining what changes may need to be implemented in future years if these difficulties cannot be addressed, including the option of Santa not going into all streets but stopping at various locations around the town at designated times so that people can come to whichever location / time suits them best.*
- iii) *Officers be given delegated authority to make any adjustments to the event in response to any difficulties experienced in the run up to the event.*
- iv) *A vetting system for new volunteers is introduced, in the form of a face-to-face meeting in late November, early December.*

2.5 Despite the ongoing difficulties and concerns, officers had been continuing to plan on running the event in its current format for 2025 as directed by the Council.

2.6 A news article has been prepared and recently issued outlining the difficulties and proposed changes.

2.7 A vetting system has been set-up and will be implemented ahead of the event as far as is possible, bearing in mind the possibility of last-minute changes to volunteers. The vetting will include driving licence checking, health questionnaire and pre-meetings where possible.

3.0 Current Situation

3.1 Despite the various difficulties, concerns and risks, and the fact that these issues are worsening each year, not getting better, officers had been continuing to plan on running the event in its current format for this year as agreed at the Events Sub-Committee.

3.2 However, the Council's Health and Safety Advisor has recently undertaken an audit of the Council's safety arrangements for all community events, including the Santa Tours.

3.3 He has advised officers that, in his professional opinion, the risk assessment for the Santa Tours event is not '*suitable or sufficient*' in addressing or mitigating all of the identified risks, and that the control measures currently identified do not address the hazards and risks.

3.4 Disappointingly, the Health and Safety Auditor has advised that it is beyond his remit to make a formal recommendation as to whether the event can go ahead in its current format or not and could not provide a formal audit report to the timescales required for this report. This is disappointing bearing in mind the clear verbal opinion given to officers on the day of the audit and an initial commitment to provide a report. He has however, indicated his willingness to continue to work with officers in reviewing the risk assessment for any revised event.

- 3.5 The concerns raised verbally by the Health and Safety Auditor to officers during the audit, included:
- *The risks associated with large vehicles entering narrow streets, in the dark, and potentially in wintry weather conditions, with increased volumes of parked cars, and public and children in the road.*
 - *The risk of 'allurement' i.e. children being attracted towards the moving Santa vehicle.*
 - *The risks of the vehicles not having safety features such as automatic braking systems, all round cameras, auto cut off when driver leaves cab etc. Durham County Council bin wagons have all of these safety features in place.*
 - *The risk of vehicles being driven by volunteers who may have never operated such a vehicle before and the lack of suitable training for the drivers, and difficulties undertaking pre-driver checks on last minute volunteers e.g. points on licences.*
 - *The risk of not being able to undertake proper checks on the roadworthiness of donated vehicles e.g. service history, engine warning lights, recovery of the vehicle if they do not have breakdown cover.*
 - *The risk of Santa travelling on the back of the vehicles without a harness (a health and safety risk despite road safety law allowing this at low speeds).*
 - *The lack of direct supervision or control of the safety of volunteers during the event by the Council, which would leave the Council completely liable in the event of an accident.*
 - *The risk of not being able to properly brief and train volunteers due to vehicles and volunteers regularly being sought and changed right up until the day of the event (and increasingly on the day).*
 - *The lack of welfare facilities e.g. no facility for volunteers to use a toilet during the event despite being out for up to six hours.*
 - *Risks in not being able to undertake health checks on last minute volunteers (for example one of our volunteers had a medical emergency two years ago).*
- 3.6 If the event was to continue in its current format, the concerns of the officers and Health and Safety Advisor would need to be reported to the Council's insurance company, and will be very likely to have implications on their willingness to continue to insure the event in its current format.
- 3.7 Regardless of this, officers would have serious reservations about signing off the risk assessment, based on the advice received from the Health and Safety Advisor, and are therefore of the strong opinion that the format of the event needs to be changed immediately.
- 3.8 As highlighted earlier, officers have been given delegated authority by the Events Sub Committee to *'make any adjustments to the event in response to any difficulties experienced in the run up to the event'*.

4.0 Proposed Changes for the 2025 Event

- 4.1 Officers appreciate how treasured this event is by the community, and that no-one wants to change the way in which Santa tours Great Aycliffe on Christmas Eve. This event is, after all, part of what makes the town so unique and special.
- 4.2 However, officers are of the strong opinion that the event needs to be *adapted* to reduce and mitigate the many risks (that cannot be mitigated in the event's current format) and the difficulties being encountered in effectively and safely running the event, and would not be comfortable as officers signing off the risk assessment on the current basis, particularly in light of the advice received from the Council's Health and Safety Advisor.
- 4.3 It is the senior officers (Town Clerk and Head of Leisure and Events) who would be held liable if something went tragically wrong and the last thing the officers want is for a volunteer or member of the public to be hurt on Christmas Eve.
- 4.4 It is therefore recommended that a revised format is adopted, whereby Santa does not 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. A total of five vans will go out, each visiting five to six locations for up to half an hour each, therefore covering a total of 25 to 30 locations around the town.
- 4.5 This would be implemented in a way that no household in Great Aycliffe is more than 500 metres / two minutes away from one of the stops, and in many cases even less than this. A copy of the proposed routes is attached at Appendix 2.
- 4.6 Adapting the event in this way would bring a number of improvements, address many of the current difficulties, and, most importantly, significantly mitigate the risks identified by the Health and Safety Advisor. Benefits would include:
 - Reducing the number of volunteers required from 36 to 14 which would be a much more manageable number in terms of recruiting volunteers.
 - Only five vans going out, all of which would be Town Council vehicles, thereby removing the risk of using donated vehicles from outside of the Council.
 - Having standby volunteers and a support vehicle on site (at the Council Offices) on the night, so that should something go wrong on the night an immediate response would be possible.
 - Increasing the likelihood of being able to have a decent pool of reserve volunteers able to step in in the days leading up to the event or on the day if any volunteers drop out.
 - Making it easier to properly vet, undertake health checks, brief, and train volunteers and reserves ahead of the event and for the drivers to have the opportunity to test drive the vehicles.
 - Removing the risk of Santa travelling on the back of a moving vehicle.
 - Removing the risk of large vehicles needing to access narrow streets with large volumes of parked cars.
 - Reducing the risk of children running up to moving vehicles as there will be fixed locations with the vehicle will be parked up.
 - No hold ups, time changes, or missed streets causing frustration for the public and abuse of staff and volunteers.
 - Times and locations would be fixed allowing the public choice in where and when to see Santa, increasing accessibility and flexibility as the public would be able to either choose from the closet stop to them or choose a place and time which is best suited to their plans.
 - Reducing the risk of missing Santa due to routes running early or late.

- Two of the locations will be in locations which are suitable for families to visit by car. These destinations will have extended stays.
- Santa will be able to engage more with the children as he will be on the ground meeting and greeting rather than up a height bending over the side of the vehicle trying to speak to the young people.
- Volunteers would only be out in all weathers for a maximum of four hours as opposed to five hours plus currently.
- Volunteer drivers would receive training on the vehicles prior to the event taking place, which eliminates some of the highest risk factors.

- 4.7 The recently issued press release and social media article highlighting the difficulties and the possible changes that may need to be made to the event is attached at Appendix 3 for Members' information
- 4.8 Officers have also been approached by representatives of local charity; All Disabilities Matter who have indicated they will again be running their Santa's Grotto from a unit in the town centre on Monday 22nd and Tuesday 23rd December.
- 4.9 Officers feel this would be a positive addition to the Christmas events schedule, offering a further opportunity for the community to see Santa in the days leading up to Christmas Eve.

5.0 Matters for Consideration

- 5.1 Members are requested to consider agreeing the proposed changes to the format of the Santa Tours Event with effect from Christmas Eve 2025, taking into account the advice received from the Council's independent Health and Safety Advisor and the likely withdrawal of the insurance cover for the event in its current format.

6.0 Policy Implications

- 6.1 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.

7.0 Staffing Implications

- 7.1 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.
- 7.2 The proposed changes to the event would mean that the input of the Events Clerical Assistant providing live updates on the progress of the tours would not be required and it is also likely that the time spent by the Head of Leisure and Events and Works Team Leader would be reduced with an earlier finish time.
- 7.3 The time spent by works operatives dressing and undressing vehicles would also be reduced leading up to and after the event.

8.0 Financial Implications

- 8.1 Currently all volunteers are offered a £20 gift card as a small token of thanks for giving up their time on Christmas Eve.
- 8.2 In recent years, each route has been sponsored by a local company or organisation who very kindly donates £100 per route towards the costs of running the event. In 2024 all routes were sponsored.
- 8.3 Should the recommended changes be agreed to the format of the Santa Tours then there would be a small financial saving to the Council with a reduced number of volunteers and no donated vehicles to insure. However, sponsorship income would also reduce as there would be fewer 'routes'.

9.0 Crime and Disorder Implications

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

10.0 Equal Opportunities Implications

- 10.1 None.

11.0 Environment, Biodiversity and Climate Change Implications

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

12.0 Risk Assessment

- 12.1 It is 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.
- 12.2 The Risk Assessment is attached at Appendix 4.

13.0 General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR)

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

14.0 Recommendations

- 14.1 It is recommended that Members:-
 - i) Receive the report.
 - ii) Agree the proposed changes to the format of the Santa Tours Event with effect from Christmas Eve 2025, as set out in paragraphs 4.4 to 4.6 of the report, taking into account the advice received from the Council's independent Health and Safety Advisor and the likely withdrawal of the insurance cover for the event in its current format.

Responsible Officer: Judith Thexton, Head of Leisure and Events