

SANTA TOURS SUB COMMITTEE

TUESDAY 3RD MARCH 2026

Notes of the meeting of the **SANTA TOURS SUB COMMITTEE**, held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, School Aycliffe Lane, Newton Aycliffe, on **TUESDAY 3RD MARCH 2026** at 7.00 p.m.

PRESENT

Councillors Martin Ashcroft, Jaci Beddard, Tony Beddard, Arun M. Chandran, George Gray, Brian Haigh, Andy Hill, Richard Hutchinson, Jacqui McFadden Lewis, John Moore, Kyle Robinson, Ken Robson, Michael Stead, Tracey Williams, Anne Woodward and John Woodward.

Public and Volunteer Members

Chris Clement, Jed Hillary, Peter Jarps, Matthew Lane, Emma Selby and Stephen Smith.

OFFICERS

Mr Dan Austin (Town Clerk)
Mr Steve Cooper (Works and Environment Manager)
Mrs Judith Thexton (Head of Leisure and Events)
Mrs Vikki Anderson (Corporate Assistant)

IN ATTENDANCE

No members of the public were in attendance.

The Town Clerk opened the meeting, thanking the members of the public and volunteers for attending and clarifying that all members of the sub-committee could take part in discussions, but only Councillors could make proposals and vote during the meeting. He added that anyone wishing to speak should raise their hand and speak when directed to do so by the Chairman and that all members were expected to be civil and respectful at all times.

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN

It was previously agreed at the meeting of the Recreation Committee on Wednesday 14th January 2026, that the Chairman of the Recreation Committee, Councillor John Moore, be appointed as Chairman of the Santa Tours Sub Committee for the Municipal Year 2025/26.

Councillor John Moore took the Chair for the Meeting.

2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN

It was previously agreed at the meeting of the Recreation Committee on Wednesday 14th January 2026, that the Vice Chairman of the Recreation Committee, Councillor Tony Beddard, be appointed as Vice Chairman of the Santa Tours Sub Committee for the Municipal Year 2025/26.

Councillor Tony Beddard took the Vice Chair for the Meeting.

3. OPENING STATEMENT BY THE CHAIRMAN

The Chairman opened the meeting offering heartfelt thanks to those who have volunteered to be part of this Sub Committee for an event that is a much-loved tradition.

4. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence had been submitted by Councillors Tony Armstrong, Neil Collinson and Carl Robinson.

Apologies for absence had also been submitted by public and volunteer members Dave Bussey, Liz Mawson and Stuart Mawson.

5. MEMBERS' DISPENSATIONS

No applications for dispensations had been received.

6. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

7. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

There were no public questions.

8. SANTA TOURS – INITIAL PLANNING FOR THE 2026 EVENT

The Town Clerk introduced the report, advising that the Council have undertaken a review of the Santa Tours event via the Service Review Sub Committee on 4th February.

This report provided the full background on the risks, difficulties, and challenges of running the event in the traditional touring format and why it needed to change, and included a review of how last year's changed format went, and some initial thoughts and proposals for how this year's event can be developed and improved.

It was highlighted that it had been agreed by the Service Review Sub-Committee that:

- i) Officers investigate the feasibility of reverting the event to as close to the traditional Santa Tours as is safely possible, on the basis of running the tour over a number of evenings in the run up to Christmas Eve, Santa travelling on the back of the vehicle, and seeking to add in additional fixed stops, particularly in the western area of the town.*
- ii) Consideration is given to maintaining the fixed location meet and greet system on Christmas Eve.*
- iii) The Care Home visits on Christmas Eve morning will continue and the feasibility of including the smaller Care Homes on the town is investigated.*
- iv) The event is operated on the principle of only Town Council vehicles being used in order to remove the risks of loaning in vehicles.*
- v) Any further work on the improvement and enhancement of the event is delegated to the Santa Tours Sub-Committee, who should meet bi-monthly and have a plan confirmed by September 2026.*

It was advised that the purpose of this first meeting of the Santa Tours Sub Committee was to put forward further information to allow the Santa Tours Sub Committee to agree the format of the 2026 event, begin the process of planning the event, and provide the opportunity for councillors, volunteer and public to put forward ideas and options for further investigation with a view to making further improvements to the event.

It was stressed that any changes to the event must be within the previously agreed decisions of the Council, such as only using Council vehicles, the budget available for the event, the capacity of the Council officers, the availability of volunteers and vehicles, and health and safety and insurance requirements.

The Head of Leisure and Events then provided an overview of the further investigations that had been undertaken in relation to the agreed actions at the Service Review Sub Committee and the initial findings and recommendations.

Regarding the adaptation of Council vehicles to allow a bespoke frame to be constructed with a harness to allow Santa to travel on the back of the vehicle, the vehicle fleet has been inspected by officers.

It was highlighted that all of the vehicles are different as they serve a range of purposes daily, undertaking a variety of tasks from golf course works, open spaces work, cemeteries, including burials, fly tipping collection, gritting and facilitation of events, to name a few. It is because of this varied workload that the Works Department needs an array of different vehicle types. The Council therefore only has five vehicles that could be considered for the Santa Tours and these are the vehicles which have been used in the past.

It was advised that for the traditional Santa Tours format, the frames were held in place with straps, which allows the frame to move within the body of the back of the vehicles. This system is not ideal and relies upon the operatives building up the display to get straps in the correct position, get the correct tension and could easily result in error as twelve vehicles were dressed in a short space of time.

In undertaking the review of the vehicle fleet, consideration was given to:

- the age of the vehicle and the date it was due for replacement, as it would not make financial sense to build a bespoke framework for a vehicle which was to be replaced in the near future, especially as it is unknown as to whether the vehicle would be replaced like for like. This reduced the available vehicles for adaptation to four.
- Any Lifting Operations and Lifting Equipment Regulations issues with tailgate lifts and being able to fix a new frame to the back of the vehicle. This further reduced the available options to three.
- Two of the remaining vehicles have plastic casings in the back of the vehicle and frames could not therefore be sited without damaging this casing and considering that these vehicles carry grit for footpaths and damage to the casing could in the long run result in metal fatigue, as well as not having fixing points for the framework to sit.

Therefore, after much consideration, only one vehicle was considered suitable for a bespoke removable frame / cage, which would eliminate the need for a framework to be held in place with straps and allow a harness to be fitted for Santa, to be used both when the vehicle is in motion and when Santa is engaging with the public.

Officers have requested a quote for the framework from a local company and a drawing of the proposed design is included with the report.

In relation to the option of running the event as closely to the traditional tour as is safely possible, but over a number of evenings in the run up to Christmas Eve, with Santa on the back of the aforementioned one adapted vehicle, officers feel this would be a feasible option.

It is anticipated that the parish would be zoned, and the tour ran in a similar way to how the Rotary Club undertakes their Santa visits in parts of the town. Each zone would have more stopping points, with set times, and walkers / stewards would guide the public from cul-de-sacs and side streets to the set points. With this format an officer of the Council could be present to oversee each evening, allowing for dynamic risk assessments to be carried out, making adjustments as needed to ensure both public and volunteer safety. It is proposed that each evening there would be a team of a Santa, driver and navigator in the Santa unit, and an officer of the Council with three or four walkers in another vehicle, going ahead of the Santa unit. An example route was included with the report.

Benefits of this option would be coverage in more areas, reducing all high-risk factors to an acceptable level, reducing the need for difficult manoeuvres in tight areas, oversight by an officer of the Council, only one vehicle being required, and increased options for the public to see Santa on an evening that suits.

However, there are concerns about this format, the main one being that the event would not be held on Christmas Eve, which would not be well received by the public. The number of volunteers needed to run the event would also not be reduced, the event would look very similar to the Rotary Club event, officers would need to consider working time directive when working on an evening, as they may not be able to work the next day, and sourcing staff and volunteers on a weekend may be difficult.

In relation to the second option of maintaining and enhancing the fixed location, meet and greet format on Christmas Eve, with more and improved locations, and the care home visits, but with *no* touring element, officers are of the opinion that this format worked well last well and provides a very strong foundation to be built on and which could be developed and improved.

Again, this format would mitigate all of the high-risk factors and address all of the operational challenges as previously reported.

The fixed location 'meet and greet' format last year gave the community the opportunity to choose which location to see Santa that best fitted into their schedule, with officers observing high numbers attending at most locations, with some exceptions. Families of all ages came out to see Santa, mostly on foot and spanning all generations. The car park locations did not work as anticipated, showing that most people did not want to travel by car to see Santa, so these could be exchanged for more stops in other areas of the town which had lighter coverage and trying to link up with community groups and activities such as the St Clare's Church Christingle Service. There was a lot of positive feedback on the night from residents being able to get 'up close and personal' with Santa. Many of the community building locations advised they would happily open their doors to bring Santa inside, which would mean that families and volunteers would be sheltered inside even if the weather was poor.

The Head of Leisure and Events highlighted that officers would have concerns about the feasibility of combining the two options due to the capacity of the very small events team working up to and including Christmas Eve, both during the day in the office and evenings and weekends. Council events are managed by the Head of Leisure and Events and a part-time Events and Administration Assistant.

It would therefore be the conclusion and recommendation of the officers that the focus of the Santa Tours Sub Committee in shaping the plans for the 2026 event should be on:

- *either*, running the event as closely to the traditional tour as is safely possible, but over several nights in the run up to Christmas Eve, as requested at the Service Review Sub-Committee;
- *or*, in maintaining and enhancing the fixed location, meet and greet format on Christmas Eve, with more and improved locations, and the care home visits, but with *no* touring element.

The Town Clerk stressed that trying to deliver both options would be a significant challenge and one which would stretch the capacity of the small officer team to breaking point. He also offered his thanks to the Head of Leisure and Events and the Events and Administration Assistant, and other officers who have assisted, for their continued efforts in planning and organising the required changes to the event.

The Chairman then opened up the debate and invited questions, comments and proposals from members of the sub-committee.

Councillor Michael Stead asked if officers had any accurate information on how long a tour of all streets in the Parish, without stopping, would take, and an idea of how many Santa's and volunteers would be needed.

The Town Clerk highlighted that since the February Service Review Meeting, officers had proceeded on the basis of the two options that had been agreed, and not on a full tour. However, this could be investigated as a third option if the sub-committee agreed to this.

The Head of Leisure and Events advised that a full tour would require all twelve routes if delivered in the original format. The feedback from the public and volunteers received was that residents didn't enjoy seeing Santa drive straight past inside the vehicle, preferring the interaction and engagement of the fixed locations.

Councillor Michael Stead stressed the need to ensure the event is inclusive for everyone within the town, including the older generation, for example.

Councillor Arun M Chandran said he hoped to help steer members towards one clear preferred option, asking if there was the possibility of adding more stops to the 'meet and greet' format, adding that this appeared to be the safest option. He highlighted the concerns regarding vehicles, stating that the vehicles could not be changed just to accommodate one event and that common sense and practicality must prevail.

The Town Clerk commented that by not having the touring element added onto the meet and greet format, officers' time could be invested in adding to and improving the fixed locations, particularly in the western area.

The Head of Leisure and Events added that quite a few additional areas will be explored, allowing for more stops, assisted by the use of all five council vehicles as nobody would be travelling on the back, thereby removing the need for vehicle adaptation. A review would be undertaken to determine where stop times could be extended or reduced, and exploring more locations linked to community buildings so that there is the option of people seeing Santa inside.

She highlighted that a number of local establishments are interested in having the Santa meet and greet as part of their own Christmas Eve events. Also, some venues provided hospitality free of charge last year, and the council may wish to consider providing a donation to encourage community organisations to get involved and enhance the events on Christmas Eve. She concluded by advising that as the town continues to grow, more venues can be added.

Councillor Arun Chandran proposed that the fixed location 'meet and greet' format on Christmas Eve, with additional and improved locations, but no touring element, and visits to the local care homes should be the preferred option, and that this be left open to ideas for improvement and evolution.

He further proposed that officers liaise with the Rotary Club to explore opportunities for working with them on a touring element.

This was seconded by Councillor Andy Hill.

A public representative and former volunteer raised concern that the risk of Santa travelling on the back of the vehicle had been over-egged, sharing examples of other towns out of area holding events with people travelling on the back of a large float. He questioned the inability to adapt the council's vehicles to fit harnesses and that further options needed to be explored. He suggested that when replacing works vans, the Council should consider purchasing a multi-use vehicle such as a pick-up truck.

The Town Clerk clarified that council vehicles are purchased in line with the purpose for which they are needed throughout the year to deliver works and environmental services and stressed that the priority is that they are fit for purpose all year round, and not just for one night of the year for the Santa Tours. This necessitates different types of vehicles and, as previously highlighted, there is currently only one vehicle currently suitable for adaptation for Santa to travel safely on the back. He further highlighted that Santa travelling on the back of the vehicle is only one of many high-risk factors in running the traditional Santa Tours event, and there are also a number of logistical problems as previously outlined. These include the need to bring in seven vehicles from outside of the Council in order to run the twelve routes which presents numerous safety issues. Commenting on the large float example, he added that in this town the vehicles need to exit the depot and onto public highways, which necessitates traveling at higher speeds which presents risks. He concluded by highlighting that a range of risks and issues had already been examined in detail since November, leading the Council to put forward the two options in February.

The Head of Leisure and Events added that various harness options had been explored, but limited options have been identified to allow Santa to both travel safely and engage with people when the vehicle is stationary, beyond the adaptation previously referenced in relation to one Council vehicle.

The Works and Environment Manager clarified that once the vehicle stops, the harness system must be changed to something like a fall arrest and therefore needs to operate in two different ways.

The Head of Leisure and Events stressed some of the further risks and concerns with the traditional tours on Christmas Eve, including entering tight cul-de-sacs with cars parked everywhere, children running up to the vehicle, the ever present risk of needing to cancel a route on Christmas Eve when volunteers did not turn up, and the key risk of late substitute volunteers going out untrained and briefed.

Councillor Michael Stead commented that only six councillors attended the Service Review Sub-Committee in February and agreed that only two options were possible. He felt the public would be expecting that the Council would seek to work out a way of getting Santa around all of the streets. He also questioned whether the Council could seek separate insurance cover for the event.

The Town Clerk explained that the Service Review Sub-Committee had considered a very detailed report, and regardless of the attendance numbers at the meeting, the resolutions made formed the basis of the discussions at this meeting. However, this first Santa Tours Sub-Committee Meeting is an opportunity for everyone to have their say and look at the potential of new ideas. The Town Clerk stressed that there is a danger in looking backwards and not forwards, and the need to make some clear decisions to allow planning for the 2026 event to take place. The aim must be to set a clear direction, whilst considering new ideas but without revisiting old ground.

Regarding the insurance, the Town Clerk advised that the Council has a long-term agreement with its insurance provider and that local council insurance is very specialised with a limited number of insurers.

Councillor Ken Robson commented that the Rotary Club has a low height sleigh / trailer with a seat fitted for their similar event and asked if the Council could consider a trailer for its vehicles. He suggested a '12 Nights of Christmas' event, alternating streets with earlier and later times each year.

The Head of Leisure and Events commented that whilst a '12 Nights of Christmas' would take up a lot of officer time, it was feasible, adding for clarification that the Rotary Club does not go into every street and have cancelled a previous event due to bad weather, which the Council has never done. She highlighted that the trailer suggestion creates its own problems for the driver as it can be very difficult to manoeuvre and that adding a seat to a vehicle would need to be referred to the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency as it is classed as a change to a vehicle.

She reiterated the concern that the public would likely be very resistant to moving the event away from Christmas Eve.

Councillor Tracey Williams asked the Works and Environment Manager if a harness would need to be stress tested.

The Works and Environment Manager confirmed that it would, as anything that holds a person needs to be tested regularly, so this would be part of the council inspections.

Councillor Tracey Williams asked how it would be adjusted for different body sizes. The Works and Environment Manager explained that each harness has a different tolerance so can be purchased in different sizes, so we would need to buy a variety.

A volunteer Santa of a number of years, confirmed the sense of panic on Christmas Eve in the Council Offices when a volunteer doesn't turn up. He commented that he would love to go back to the original format but understands the need to adapt the event. His wife has volunteered as a navigator and some streets are very difficult to get in and out of, with children running around excitedly in the dark.

He felt that taking the event away from Christmas Eve would not feel like the magical event previously delivered and the idea of repeatedly clipping and unclipping a harness does not feel right, plus he would be worried that he would forget to clip back in. He added that adapting and improving the 'meet and greet' format to smaller locations sounds ideal, and the enjoyment of the children seeing Santa turn up and having time to spend time with them was excellent. He advised that the drive around was not so good, and it was sad to not be able to stop.

The Head of Leisure and Events highlighted that several volunteers had also said it was much more rewarding spending time engaging with the children rather than just handing sweets out. The meet and greet format does rely on people being prepared to come to these areas, which is the biggest change to adapt to, but this could be developed and worked on.

A public member asked if it might be easier to try and focus on one option and review it, then the other option, instead of trying to do both at the same time. She also suggested that students who attend the local University Technical College (UTC) may be able to help design a vehicle adaptation.

The Works and Environment Manager explained that officers do have connections with the UTC and could explore this but was mindful that the students are young adults and not engineers or experts, but there is no harm in asking the question.

The Head of Leisure and Events raised concern regarding who responsibility would lie with if UTC built something that had any design flaws etc.

Councillor Tony Beddard commented that he felt his role was to try to represent what most residents want, and the current proposal of not having a touring element would be moving away from a longstanding tradition which seemed a drastic change.

He questioned whether residents' views were being properly represented and how the Council gets to a point of understanding of what the residents want. Councillors have received comments directly, volunteers have made their observations and there are two options currently up for consideration, but nothing is set in stone yet. He suggested that a deeper level of consultation is required including polls through local social media groups. He added that whilst lots of observations were being made, delivering these with actual proposals would be more useful.

The Head of Leisure and Events clarified that it was the intention to undertake consultation via surveys at the appropriate time, and that consideration was being given to making the survey anonymous so that people are not afraid to comment with their name displayed and risk being verbally attacked by others on social media.

A volunteer member with over ten years of service stated that he felt that the street tours need to go ahead but also suggested developing the community centre stops, as they were very good. The Rotary Club does not visit as many streets as the Council does. He highlighted that there were a few upset and angry people last Christmas Eve.

The Head of Leisure and Events felt that as years go by the public will understand the new event structure better. There was some confusion in 2025 across social media. She raised concerns with the touring element following the disappointment last year with Santa waving from the vehicle, adding that it is not easy to step away from.

Councillor Richard Hutchinson asked for clarification on the plans for the fixed location proposal, asking if some venues would be set up as a grotto, for example.

The Head of Leisure and Events suggested engaging with the volunteers and public to explore where they feel the fixed locations need adapting, then to create a strategy and develop the event. As previously suggested, community centres could be encouraged to apply for a small donation to decorate their building for the event. She added that some areas such as Byerley Park do not have any community buildings, so Santa would be visiting an outside location.

A public member stated that he agreed that moving the event from Christmas Eve would create uproar with residents. He advised that a separate insurance policy could be created but the issue is the event would be covered by both motor vehicle insurance as well as an events policy. The main risk is a road traffic accident, which would likely not be covered under the events policy. In his opinion, the event risk assessment will not receive insurance approval without considerable training and investment in vehicles. It is not ideal for an officer to be in a position where they are personally liable. He concluded by advising that his preference would be the meet and greet format, which is the most traditional and safest option..

Councillor John Woodward advised that he had previously designed and built the sleigh for vehicles for a local organisation. Santa and Mrs Claus were in a seat at the back with boards and seatbelts. When stationary, they could take off their seatbelts and easily fasten back in, so he queried why Santa could not be sat down on the Council vehicles.

The Head of Leisure and Events explained that to add a seat to a vehicle the Council would need to refer this to VOSA as this would be considered a new adaptation to a vehicle and she would be unsure about how to get an adaptation to the sub-frame, and how that would affect usage of the vehicle in future. The seat would also be very low, in a higher vehicle, so the public wouldn't be able to see Santa.

Councillor Tony Beddard suggested that if a public consultation is to be carried out, it may be best to make no decisions on options until the consultation results can be taken into consideration.

The Town Clerk indicated that ideally the consultation would include a preferred option but agreed that no final decisions should be taken pending the outcome of the public consultation.

Councillor Andy Hill commented that he has a lot of respect for the officers coming in on Christmas Eve and the stress involved when volunteers do not turn up. Taking the event away from Christmas Eve would be a negative for all concerned. The meet and greet format has advantages such as the opportunity to bring the community inside and eliminating issues with the weather. The event would need to be modified, adding more community areas to bring people together. He concluded by highlighting that on the night it is the volunteers and the officers who deliver this event.

Councillor Martin Ashcroft agreed to move the event away from Christmas Eve would not be acceptable, agreeing with Councillor Arun M Chandran's ideas regarding working with others in the community, such as the Rotary Club and enhancing the venues for the meet and greet format. It is unfortunate if there is a need to move away from the touring element, but this can be looked at again next year after spending this year focusing on the fixed location event. He suggested that schools could also be explored as venues, as well as the T.A. centre.

He also reiterated that without the volunteers and staff, the event would not go ahead and delivering what they did in 2025, in a very difficult situation with limited time to plan was excellent.

He asked if, when travelling from one venue to the next, it would be practical, if a large crowd of people were seen waiting for Santa to pull over and engage with those waiting, if deemed a low risk.

The Head of Leisure and Events advised she did contact Byerley Park school last year, but the Head Teacher advised that as they are a Durham County Council school this would need to be requested through DCC. However, given there is more time to explore this further this year, it may be possible. She recommended steering away from encouraging public to congregate away from the fixed locations and Santa stopping on the roadside as people would then expect this and in turn it confuses the structure and creates issues with the route times as well as the same safety issues.

Councillor Martin Ashcroft took on board the officer's comments and asked that any event advertising be clear that there would be no stopping along the way and that Santa would visit the fixed locations only.

Councillor Arun M Chandran referred back to this original proposal that the sub-committee agrees in principle that the fixed location 'meet and greet' format on Christmas Eve, with additional and improved locations, but no touring element, and visits to the local care homes should be the preferred option, and that this be left open to ideas for improvement and evolution.

He stressed the need for a core preferred option to allow the officers to begin to work on making enhancements and improvements,. He advised that his initial view was to spread the event over 4-5 days before Christmas, but if an event of quality can be created on Christmas Eve, to be improved year on year, then this should be explored.

He agreed that consultation with the public was important that summaries of the meetings of the Santa Tours Sub Committee should be advertised in the Newton News for transparency along with links to the reports and minutes. He highlighted that social media receives a relatively small number of people's opinions.

Councillor Arun Chandran proposed an addition to his original proposal that a public consultation is carried out on the preferred option, to include a survey, and that the public and volunteer representatives on the sub-committee remain in place for the rest of the year for continuity, regardless of any changes to the councillor members at the forthcoming Annual General Meeting. This was seconded by Councillor Andy Hill.

Councillor Kyle Robinson asked if the route sponsorship income is in addition to the Santa Tours Budget.

The Head of Leisure and Events clarified that there is a fixed expenditure budget of £3,300 for the Santa Tours and the Santa Letters. The sponsorship income is separate and goes to the events income budget.

Councillor Kyle Robinson asked if the public could be asked for donations to generate additional resources towards the costs of running the event in its traditional format.

Councillor Arun M Chandran highlighted that budget is not an issue and the idea to raise funds from the public to go back to the original tour is out of the question as the issues are due to health and safety risks and legislation.

Councillor Martin Ashcroft asked if the Community Support Fund could be used to boost the Grants and Donations Budget next year to allow for donations to be made to the fixed locations, if required.

The Town Clerk stated that as it stands, the Grants and Donations Budget is £5,000 per year which has to spread across the various requests that are received throughout the year. However, in light of the savings on the Revenue Budget this year, there may be an opportunity following the year-end to carry forward resources to boost the grants and donations budget for this purpose, which could be discussed with the Finance Manager.

Councillor Michael Stead advised that he felt there is a need to increase the budget for the Santa Tours, questioning whether the public are offered enough incentive to volunteer, suggesting appealing to the original volunteers and trying to attract more with vouchers of £250, for example.

In relation to the consultation, he advised that the paid version of Survey Monkey is not expensive, but limits responses to one IP address per person so it helps avoid people completing the survey repeatedly and suggested that a QR code could be included in any press releases. He suggested five weeks to two months to get the surveys completed so that we can say we have done everything we can.

Councillor Stead stated that he would not be willing to let the touring element go tonight, without further investigation, favouring an event with a smaller number of stopping areas but higher quality, with more funding, and a no stopping tour of the town. He requested that officers investigate how long it would take Santa to tour the streets and how many vehicles would be needed for the tour element with no stops and at a lower speed. He concluded by saying that officers did a fantastic job during a difficult situation last year, but the Council had made a promise to the public that it would try to deliver what the public asked for, which is something as close to the traditional touring format as possible.

Councillor Stead proposed an amendment that the Council make further investigations to look at reinstating a tour of the streets, with no stopping but at a lower speed, in addition to a smaller number of high-quality fixed stops, and that the Council review the Santa Tours Budget during the next budget setting process.

Councillor Tony Beddard asked if Councillor Stead was making a new proposal or if it was to amend what had already been proposed by Councillor Chandran.

Councillor Stead confirmed it was a slight amendment, in addition to what Councillor Chandran had proposed, as he felt he needed more information on the touring element before ruling it out.

Councillor Tony Beddard seconded this amendment.

The Town Clerk reiterated that the service review report provided in February of this year and the reports at the end of last year had considered in detail the touring element and what was possible and in his opinion had already addressed a lot of what Councillor Stead was proposing. There are a multitude of risks and logistical challenges to overcome, and he was not convinced that a budget increase could address all of these. He drew attention to the Sildon Town Council Santa Tours, which has been changed and scaled back for the same reasons. This too endured a public backlash initially but as time has passed, the public have accepted the changes.

The Town Clerk advised that officers can make further investigations into the touring element including how long it would take Santa to tour the streets and how many vehicles would be needed for the tour element with no stops and at a lower speed but it did feel like going back over issues already debated at length previously.

The Head of Leisure and Events raised concern with the suggested incentive of £250 per volunteer, which would be a considerable cost increase but more importantly of detriment to the essence of the event. She felt that if people are volunteering for the money they would be less likely to have any real care for the delivery of such a special event. She also questioned what legalities or tax issues may apply, so she would need to liaise with the Finance Manager. Currently, volunteers are given a £20 voucher as a small token of appreciation, and many volunteers ask officers to donate these to the local food bank.

Councillor Michael Stead clarified that he had suggested £250 as an example but really meant for officers to explore ways of making volunteering slightly more appealing.

The Head of Leisure and Events asked for clarification as to whether the request for further information on a non-stop tour was with Santa in the cab or on the back.

Councillor Michael Stead confirmed he would like data for both speeds.

In light of the time that had elapsed, the Chairman requested that the meeting be adjourned at 8.55pm. The meeting reconvened at 9.05pm.

Councillors Richard Hutchinson, George Gray and Ken Robson left the meeting at this point.

Councillor Arun M Chandran stated that he could not agree with Councillor Michael Stead's amendment based on going back to the original tour, adding that everyone present has the right to propose ideas to the officers, and that while all councillors wanted what the public wanted, but it could not be done. More locations can be added to the meet and greet format in future years and there could be one in virtually every area. The officers have laid out all the facts in the last three meetings, and it is all within the reports. The Council is trying to go back as much as possible to the way things were, but things must be adapted.

A public member asked if whilst travelling from one fixed venue to another, it would be possible to have Santa on the back of the vehicle.

The Head of Leisure and Events clarified that as only council vehicles were being used and only one had the option to be adapted for a frame and harness as part of the structure, this would not be feasible for a full tour of the town.

Councillor Jaci Beddard advised that she agreed with the amendment as the public had been promised the Council would look at all options fully. She stressed that the event needs to be held on Christmas Eve and that the tour didn't work well last year because Santa was in the cab, but if he was on the back and didn't stop but drove slowly, the public would be happier.

A public member agreed that having a back-up option that is viable would be best. There is no public interaction touring without stops and incorporating stops and touring would ensure that the event can be fully disability inclusive. He also suggested that clear communication with the public is more important than consultation.

He also asked if the high risks identified in the event risk assessment were before mitigation, or the residual risks, offering to seek an opinion on the risk assessment with two insurance companies he uses.

The Head of Leisure and Events confirmed that the high risks are residual risks.

The Town Clerk provided a summary of the amendment and the original proposal for the benefit of members ahead of a vote.

The Head of Leisure and Events made a closing statement to stress that officers are trying to find viable and safe solutions, without disappointing anyone on Christmas Eve, and that the meet and greet format provides an opportunity to adapt and grow the event, no matter how big the town gets. The risks of a route needing to be cancelled under the traditional touring format had been growing year after year and the disappointment would be phenomenal for children in the town if this happened. As a small council there are limited resources and capacity, officers are trying to be realistic about what can be safely achieved. She advised that she has delivered the Council's Santa Tours event for around 20 years, and this has included many years of worrying about the safety of volunteers and members of the public. She reiterated that it was not easy to raise the concerns with the Council and seek to change the event, but that changes must be made to mitigate the risks and logistical challenges.

Councillor Kyle Robinson asked if Santa could stop on the accessible streets.

The Head of Leisure and Events explained that this would put all the route timings off, which was part of the problem of keeping to the route timings and highlighted the abuse suffered by officers and volunteers for routes being late, whilst giving up their time on Christmas Eve.

Councillor Michael Stead asked for a point of clarification whether the content of the survey was to be agreed at this meeting.

The Town Clerk suggested not, as there was not yet a preferred option to consult on, if the amendment was agreed, and until the Council has firm idea of what the 2026 event will look like, the consultation should be delayed for now.

Councillor Arun M Chandran raised a point of order that Councillor Michael Stead did not have the right of reply and proposed that the amendment be put to the vote.

The Town Clerk explained that Councillor Stead was raising a point of clarification.

A vote was held on Councillor Michael Stead's amendment with the following result:

For: 11
Against: 2

The amendment was agreed and became the substantive motion.

A further vote was held on the substantive motion with the following results:

For: 13
Against: 0

The substantive motion was therefore agreed.

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) The report and appendices be received.
- ii) The fixed location 'meet and greet' format on Christmas Eve, with additional and improved locations should be the preferred option, and this be left open to ideas for improvement and evolution.
- iii) That the care home visits on Christmas Eve morning will go ahead each year and the smaller care homes are to be included.
- iv) Officers liaise with the Rotary Club to explore opportunities for working with them on a touring element.
- v) Officers investigate further options for reinstating a tour of the streets, with no stopping but at a lower speed, in addition to a smaller number of high-quality fixed stops.
- vi) Officers bring information back to the next meeting on how long it would take Santa to tour the streets and how many vehicles would be needed for a tour with no stops and route times.
- vii) The Council reviews the Santa Tours Budget during the next budget setting process.
- viii) A public consultation is carried out on the preferred option, following the next meeting, to include a survey, and informing the public that the touring element is being explored and that summaries of the meetings of the Santa Tours Sub Committee should be publicised for transparency along with links to the reports and minutes
- ix) The public and volunteer representatives on the Santa Tours Sub-Committee remain in place for the rest of the year for continuity, regardless of any changes to the councillor members at the forthcoming Annual General Meeting.

CHAIRMAN