

2 February, 2023

Evaluation of Walsall Council Bonfire and Firework Events 2022

Ward(s): All

Portfolios: Councillor Murphy – Clean and Green
Councillor Flint – Health & Wellbeing

1. Aim

- 1.1. To provide the residents of Walsall with safely organised bonfire night events that are enjoyable, affordable, and as sustainable as possible, whilst meeting the expectation of what a traditional bonfire night celebration should be.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. Members review the evaluation and results from the consultation and provide comment to officers planning future events.

3. Report detail – know

- 3.1. For at least 15 years, Walsall Council has operated bonfire and firework displays across the borough. This was extended to include Walsall Arboretum after the Walsall Illuminations ceased in 2011/12. Events in Willenhall, Holland Park and Bloxwich had historically had a far more local focus than the Walsall Arboretum event, which for an additional charge provided entertainment and attracted attendance from across the West Midlands.
- 3.2. In 2019, although the events generally received good feedback, due to very poor weather leading up to and on the night of the events and the considerable increase in price, the Council made a significant loss.
- 3.3. Initially Cabinet had suggested an additional event be held to celebrate Diwali, however, upon closer scrutiny, it was determined that it was very unlikely that number would be achieved for the event to break even. Furthermore, it would be difficult to market this new event, which is very close to, and would be similar to the bonfire events. As people struggle with the cost-of-living crisis, it was felt that it was not a good time to start a new event, when the Council has not made a profit in the past from these large-scale events.
- 3.4. Due to the low site limit at Holland Park and the particularly low numbers in 2019, Cabinet decided to only operate events at the other three sites. Furthermore, a decision was taken to remove the entertainment element at Walsall Arboretum

and focus on promoting three similar traditional bonfire and firework events. All three events were to take place consecutively from Friday 4 until Sunday 6 November. A full evaluation of the 2022 events is provided at **Appendix A**.

- 3.5. Due to the price increase in 2019 and the cost-of-living crisis, the decision was taken to provide early bird tickets at 2019 prices, with only a slight increase after this date. The price charged is comparable to events across the Black Country, however, some of the other Council events offered significantly more entertainment for the money.

Table 1 - Pricing of Bonfires Events across Walsall and Wider Birmingham and Black Country

Area	Location	Prices (£)			
		Child	Adult	Family	Other
Walsall Based Events					
Borough wide Council Events	1. KGV (Bloxwich) 2. Arboretum 3. Willenhall Memorial Park *lower price = online early bird	5* / 5.50 (U16)	7.50* / 8	18* 20	Under 3's free
Aldridge	Aldridge Cricket Club	5 (U12)	8	N/A	Under 5's free
Park Hall	Handsworth Rugby Club (Scouts annual bonfire)	N/A	6.50 / 8 on gate	N/A	Under 3's free
Birmingham and Black Country Based Events					
Wolverhampton	Wolverhampton Racecourse (17,000)	5	7	N/A	Under 3's free
Dudley	Himley Hall (Parking £8)	6 (U16)	11	25	Senior 60+, Under 5's free, +VIP and Premium tickets Free shuttle bus
Sandwell	Dartmouth Park, West Bromwich Events 4 and 5 November	3	5 (U18)	12	Under 2's Free
Birmingham	Edgbaston Cricket Ground	7 (U16)	14	36	Premium seating/ tickets available

- 3.6. Of the three events, the preferred venue continues to be Walsall Arboretum. The event usually takes place on the Saturday closest to bonfire night, and this year bonfire night fell on the Saturday and in turn this event sold out. The Sunday event at Willenhall Memorial Park also sold out, but the site capacity at this venue of just 3,500 means that this still did not cover costs. The Friday evening event at King George V Playing Fields achieved a disappointing 46% turnout, however, it did still cover its costs due to the significantly greater site capacity of 10,000.
- 3.7. There were concerns on the evening at the Arboretum as, although the site capacity is 11,000, the lack of entertainment on the main field meant there was nothing to draw the crowd towards the bonfire. This caused the crowd to swell around the food stalls and fairground. Two food providers didn't turn up on the evening and this caused significant delays with people obtaining food and although the event took place with no health and safety incident, upon review it has been determined that the site capacity needs to be significantly reduced if there is no draw on to the events field.
- 3.8. A consultation exercise was carried out during and after the events, to understand people's views on the events. The new consultation platform 'Common Place' was used. The main reason for people attending the events are that they are close to home, offer good value for money and are family friendly.
- 3.9. In response to questions relating to the community and environmental impacts of the events, it was clear that, although 46% of respondents like the idea of a quiet display 54%, do not state enthusiasm to attend such events. When asking about the environmental impact, the vast majority are indifferent, with only 1 in 10 holding strong concerns. This was again emphasised with the response to whether it was important for there to be a bonfire at the event with 51% expecting to see on and only 17% feeling that it is not important.
- 3.10. Of those attending the events, as expected, KGV had very positive feedback, but both the Arboretum and Willenhall had an even split between positive and negative responses. Both of these events operated at maximum capacity. At Walsall Arboretum the crowd problems, lack of food providers and not enough fairground rides or toilets were the main issues, which the staff also picked up in the debrief session.

4. Financial information

- 4.1. Walsall Council bonfire and firework events have historically run at a loss to the council. This year a small profit was made, however, this does not take in to account the full staffing and event preparation costs. The site attendance limits make it difficult for a profit to be made, however, due to improved weather conditions and, probably the fact that there have been no events for two years due to the Covid pandemic people came out in force with many events taking place across the region on bonfire night selling out.

Table 2: Known attendances and income for Walsall Bonfire and Firework Events 2016 – 2022 (no events in 2020 or 2021 due to Covid).

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2022
Holland Park - Brownhills	(12/Nov) 2,598	(2/Nov) 2,312	(27/Oct) 1,350 (est)	(26/Oct) 493	N/A
Willenhall Memorial Park	(29/Oct) 2,129	(4/Nov) 4,618	(1/Nov) 3,000 (est)	(1/Nov) 1,489	(6/Nov) 3,500 (max)
Walsall Arboretum	(17/Oct) 8,000 (est)	(5/Nov) 10,000 (est)	(3/Nov) 10,000 (est)	(2/Nov) 4,066	(5/Nov) 11,000 (max)
King George V (KGV) Playing Fields Bloxwich	(22/Oct) 2,630	(28/Oct) 3,910	(5/Nov) 8,000 (est)	(5/Nov) 4,536	(4/Nov) 4,639
TOTAL COSTS	£not available	£80,155	£114,210	£118,637	£84,376
TOTAL INCOME	£not available	£57,000	£86,000	£64,942	£97,751
NET	£not available	-£22,000*	-£28,000*	-£53,465*	13,375**

* Net losses were balanced from corporate reserves

** This figure does not include overtime and TOIL of Healthy Spaces Team staff.

NB: As far as possible the income figures are comparable – given different models of delivery and different elements offered each year.

4.2. The bonfire and firework events have an income target of £10,000. The net income achieved in 2022 of £13,375 does exceed this target, however, to be able to deliver the events on consecutive days over the weekend, members of the Healthy Spaces Team received overtime worth a combined sum of £6,000 and the managers received time of in lieu of 207 hours. It should also be noted that these costs only include the time associated with the actual delivery and not that taken up with planning.

5. Reducing Inequalities

5.1. The bonfire and fireworks events are open to all and, as the events are aimed at children, there are reduced ticket prices for families and under three's enter for free.

5.2. The events were provided in three locations across the borough to reduce travelling. Of those that did respond to the consultation, the average distance people travelled to attend was 4-5 miles, with the maximum for Bloxwich being around 9 and 12 for the Arboretum.

6. Decide

- 6.1. Although the events this year made a small profit, there were some problems with the operation of this year's events. The logistics of putting three events on one after the other over consecutive evenings was particularly difficult for the small team that delivers the events. Using the same staff does result in efficiencies however, the team were exhausted with setting up, delivery and take down of the events.
- 6.2. Members should consider whether it is viable to continue with the Willenhall event as the site limit of 3500 people means that this site cannot make a profit (approximate £6K loss at full capacity).
- 6.3. If Walsall continues to provide traditional events, with no additional entertainment at Walsall Arboretum, the site limit for this site needs to be significantly reduced which will impact the ability to make an overall profit (particularly if Willenhall continues).
- 6.4. Looking forward to 2023, members need to decide what form the events should take and whether they should continue to operate at the current three locations.

7. Respond

- 7.1. Feedback on the bonfire and fireworks 2022 events will be used to inform the development and delivery of future events.

8. Review

- 8.1. The Healthy Spaces Team undertakes evaluations and reviews of its activities and events as part of its standard performance monitoring systems.

Background papers

Appendix A – Evaluation of Walsall Council Bonfire and Firework Events 2022

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