

Evaluation of Walsall Council Bonfire and Firework Events 2022

Healthy Spaces Team



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1.0 Purpose and Overview of Report

The purpose of the report is to provide an evaluation of the Walsall Council Bonfire and Firework Events 2022. This will help to inform the future development of this, and other events managed and delivered by Walsall Council. The report will provide a summary of the key aspects (the general approach including pricing and ticketing, staffing, entertainment and catering, sales, and attendance) of managing and delivering the bonfire and firework events and as well as feedback from a survey completed by a sample of attendees.

1.1 Insight

The information that informs this evaluation has been collated from multiple sources including staff feedback, bookings system and business supporting the event.

1.2 The Bonfire and Fireworks Events' Survey

The Council has recently secured Proptech funding from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to trial a new consultation platform called 'Commonplace'. A bonfire consultation was created to get feedback from attendees to the three events. It was promoted on all Council social media platforms, and, unlike the 2019 survey, it gave people who chose not to attend the opportunity to respond.

The survey asked a range of questions regarding the event including an overall rating of whether they enjoyed it and whether they offered good value for money, how they found out abouts it, how they travelled, and what they thought about the offer. This was to provide insight into attendees' views.

A total of 168 responses were received which is less than 1% of those who attended. The low response rate is typical of an online survey of this nature, however, the general feedback received is in line with what the staff experienced on the evenings. Respondents generally described themselves as female (88%), with an age skew (67% of respondents) of around 25-44 years of age.

Each section of the report below includes relevant data from the survey, with any additional information covered in Section 7. The full survey report is provided at **Appendix 1**.

2.0 Background

2.1 History

For at least 15 years, Walsall Council has operated bonfire and firework displays in different places across the borough. This was extended to include the Arboretum after the Walsall Illuminations ceased in 2011/12. Events in Willenhall, Holland Park and Bloxwich had historically been far more locally focus compared to the larger Arboretum event that attracts attendees from across the West Midlands.

Over the same period, fireworks have become more powerful and firework prices in the UK have risen significantly, costing £10,000 for a single event display in 2022. This reflects increased regulation on the storage and use of high-powered fireworks in crowded places. Since 2014, far more stringent health and safety legislation relating to explosives and public display pyrotechnics has added to the need for increasing precautions on public safety. These were all considered in the 2022 events adding to the complexities and costs of putting on a bonfire and firework display but ultimately providing a safer and more enjoyable experience for members of the public. Over the past five years of operation (not including 2020 and 2021 where there were no displays due to Covid restrictions), the council has run these events at a

loss. Due to several factors, but most notably very poor weather conditions, the loss in 2019 was over £50,000. Cabinet has also agreed a Commercial and Income Policy which looks to avoid such losses.

Further to the significant financial loss in 2019, Members took the decision to not operate the Holland Park event (which had less than 500 attendees in 2019), remove the additional cost associated with the entertainment and radio support at the Arboretum and provide three similar traditional events at the remaining sites. It was also acknowledged that people really wanted to attend on bonfire night (not a week before or after the event). Members took the decision to hold the three events on the consecutive nights of the 4 – 6 Novembers, with KGV being held on Friday 4/11, Walsall Arboretum being held bonfire night itself and Willenhall Memorial Park being held on Sunday 6/11.

2.2 Healthy Spaces Team

From 1st August 2019, Walsall Council further developed the way in which services work to improve healthy living, safe green spaces, and active lifestyles across the borough. To achieve this as well as a council saving target of £500,000, a new Healthy Spaces Team was formed under Public Health through merging the previous Sport and Leisure Development and Environmental Improvement Team. As one of the early priorities, the Healthy Spaces Team picked up the planning for Walsall bonfire and fireworks events. Initial planning discussions took place in August, however, the key work started after the summer holidays due to the team being focussed on the delivery of the holiday and food sessions.

The team is focussed on increasing the usage of our green spaces to encourage communities of all ages to take part in activities beneficial to health and wellbeing. The team's flexible borough-wide structure enables the Council to maximise opportunities for new and existing voluntary groups to grow the number and quality of activities our communities can get involved in. From allotments and community gardens to public events and healthy schools, the Healthy Spaces Team has a range of functions it continues to develop.

2.0 Approach to Management of Bonfire and Firework Events 2022

2.1 Shared Decision Making

A proposal was shared with Cabinet members in March 2022 to request guidance on how many bonfire and firework events were required for 2022. This paper, together with other supporting documents immediately following it, set out the alternative options on price of tickets and numbers of events.

The decision was taken to provide three events, plus a further event for Diwali on Monday 24 October. Following significant changes in the economic situation, the deepening cost of living crisis and numerous concerns relating to marketing and communications, developing a new event when the bonfire events themselves struggle to make a profit, the decision was taken to not continue with the Diwali event.

As there had been a significant price increase in 2019, the decision was taken by Cabinet to maintain prices at the 2019 level and offer cheaper 'early bird' tickets to encourage earlier take up. Although there was a slight uptake, it was not significant, and most people still waited to purchase tickets until the last 24 – 48 hours.

2.2 Summary of feedback from survey (pricing)

Overall, the Walsall events rated as middling in terms of value for money (3 on a scale of 1 – 5), which presumably means that we have the pricing about right.

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

Area	Location	Prices (£)			
		Child	Adult	Family	Other
Walsall Based Events					
Boroughwide 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	7 (U16)	14	36	Premium seating/ tickets available at higher cost

2.3 Break-Even Position

The break-even position was identified as being in the region of 80% ticket sales (19,600) across the three events.

2.4 Ticketing

Online ticket sales had been successful during the 2019 events. Over the next two years, as Covid hit, cash transactions have been discouraged to prevent the spread of disease and the public is now fully accustomed to online payment systems. Ticket sales were only promoted

through this online method. To ensure that people who did wish to pay by cash could, tickets were also offered through the four Active Living Leisure Centres.

At the first event, gate supervisors were issued with cards with QR codes taking people to the ticket source website enabling them to purchase tickets whilst standing in the queue. At one gate there was a member of staff with a laptop to assist with online payments if required, however this was not used, and the staff member was redeployed to assist with scanning people into the venue.

Almost all tickets were sold online, with just over £80 worth being sold through the leisure facilities and due to the second two events being sold out, the QR codes were only used at the first Kings George V event.

Due to connection problems being experienced with the relatively new 'Seaty' platform in 2019, officers reviewed the main systems available, and determined that Ticket Source offered the best solution for the public and for the event staff on the evening for processing payments. Some initial problems were experienced with Ticket Source not responding in a timely manner to email, however, upon investigation, this was due to the Council's security system blocking them. Once this was resolved, there were no further problems with the system. On the evenings staff who used Council mobile phones for scanning did experience problems with the cameras not focussing on the QR code and connection problems resulting in almost all staff opting to download the app and use their personal mobiles.

3.0 Marketing and Communications

Similar to 2019, the 2022 events had a comprehensive and more digital approach than any previous bonfire events. See **Appendix 2** for a copy of the marketing plan. A sum of £766 was incurred through social media promotion which produced the most interaction and prompts to purchase tickets.

Event awareness was also ensured through other promotional materials (press releases, banners, and posters) that were displayed at each venue and other strategic parks. Signage / posters were shown to have an effect in some areas, but as there was less response to those placed in schools and other places of education in 2019, the decision was taken to not repeat at these sites in 2022.

Summary of Survey (Marketing)

- When asked about how people heard about the events, 71% had found out via social media. Relatives, friends, and neighbours was the second highest category, but this also may have been via social media channels.

4.0 Staffing and Security

A full staff plan for each event was created. Following problems being experienced in 2019, the decision was taken to use Healthy Spaces Team staff, invite the casual staff who had worked over the summer holidays on the Council splash pads and if there were any other vacancies, these would be picked up by additional security staff.

The Healthy Spaces Team all offered to work substantial additional hours to make the events a success on the three consecutive nights, with these staff and all the splash pad staff coming forward, there were only a few vacancies picked up by additional security staff.

To enable the events to take place over the three days consecutively, deliveries were taking place at the same time as set ups and take downs. This involved significant coordination by the team to ensure that deliveries could take place and events were set up on time. Due to the

events running on consecutive nights, in the middle, one event was still be closed off, whilst one was being set up for that evening and the third had the bonfire being built. The fact that most of the staff worked each event enabled people to quickly learn what was involved with setting up, events roles on the night and packing down.

5.0 Entertainment and Catering

5.1 Concessions and Fun Fairs

Due to the Showman's Guild guidelines, the decision was taken to message the known providers who operate in Walsall and ask them to submit offers for delivery at the 2022 bonfire events. The value of income was comparable to 2019, when a full tendering process was undertaken.

With the concessions, the opportunity to provide food / drinks at the 2022 events was promoted on the Nationwide Caterers Association website, which is a membership association founded and created for independent caterers. The income and number of concessions on offer were comparable to 2019, however, we were let down by two providers at Walsall Arboretum which did cause significant problems on the evening. The sell-out event at the Arboretum did not have enough food or drink on offer for the number of people present and this was one of the significant complaints on the evening and identified through the consultation.

6.0 Sales and Attendance

The history of pricing for borough-wide bonfire and firework events is detailed in Table 2. It shows that Walsall Council has made a loss in most, if not all years of operation, as costs have grown but ticket prices and regular income have not. In 2019, a significant price increase was introduced, and that was compounded with very poor weather forecast for the three weeks leading up to and on the evening of the events resulting in a very poor overall turnout of 40%. This resulted in a significant financial loss. Furthermore, the events were split over three weeks with the earliest event taking place before Halloween.

Cabinet took the decision to only operate at three sites in 2022, removing the smallest site at Holland Park. It was determined that the three remaining events should take place consecutively from Friday 4 until Sunday 6. Furthermore, the financial risk was reduced by not providing additional entertainment at the Arboretum and the ticket price for the venue was brought in line making promotion of the traditional offer easier.

An 'early bird' ticket price offer was provided online and although there was some take up on this, most sales still took place in the last few days leading up to the events, when people could have more certainty over the weather conditions.

Two of the events, the Arboretum, which took place on Bonfire Night, and the event at Willenhall Memorial Park, which was the day after, both sold out. It should be noted, however, that the site capacity is significantly lower at Willenhall meaning that even at full capacity the event cannot make a profit. KGV only achieved 46% turnout, however, this was enough to cover the costs of staging the event at this venue.

Table 2. Known attendances, and income for Walsall Bonfire and Firework events 2016 to 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	(6/11) 3,500 (max)
Walsall Arboretum	(17/Oct) 8,000 (est)	(5/Nov) 10,000 (est)	(3/Nov) 10,000 (est)	(2/Nov) 4,066	(5/11) 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	(4/11) 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 members.

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

6.1 Sales Trends

Data showed that sales climbed approximately 10 days before each event in response to good digital marketing. The clearest indication, however, are the marked peaks of activity on the days of the event themselves, which tells us people were generally making decisions within 24 - 48 hours of each bonfire about whether to attend.

Ticket Sales Graphs



6.2 Weather Impact

Table 4. Weather forecast and actual weather conditions for each event

Date	Location	Weather
Friday 4 November 2019	Bloxwich	Week forecast leading up to the event: Dry. On the day: Evening was dry
Saturday 5 November 2019	Walsall	Week forecast leading up to the event: Mixed, potentially some rain On the day: Evening was dry
Sunday 6 November 2019	Willenhall	Week forecast leading up to the event: Mixed, potentially some rain On the day: Evening was dry

Overall, the weather forecast over the bonfire weekend was much more favourable that it was in 2019, when the Council made significant losses. In the three weeks before, generally it was showing dry, with possible showers for the Saturday and Sunday. Although there were showers during the day, whilst the team was setting up and taking down, on the evening it was dry with little wind for all the events.

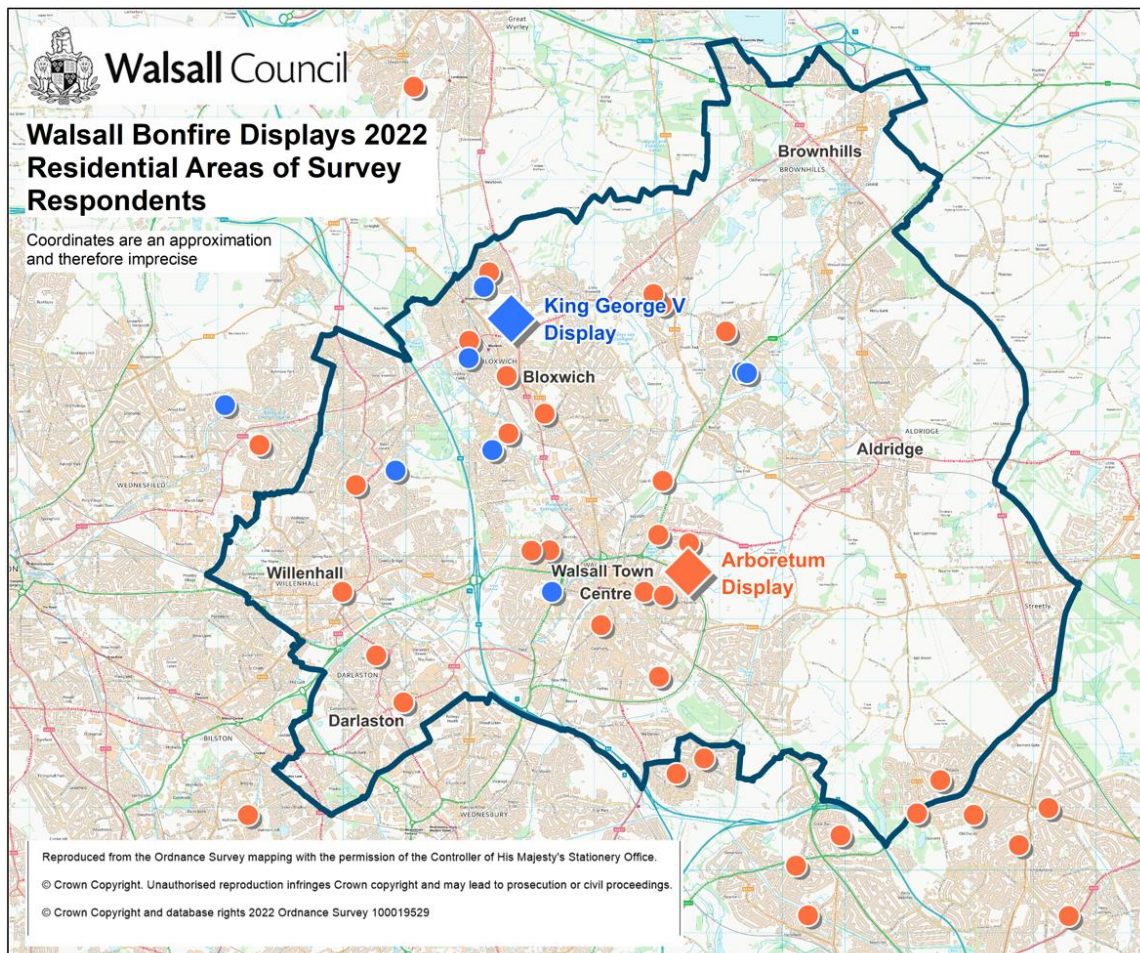
6.3 Attendance spread

Postcodes data was problematic as many respondents did not provide it; therefore, the locations are a fraction of a small subset (survey respondents). Of those that responded, none came from the east of the borough.

However, it does indicate the wider reach / catchment area of the Arboretum event – particularly respondents from North Birmingham (Great Barr, Kingstanding, Old Oscott and Hamstead)

Postcodes displayed here are approximated locations, and therefore not precise

Fig 1: Spread of survey respondents



Source: Attendee Survey 2022, mapped by Public Health Intelligence Team

Summary of Survey (Travel):

- Across the three events, 68% of people travelled by car which is up from 53% in 2019, with only 22% walking, down from 33%. There was a significant difference between sites, with KGV and Willenhall have a higher proportion of people walking (33% and 50% respectively).

7.0 Review and Evaluation

Health Spaces Team Debrief - Following the events, the Healthy Spaces Team held a debriefing session to identify what had gone well and what could be improved.

Topics covered include:

Marketing and Promotion - where the conclusion was that we needed to start slightly earlier and should have included emails for the schools to send out.

Tickets – need to review the pricing structure (including Under 3's being free, car parking charge and the value of the family ticket). There is also a need to emphasise that people who buy group tickets do need to turn up together to enter the venue.

Healthy and Safety- need to review the offer alongside the site limit for the Arboretum as at full capacity the event was overcrowded by the food and fair ground. Furthermore, there were problems with exiting the car park and support may be needed from the Police to move people on and prevent them blocking the road.

Staffing – went really well, however, the team was exhausted from doing three consecutive events and would not wish to repeat this.

The main concerns raised by the staff were those relating to the problems at the Arboretum.

Post Events Survey - A total of 142 people completed the online survey (full report available at **Appendix 1**). The opportunity was taken to see what people thought about providing quieter displays and although 46% would prefer them, the majority 54% do not state any enthusiasm for attending. With concerns about climate change growing, people were also asked if they were concerned about the environmental impact of the events, and the vast majority were indifferent, with only 1 in 10 holding any strong concerns and when asked whether people thought the bonfire was still needed, half of respondents (51%) said they expected there to be one, with only 17% feeling that it is no longer important.

When asking about the events themselves, the most well received event was that at King George V with 92.9 feeling positive or greater and 64% being very positive. Willenhall had a 50% positive response rate; however, the response rate was very low (just 8 people).

The Arboretum had a very mixed reception with 33% being very negative and 32% broadly positive. When looking in more detail, overcrowding was a key issue which meant that queues were too long for food and rides.

Overall (61%), people felt that the Council should organise bonfire and firework displays in the future.

8.0 Summary

Overall, the events were well run, were of good quality, were safe and offered value money. There were issues raised at the Arboretum that will need to be addressed in future years, most notably reducing the site limit, and increasing the food offer.

Staffing of the events worked particularly well, with the Healthy Spaces Team itself staffing all events along with casual staff recruited through Starting Point. The team quickly got to grips with the requirements for setting up, what needed to be done on the evening and taking down the events.

All income from the events was properly routed to Council accounts in good time. The online Ticket Source system worked well and it is clear that the public are now well versed in purchasing online, resulting in there being no need to provide cash sales in future.

Although there was significant competition from events around the region, the fact that bonfire night fell on the Saturday and that there had been very few events for the last two years due to Covid, meant that the public were out in force and almost all Saturday events were sold out. The good weather on the evenings also helped to ensure a good turn out and Walsall Council made a small profit for the first time.

Appendix 1: Bonfire and Firework 2022 Analysis

Appendix 2: Communications Summary of Communications Delivery for Bonfires Events 2022

Communication	Channel of distribution	Notes
Digital		
Website	Walsall Council website.	Updated regularly with link to purchase tickets.
Social media posts and tweets	Regular Facebook posts via Walsall Healthy Spaces Facebook and Walsall Arboretum. Shared from major Walsall Council Facebook accounts.	Boosted posts on Facebook helped to increase the reach of the messages. A total of £766 was spent on boosted posts throughout the promotion of the events.
Printed leaflets & posters		
A4 Posters	Leisure facility specific – identifying tickets available on site	8 produced
Media release		
Media release X2	Released via Council Comms and 'Newsroom' – pushed out to local press, radio, TV etc	The first media release was issued to announce dates, times & locations of events.
Radio		
None		
Outdoor promotion		
Vinyl Banners	Positioned outside parks / around park's hosting events.	14 banners created for the four events.
Correx Board A2 Posters	Posters around the parks on notice boards/ visitors centre etc	44 A2 correx boards produced for display in parks and on gates etc.
Internal Communications		
Internal Communications	Weekly Bulletin – x2 Arboretum promotion screens Newsroom	
Additional items		
QR code cards linking to TicketSource Ltd	To give to people in the queue who haven't purchased tickets.	Given out by gate supervisors on the night of each event (not needed in the end at Arboretum or Willenhall as both sold out)