

Community Services Committee

Title:	Christmas in Thame – Feedback 2024
Date:	4 February 2025
Contact Officer:	Cassie Pinnells, Community Services Manager

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide feedback on the Christmas events and activities held in 2024.
2. To agree the shape and date of the 2025 Christmas event.

Background

1. The Christmas lights switch on launched the season's itinerary of events on Friday 29 November. The event was well supported by local organisations and businesses. The timetable up to Christmas included a Charities Fair, Santa's Grotto, and a variety of competitions and fun activities. There was a Reindeer Trail to find Santa's nine missing reindeer, a selfie station permanently located outside the Town Hall with the Nutcrackers, a window display competition for residents and businesses, and children were invited to post their Letters to Santa. Other festive activities that we were made aware of in time for publication, such as concerts & church services, were also highlighted in the Christmas booklet.

Feedback and Review

2. **Christmas Sponsorship & Advertising Brochure:** In 2024, a sponsorship and advertising brochure was created to promote the sponsorship and advertising packages available to businesses across Christmas. Packages were created for the Headline Sponsor, Christmas Tree, Selfie-Station, Santa's Grotto, Online Advent, Reindeer Trail, Letters to Santa, Window Displays, and the Switch-On Rides. All packages bar the Online Advent were sold (BP Collins wanted the advent, but it would have posed a solicitor clash with Lightfoots, so they opted for the Window Displays and an ad in the brochure instead). Around 5 or 6 businesses also requested sponsorship of the tree. This was offered to ASM Auto Recycling due to their past involvement (which they accepted).

Each sponsorship package offered a different level of exposure for businesses – from inclusion on the promotional signage and advertising/dedicated articles in the Christmas guide to inclusion on the Christmas in Thame web page and social media branding. Sponsorship packages ranged from £200 - £2,000.

Advertising opportunities were also made available for inclusion in the Christmas Guide. Prices ranged from £100 for a ¼ page advertisement to £400 for a full page.

Income generated from sponsorships and advertising totalled £9,075.

3. **Christmas Guide:** The 2024 guide was published and distributed in November to all households in Thame. It featured a message from the Mayor, switch-on event details, sponsored activities throughout December, a Christmas calendar, word search, and a contact page with phone numbers for support services/waste collection etc. Feedback for the Guide

(from readers and advertisers) was positive with general comments from residents finding it helpful to see all that was happening in one place.

4. **Light Switch On event:** 2024 saw a revised layout for the switch-on event with the stage located in front of Mountain Warehouse. The layout proved popular with visitors who were able to see what was happening on stage. It also gave people a clear view of the tree. By having separate zones for the children's rides, entertainment, food stalls, and charity/gift stalls, people were better able to move between locations which helped create a greater sense of community on the night. Income generated from the food and gift stallholders totalled £653.

This year's event featured entertainment from hosts Paddy & Anthony, the Thame Players, Thame Concert Band, and singer Philippa Mummery. Thame Round Table also ensured Santa and his elves made an appearance. There were eight StrEat Meet food stalls set-up around the Town Hall, including a bar serving festive drinks, beer, wine and soft drinks, and twelve stalls along the High Street. At the far end of the car park, two children's rides – a chair ride and Helter Skelter were offered to event-goers free of charge. The rides were incredibly popular with long lines for both from the moment they opened until closing.

Formal feedback from the night suggests people especially enjoyed the community spirit and "fun vibe" of the evening. They also noted that the crowd felt bigger than the previous year's and that the event timetable, from 5-7pm (switch-on at 6.30pm followed by a sing-a-long) was just right. The entertainment was commended, and people particularly enjoyed the sing-a-long with Philippa Mummery.

The person chosen to turn on the lights was local market man and English veteran, Chris Hurdman. His selection proved incredibly popular with the Facebook announcement alone attracting over 220 reactions and 42 comments.

5. **Stage:** A solar-powered drive-in stage with self-contained acoustics was used for the 2024 event. The Council was given an upgrade on account of the stage van we ordered being out of action. The stage allowed more visibility for the crowd and provided a good platform for the presenters and entertainers. The upgrade also gave us access to a led screen which we were able to utilise for Christmas and sponsorship messaging. The stage gave a professional feel to the event, although many people commented post event that they could not hear very well and would have liked the concert band to be mic'd.
6. **Tree:** On the back of past negative feedback regarding the wrap-around tree signage, the sponsor ASM Auto Recycling was persuaded to try something different in 2024. A set designer from Thame Players was invited to make two Christmas-themed signposts to accommodate the client's logo. The two signs (complete with robins atop) were placed on the sides of the tree facing Greyhound Walk and the High Street. At eye level, passers-by could see that the tree had been donated and those who wanted a photo of the tree and Town Hall could enjoy a photo without any obvious advertising signage. The move was not only appreciated by the public (a number mentioned the signs in our online survey), it was also appreciated by the client who was delighted with the positive feedback they received.
7. **Free Rides:** This year, income from sponsorship made it possible for the children's rides (a helter skelter and chair ride) to be offered free to children – a decision made to help ease the financial burden on parents and caregivers at Christmas. The rides proved very popular on the evening with continuous lines for both rides for the duration of the event.

8. **Santa's Grotto & Christmas Charities Fair:** The Grotto was set-up in the Information Centre and ran in unison with the Christmas Charities Fair on Saturday 30 November. The Fair, attended by 16 charities, was held in the Upper Chamber. Without any available Santa's from Round Table, the Council struggled to secure three Santas to cover the whole day. The Grotto ran from 10am-4pm and the Fair from 10am-2pm. Both were well attended and past fair stallholders believed that the Grotto helped improve visitor numbers on past years.

A singer (Michael Hodges) performed free of charge outside the Town Hall until midday, which also helped attract visitors to the Fair & Grotto. The Grotto was free for children to attend, and every child received a gift. 115 children visited the Grotto and £222.30 in donations (on behalf of sponsor Lucy Electric) was raised for the Lord Williams's School Young Carers.

9. **Community Elements:**

- **Reindeer Trail:** The Reindeer Trail was very popular. Feedback suggested that the ease of the trail with only nine venues to visit, made it enjoyable for both children and their parents. Participants particularly enjoyed going to the various shops along the High Street, searching for Santa's missing reindeer (each was featured on a poster with the jumbled letters of the reindeer's name). The entry cards were stamped with a different letter at each location, with the nine stamps spelling the word "CHRISTMAS". They were then dropped at Specsavers where each of the 96 children who completed the Reindeer Trail were given a "thank you" gift for completing the trail and entered into the draw to win one of three hampers.
- **Letters to Santa:** Specsavers were keen to present a "family friendly" image over Christmas and also chose to sponsor our Letters to Santa. Red Kite Family Centre kindly supplied their purpose made letter box for the letter collection. In total, 39 letters were received and each was sent a personalised reply from Santa.
- **Selfie Station:** Your Dentist in Thame, a new local business, was keen to sponsor this year's Selfie Station. The selfie backdrop was erected outside the Town Hall between the Nutcrackers on the day of the lights switch on and remained in place until the end of the Christmas period. People were encouraged to share their selfie photos for the opportunity to win a family pass to see the Peter Pan panto at Aylesbury Waterside Theatre. Many selfies were taken during the month and over 30 were shared for the competition.
- **Window Display competition:** Sponsored by BP Collins Solicitors, local businesses and residents were invited to upload photos of their window displays to the competition web page for the chance to win one of two Christmas hampers. In total, 42 entries were received.

10. **Churches & Charities/Community Groups:** The switch on was well supported by local churches, charities, and community groups. Paddy Harris from Cornerstone Church and Anthony Taylor from Gracechurch Thame performed hosting duties on the night. Round Table ensured Santa and his elves dropped by, Rotary set-up two stalls for mulled wine (and still sold out), while a further seven charities and community groups took part in the evening with stalls and information stands.

Future thoughts

11. Looking ahead to this year, consideration should be given to:

- Continuing use of the sponsorship and advertising brochure to attract sponsors/advertisers for all elements of Christmas, including the switch on and production/distribution of the Christmas Guide. (Already Lightfoots have signed on as headline sponsor for 2025 and we have had a sponsorship enquiry from the Oxford Bus Co. who are keen to be involved in 2025).
- Consideration for auctioning off the Christmas tree sponsorship to the highest bidder.
- Positioning future signage on the Greyhound Walk/High Street sides of the tree.
- Keeping the switch-on layout with the stage on the side.
- Mic'ing the Concert Band and/or positioning them on the stage.
- Having more live entertainment on stage, particularly more sing-a-long activities.
- Having more Christmas themed stalls at the switch on event.
- Offering free rides for children again.
- Repeating the Christmas Charities Fair & Grotto on the Saturday after the switch on, but reducing the hours of the Grotto to match those of the Fair (10am-2pm).
- Organising a Christmas collection of some sort, possibly tied in with one of the local churches (Paddy Harris is particularly keen so may be willing to help).

Income and Expenditure

Below are the figures (excluding VAT) for the Income and Expenditure for the Christmas events 2024. Please note that we are still awaiting electricity costs within the Christmas Lights Budget.

12. Investment to future Christmas events has taken place this year with the purchase of reusable signage and new advertising signage for the Christmas Tree and part of the income was used to promote the Community and Youth Centre within the Thame Out Magazine.

Expenditure		Income (aligned budget and actual)	
Tree	1,303	Tree budget	1,500
Security	700	Security budget	750
First Aid	500	First Aid budget	525
Stage	2202	Event seed funding budget	3000
Thame Concert Band	180		
Publicity, Printing, booklet delivery, banners, lamp post signs, tree signage	2845		
Attractions & Grotto	1707	Booklet sponsorship	2075
Prizes	508	Sponsorship incl. stage, tree & prizes	7000
Sundries	157	Street food market & stalls	653
Cost of Christmas	£10,454	Total	£15,753
Senior Tea Party	£352	Senior Tea Party Budget	£250
Christmas Lights	£18,200	Christmas Lights Budget	£19,000

Event Date 2025

13. The Christmas lights switch on has been scheduled for Friday 28 November 2025.

Recommendation:

The committee is asked:

- i) To receive feedback on the Christmas events and activities held in 2024.***