

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Christmas Lights

Report of the Scrutiny Review Panel

Chair: Cllr Gabrielle Davis

1 Introduction

1.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee approved the Christmas Lights Scrutiny Review as a topic on 9 July 2003. After consultation with Scrutiny Review Members and Area Member Panels, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee approved the scope of the Review at its meeting on 6 August 2003.

1.2 Scrutiny Review Members:

Councillor Davis (Chairman)
Councillors Cavell, Hando, McLachlan, Seager

Mark Everett (Lead)
Ian Brown, David Ford, John Hawkins, Linda Mason, Darren Simpson, Bob White
Lyn McDaid (Committee Administrator)

2 Background: The District's Christmas Lights at Mid-2003

2.1 Canterbury City Council provides Christmas Lights each year in Canterbury, Whitstable and Herne Bay. As part of the Council's Environmental Services Contract, SERCO install the lights (all of which are owned by the Council), ensure they are switched on and remain operable during the Christmas period, and at the end of each season remove them for testing and maintenance, repair and secure storage. This is seen by both SERCO and the Council as a partnership arrangement. The contract with SERCO was entered into in Year 2002-03 and is for ten years: it therefore expires in eight years' time during Year 2011-12.

2.2 At July 2003 the Christmas Lights stock was four years old.

2.3 The revenue budget for Christmas Lights in Year 2003-04 is £72,400, of which £60,700 is payable to SERCO for the Christmas Lights element of the contract. The remainder of the budget comprises rates costs, supplies and services, and Highways Services charges. In Year 2003-04 there is also a carry-forward of £40,000 due to an underspend in the previous year. This one-off sum was spent on essential works and new lights.

- 2.4 As part of the Star Chamber four-year budget process a bid was submitted for the capital sum of £55,000 to invest in new, white, Christmas Lights across the District, commencing with £15,000 for Whitstable in Year 2004-5, £15,000 for Herne Bay in Year 2005-6, and £25,000 for Canterbury in Year 2006-07. Within this bid it was anticipated that the maintenance of new lights would be met through the existing SERCO contract although it was acknowledged that the contractor's fee could alter depending on the scale of the new lights. Within the bid it was proposed that there should be a "challenge" element whereby local traders, either separately or through their Chambers of Commerce, should contribute at least £5,000 towards the necessary cost. At the time of presenting this report the outcome of this bid is not known.
- 2.5 Members representing wards in Herne Bay expressed particular concerns about the state of repair and design of Christmas Lights in the town. There were also residual concerns about the design and safety of "drum"-style Christmas Lights that had in the past been provided by local businesses although these have since been removed and are no longer used.

3 Background: Issues

3.1 Financial Issues

- 3.1.1 With the current stock of Christmas Lights now four years old and therefore probably needing replacement within the next two years, there is the issue of from where the necessary funds will be found. This is also a longer-term concern
- 3.1.2 There is the likelihood of the revenue cost of Christmas Lights increasing through having to pay electricity costs in future.
- 3.1.3 Given the likely restrictions on the Council's budget over the next few years, there are concerns, even though the contract with SERCO extends for a further eight years, about the revenue budget being maintained at least at the current level plus annual inflationary increases. There is a proposal within the Star Chamber budget exercise to make a revenue saving of £25,000 in Year 2005-06, £30,000 in Year 2006-07, and £30,000 in Year 2007-08.
- 3.1.4 From what other sources might finance for Christmas Lights be obtained?

3.2 Other Concerns

- 3.2.1 The perception of some Members that the Council's Christmas Lights are not very good and could, and should, be improved. This perception is reinforced by the feeling that Christmas Lights are not taken sufficiently seriously within the Council.

- 3.2.2 The need to settle the continuing debate on design issues, in particular whether designs should predominate with white or coloured lights, and whether there should be a uniform design theme throughout the District or individual, “themed” displays in each of the three towns.
- 3.2.3 The desire for better, higher profile switch-on events that would attract the involvement of more residents.
- 3.2.4 Parochial concerns about the balance of Christmas Lights provision and financing within the District, particularly amongst some Herne Bay Members and residents.

4 Scope of the Review

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed that the Review would investigate the following:

- (1) the need for Christmas lights, in all parts of the District
- (2) the cost of (to include all revenue implications), and extent to which, the Council should be providing them.
- (3) the condition of the current stock of lights
- (4) the opportunities for contributions from local businesses, and other forms of sponsorship
- (5) the opportunities for funding from statutory sources, eg from Europe
- (6) assuming that there is a need and/or desire to continue providing Christmas lights, what design and form should future displays take, including any implications for the Council’s policies for public art
- (7) in the context of limited resources, whether to aim for uniformity of provision across the District or to focus on one centre
- (8) the possible option of providing permanent lights (mindful however of potential vandalism)
- (9) the opportunities to acquire good quality second-hand lights to enhance the existing stock
- (10) how “Winter Festivals” or similar around Christmas lights switch-ons, might be enhanced, for example through a “Christmas Children’s Day”

It was also agreed that the following groups and individuals should be consulted as part of the Review:

- Area Member Panels
- local businesses / chambers of commerce
- Town Centre Co-ordinators
- appropriate City Council officers
- examples in comparable districts, in particular investigating how they provide Christmas Lights, and how they pay for them
- Parish Councils
- appropriate local societies

- the public
- SERCO

Review Methodology

The Scrutiny Review Panel met eight times to discuss the issues and the points raised through consultation, taking advice from appropriate officers as necessary, including the Town Centre Co-ordinators. The Panel visited Maidstone and Faversham to view the Christmas Lights in those towns, and members attended the three switch-on events in the District.

Consultation

Area Member Panels

1. All four Area Member Panels were consulted on the Scope for the Review and their comments fed into the final version.
2. The Rural Area Members Panel made the following specific comments on the issue of Christmas Lights within the District's larger villages:

Bridge provides its own Lights, paid for by the Parish Council. There used to be City Council support but not now so there is a legacy of some bad feeling. Bridge lights are all white.

Littlebourne puts on a small annual display. There is a feeling within the village that small communities are left out and that they would like more help from the City Council.

Local Businesses

1. A questionnaire was devised to seek responses from local shops, traders and other businesses in Canterbury, Herne Bay and Whitstable to a number of key questions relating to the provision of Christmas Lights. The questionnaire was introduced by a covering letter from the Panel Chair, setting out the reasons for the review and encouraging people to respond. The offer was made of a voucher for two complimentary tickets at The Marlowe Theatre for all businesses that returned a completed questionnaire. 560 questionnaires were delivered by hand to the three town centres. 45 were returned.
2. Below is the summary of the responses to the questionnaire.

1. **What is your overall impression of the Christmas lights in your area?**

Good	20	44.44%
------	----	--------

Average	14	31.11%
Poor	10	22.22%
No reply	1	2.22%

2. **Do you feel the city council should spend money on improving these displays, even if this includes additional calls on the council's budget?**

Yes	24	53.33%
No	19	42.22%
No reply	2	4.44%

3. **Do you feel the city council's "Switch On" events could be improved?**

Yes	29	64.44%
No	15	33.33%
No reply	1	2.22%

4. **Do you think the local business community should be more involved in planning and designing the displays?**

Yes	34	75.56%
No	8	17.78%
No reply	3	6.67%

5. **Do you support any of the following contributions from business?**

Direct contributions to the cost of the displays	11	24.44%
Sponsorship of individual displays	17	37.78%
Sponsorship of parts of displays	15	33.33%
Contribution in kind of materials for displays	7	15.56%
None of the above	18	40.00%
Other	9	20.00%
No reply	1	2.22%

Other Comments Included:

No one wants to be paying when they feel others are not. So the best way is through business rates which we all pay.

We pay enough council rates already - should be budgeted for.

Businesses pay enough in business rates. This should be paid for by the council budget not out of individuals' pockets, especially small businesses like in Herne Bay, that would just not be acceptable. After all we all know that small businesses are having a hard time at present.

Pay rates and raise Tesco money via Chamber of Commerce to be used for Whitstable not the council.

As the organiser of the 1997 Christmas Parade, we would very much like to see something similar for the switch-on of festive lights - the difficulty will be getting everybody to contribute!

6. Do you feel the local business communities should identify representatives to act on their behalf to organise displays and to collect contributions?

Yes	19	42.22%
No	23	51.11%
No reply	3	6.67%

7. Other comments written on the questionnaire included:

Under Q1: "Less than poor because there are none! St Dunstons neglected as usual." Under Q4: "No, we haven't the time - too busy working to pay the rates as it is!"

Under Q3: "Very good but you can always improve".

For Q3: "Lights should be switched on while shops are still open".

On Q3: "Not well advertised/promoted. Wrong day? Saturday. Wrong time? 4-4.30 so still hour or so shopping after".

On Q1: "Not helped by number of shops not making an effort". On Q3: "Sadly predictable use of Marlowe stars should be varied over area otherwise very same as everyone else". On Q4: "Shops should make more effort planning festival so shops can take part, would be a great improvement, how about Christmas carnival parade in shop area?". General: "A Herne festival organised in May for Christmas so shops and organisations can take part, more music like this year's would help greatly (less negative attitude from shops).

In the past if a tree has been placed near the Westgate Towers it has been subject to losing the lower lights which have generally been fitted high up, which looks stupid. A tree on top of the Westgate Towers would look good, as would small ones over shops on the lively St Dunstan's Street.

"If you want people to contribute to Christmas lights give incentives. There should be a best shop window which someone from the council judges at a selected time. Also houses, but not just those nominated, it should be judged properly".

On Q1: "Once again Whitstable has been the poor relation". On Q2: "Providing it is not going to effect what little the council spends on Whitstable".

On Q1: "But is it necessary for them to be on 24 hours a day?! No I think not."

3. Individual consultation with Canterbury-based businesses showed that they prefer to support Christmas Lights collectively through the City Centre Partnership, although some individual companies also put up their own lights by their premises. Canterbury stores have a very good track record of supporting Christmas Lights displays, and the annual switch-on event in the city. There is a general concern that the switch-on event in Canterbury could, and should, be larger and longer and therefore making a greater impact. The Chamber would like to be consulted over the design and location of new displays.
4. In response to the question concerning Christmas Lights provision posed in the SIMALTO consultation exercise of 2003, businesses ("traders") in Whitstable and Herne Bay stated that they would wish the Council's investment to remain as now, whilst those in Canterbury and the rural areas of the District wanted to see an increase.

Other Local Authorities

1. Eight other local authorities that provide Christmas Lights were consulted by contacting the officer who deals directly with the provision.
2. The general feeling is that Christmas Lights are one of the most difficult issues dealt with by the authority because it is so difficult to please everyone all the time. In all cases there were local issues about the design and placing of Christmas Lights displays, and criticism of their maintenance, particularly the frequency with which failed bulbs are replaced. Both within the local authorities at all levels and amongst the public, understanding of the practicalities of Christmas Lights, and the costs concerned, is minimal. In all cases, those concerned felt that the public generally want and like Christmas Lights, would actively protest if they were not provided, but do not wish to pay any extra for their continuance, or expansion and improvement.

3. All those consulted believed that traditional designs were best for their town centres. The public do not respond well to radical change in the design approach.
4. Although many local businesses refute this, there is a general view that the provision of Christmas Lights in town centres does enhance their attractiveness to shoppers and other visitors and creates a general “feel-good factor” during the season. Christmas Lights give the shopper a more positive frame of mind to spend their money.
5. All those consulted agreed that it is practically impossible to obtain significant sponsorship or other financial support from local businesses. The best achieved out of those included in the survey was £3,500 in Maidstone.
6. One authority response suggested that Christmas Lights in the town centre enhance the effectiveness of CCTV security.
7. Several of those consulted said that they aspire to be like Canterbury (City) lights. They see them as the best in Kent, and a benchmark to aim for.

Parish Councils

1. The Parish Council Contributions Scrutiny Review had issued a questionnaire to Parish Councils that included a question on Christmas Lights.
2. Six parishes responded to this part of the questionnaire. The following is an analysis of these responses:

2.1 How much do you spend on Christmas Lights?

Bridge:	circa-£300
Chestfield:	£250 to £350
Hackington:	£200
Littlebourne:	£400
Sturry:	£260
Upper Hardres:	£150

2.2 How many of them do you have?

Chestfield:	1 tree, 40 lights
Littlebourne:	1 set

2.3 To what standard are they maintained, and how often?

Bridge:	Excellent
Chestfield:	High – annually checked and bulbs replaced
Littlebourne:	Legal standard
Sturry:	Good

SERCO

The Panel felt that it was inappropriate to consult SERCO as part of the Review because the company's input to the District's Christmas Lights is clearly defined within their contract with the Council. The Panel noted that SERCO staff involved with Christmas Lights were very helpful and enthusiastic and took a creative view of their work.

The Panel's Visit to Maidstone and Faversham Christmas Lights

1. The Panel visited Maidstone and Faversham on 4 December 2003 to view those town centre Christmas Lights.
2. The Panel made the following observations,
 - 2.1 In Maidstone, the balance of colour with plain white seemed correct. The all-white "canopy" effect in Maidstone High Street was particularly dramatic and effective.
 - 2.2 Maidstone lights signs saying "Happy Christmas from Maidstone" and "Welcome to Maidstone" were most effective and helped to confirm a sense of place and seasonal festivity.
 - 2.3 The use of individual sponsor names in places was noted with interest.
 - 2.4 There was the strong impression that the overall illumination of the shopping area depended greatly on the Christmas Lights managed by the local authority: most individual shop windows were dull by comparison and would be far less noticeable if Christmas Lights were not there.
 - 2.5 Concerns were expressed about the large number of lights in the displays that had failed so soon after the switch-on.
 - 2.6 Whilst there was a mixed opinion on the overall quality of the lights in Faversham, the Panel all felt that there was a general lack of maintenance and that better lights could have been displayed in the Market area.

- 2.7 It was noted that the Faversham Lights are organised by a local committee effort rather than the Council.
3. Overall, the Panel felt that, in comparison with Maidstone and Faversham, Canterbury District's Christmas lights displays were very good and worthy of praise.

The Panel's Attendance at the District's Christmas Lights Switch-Ons

1. Members of the Panel attended the 2003 Christmas Lights switch-on events in Canterbury (Saturday 15 November), Herne Bay (Friday 28 November), and Whitstable (Saturday 29 November).
2. The Panel made the following observations,
 - 2.1 There were concerns about the number of food and drink establishments in Herne Bay and Whitstable that were closed during the switch-ons. Whilst some were open, they were insufficient given the number of people attending the switch-on events, despite efforts by the Town Co-ordinators to persuade them to take advantage of this potential business.
 - 2.2 Additional effects such as artificial snow (used to particularly good effect at the Herne Bay switch-on) were most effective.
 - 2.3 The fireworks used at the end of the Canterbury and Whitstable events were effective and clearly enjoyed by the public. The Panel noted that the Council officers concerned maintained a continuing review of health and safety issues associated with fireworks usage for these events.

Discussion Points

DESIGN OF DISPLAYS

1. With all new investment in Christmas Lights, the emphasis should be on quality and not quantity. Effort should be made in all new designs to create the "wow factor" that raised public interest and helped to enhance other displays.
2. The exclusive use of white lights is common in other districts, and they are less expensive to operate than coloured as the bulbs are cheaper to replace. The Panel felt, however, that the best option is to break up a majority of white lights with some coloured.
3. Consideration should be given to the greater use of trees as locations for certain kinds of displays, although care should be taken not to interfere with routine good husbandry of the trees thus used. Trees that have been pollarded are unsuitable.

4. Whilst maintaining some continuity in design throughout the District, the Panel felt that the use of individual themes for each town should be encouraged in future, for example fishes and sailing boats in Whitstable. Acknowledgment of the City Council should be prominent in all three centres.
5. In Whitstable, Christmas Lights on the new Horsebridge Square may re-focus the centre of Christmas lights within the town. Given the nature of Horsebridge, and the predominance of visual artists in Whitstable in general, there is a good opportunity to use a professional design for the location, perhaps from a local artist(s).
6. Consideration should be given to extending the Canterbury displays to lighting parts of the river. Funding for this sort of individual project might be available from new sources either within, or beyond, the Council.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. The Panel considered the issue of whether Christmas Lights should remain installed throughout the year rather than be annually installed and taken down. In favour of doing so is the reduced cost of installation, removal and storage, and the opportunity to use lighting displays during Summer events such as the Whitstable Oyster Festival and Herne Bay Festival. However, against the proposal is the risk of vandalism and increased maintenance of bulbs and fittings through greater use. Permanent fixtures also interfere with tree husbandry, and there are potential corrosion problems on the coastal sites. The Panel felt that it was practically necessary for most of the lights to be removed after each Christmas season although there are some, particularly in Herne Bay, that can remain in place all year and be used to enhance the area throughout the year.
2. The location of individual displays of Christmas Lights must be regarded as near-permanent as it is not easy to move lights around to different places within the town centres each year. Consequently, great care must be taken when deciding where to add new displays. There should always be full consultation with local residents and local councillors in advance of settling new locations.
3. The replacement of bulbs during the Christmas Lights period has always been a concern. The Panel felt that the current maintenance arrangements are adequate. Greater use of energy-saving bulbs might reduce replacement costs, and energy requirement, but there is a higher capital outlay to begin with.
4. Energy expenditure is high through lights being left on all the time. However, timers are even more expensive, do not in themselves enhance the displays, and from experience have been shown to be unreliable.

5. The purchase of second-hand lights, in particular from other local authorities, on the face of it seems to be a relatively inexpensive way of enhancing the stock. However, research showed that no local authorities do this. Furthermore, given their concerns about the deterioration of the existing lighting stock, the Panel felt that buying second-hand would, in effect, be “buying into decay” and rejected the idea.
6. There are public liability concerns, as well as issues over design, about local businesses putting their own lights up. The Panel felt that, in general, this practice should be discouraged. However, the proposed lights brackets on trees in Herne Bay might be a method by which businesses could contribute towards the overall Christmas Lights scheme in the town. The Panel noted with interest the efforts being made by the Herne Bay Town Centre Co-ordinator to provide festoon lights along part of the town’s seafront.
7. Whilst the management lines of responsibility for the engineering aspects of Christmas Lights are clear, they are less certain over promotional activity such as the switch-on events. Whilst individuals do very well at organizing the events in their own areas, the Council lacks central guidance which, if in place and with a clearer overall strategy for Christmas Lights and their promotion, might enhance and improve not only switch-ons but also encourage greater support from all elements of the local community.
8. It is most important not to underestimate the engineering requirements for the installation, maintenance and general management of Christmas Lights which can in some circumstances be very difficult.

PROMOTIONAL ISSUES

1. Launch events could be bigger and involve more groups, in particular local organisations such as church and school choirs, bands, local music and drama societies, and other community groups. To assist this, dates should be decided much further in advance. However, there are financial restrictions on what can be achieved. There should be an emphasis on the involvement of children’s groups.
2. The switching-on of Christmas Lights should be better tied-in with other seasonal events such as Christmas markets. The notion of “Christmas at Canterbury” should be further explored, together with the idea of winter festivals within the District, even though the Panel felt that to an extent these already exist in some areas when lights are switched on.
3. Careful consideration should be given to the time of the switch-on events although agreement on the exact time is hard to obtain. The Panel generally felt that 6.00pm is most appropriate as it fits best with most families’ timetables.

4. More can, and should, be done to promote each town's Christmas lights and their switch-on events through the City Council's own press and publicity resources. To assist this, better communication is required between organisers and the Council's Communications Section.
5. KMFM and BBC Radio Kent currently promote the switch-ons, appealing to the younger and older members of the community. Invicta are not involved (except indirectly through their involvement with The Marlowe Theatre) which is a deficiency as they are a major local broadcasting presence with a broad appeal to younger people.
6. Generally, the Panel felt that local press coverage of the District's switch-on events had been good.
7. The involvement of Marlowe pantomime stars, whilst now somewhat old-hat, is nevertheless thought to be effective promotionally and much enjoyed by those attending switch-on events.
8. The Panel noted that there is no separate provision for funding switch-ons in the Council's Events budget.

FINANCIAL ISSUES: BUDGET

1. The Panel noted the continuing debate about the balance of Christmas Lights expenditure between the three towns within the District. There was a good case for additional expenditure being required for raising the standard of lights in Herne Bay, at least in the immediate term. The Panel endorsed the decision to weight the expenditure from the carry-forward sum from Year 2002-03 in Herne Bay's favour in Year 2003-04.
2. The Panel viewed with great concern the possibility of the revenue budget for Christmas Lights being reduced over the four-year period of the "Star Chamber" budget exercise. It was felt that the current budget is reasonable and well reflects the position of Canterbury, Whitstable and Herne Bay within the East Kent sub-region. The current level of provision of Christmas Lights is sustainable within this budget. The Panel considered that any cut in budget would significantly reduce the provision of good quality Christmas Lights within the District, notwithstanding any additional capital investment over the period.
3. The length of the current contract with SERCO mitigates against much change in terms, or financial emphasis, at least in the short term. The Panel emphasised their conviction that there are no savings possible within the current contractual arrangements. Shortening the period during which Christmas Lights are displayed would not make a significant financial saving.

4. The Panel debated the question of the extent to which money is the key issue in providing good Christmas Lights. Whilst it was agreed that it is the key ingredient to providing good displays of lights, quality and imagination also have a significant role.
5. The Panel did not support the view that the Council should become practically involved with the provision of Christmas Lights at Parish level. They should remain independent in their provision, setting their own priorities. If funds permitted, and this was felt to be unlikely, the Panel hoped that it might be possible to provide some subsidy for the improvement of Christmas Lights to the larger villages within the District through the Parish Councils. This would be proportional to the size of the villages.

FINANCIAL ISSUES: SPONSORSHIP OR OTHER INCOME

1. There is a prevailing view within the Council that local businesses should contribute towards the cost of Christmas Lights. In some instances, they already do, for example through individual displays, such as Fenwicks' tree in Canterbury, and through the larger Canterbury stores contributing towards the annual switch-on event. There are also precedents of local businesses supporting Christmas Lights in Herne Bay where tree motifs have been sponsored and market traders there have collectively made donations to connected Christmas events. However, a key issue for the Panel was to investigate how more businesses might sponsor or otherwise provide funds to assist Christmas Lights provision in the area in which they carry out their business, and thus reduce the financial burden on the Council.
2. There has been little effort in recent years to encourage the financial involvement of local businesses in Christmas Lights provision. Therefore, to an extent, the view that businesses should so contribute has created a rod for the Council's own back in that they currently expect the provision of Christmas Lights to be a civic function. This view is firmly endorsed through the comments received in the business survey that was carried out as part of this Review.
3. However, some of the major stores in Canterbury have said that they are prepared to make more of an effort to promote the lights and their part in the overall promotion of the Christmas season in the City. They favour doing this collectively through the Chamber of Commerce rather than on an individual basis (although Fenwicks might remain an exception in this regard).
4. The Panel spent much time on considering how local business might contribute. Clearly, direct sponsorship from individual local businesses is the most desirable option. Local businesses might do this through sponsoring individual displays, or signs (the Panel noted that individual designs in Sheerness had provision for including the name of the business sponsoring them). Businesses beyond the

- town centres might also be approached on the basis that they too benefit from good quality Christmas Lights in their area.
5. The Panel was aware that the evidence from other local authorities is that appealing to support from local businesses is generally unsuccessful. Local businesses all tend towards the (false) expectation that it is their Council's duty to provide Christmas Lights.
 6. It would not be possible to ring-fence a proportion of local business rates to help fund Christmas Lights, or charge local businesses directly. This is because although the City Council collects them, business rates are set independently and passed on to central Government.
 7. The Panel noted that funding of Christmas Lights by organisations such as Arts Council England would be unlikely unless there was agreement to a significant shift in emphasis from the current type of displays to commissioned pieces of "public art lights" or a similar change. The Panel felt that this would be unlikely.
 8. The Panel noted that new investment in Christmas Lights might be available through parts of the area being designated Business Improvement Districts.

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. To continue with the current level of Christmas Lights provision, it will be necessary to maintain at least the current level of budget requirement.
2. To emphasise and support the current plan to focus any new expenditure on Christmas lights in Whitstable in Year 2004-05, in Herne Bay in Year 2005-06, and in Canterbury in 2006-07.
3. The current tradition of Christmas Lights being switched on by celebrities appearing in The Marlowe Theatre's seasonal pantomime should be maintained, but enhanced by other activities (and, hopefully, by the stars being able to stay at the event for longer which might in itself encourage local businesses to remain open). These could include a Christmas carnival, wider use of snow machines, street markets, outdoor carols, local brass and pipe bands (eg the Canterbury Silver Band), and the involvements of local organisations such as the Lions and Rotary clubs, and Twinning Associations.
4. As the Panel believed that local businesses do benefit from the provision of Christmas Lights, a strategy is required to encourage their financial participation and better to co-ordinate their own provision of lights with that of the City Council (eg in Tankerton there have been instances where a local business has decorated the trees whilst the City Council has decorated adjacent lighting columns). The plans to invite Whitstable businesses to hospitality events to encourage them to support Christmas Lights are welcomed.

5. If the amount of activity at switch-on events, and its promotion, is enhanced then local businesses would be more encouraged to participate, and hopefully make a financial contribution.
6. The Job Descriptions of the Town Centre Co-Ordinators should be expanded (over time as appropriate) to include the development of closer liaison with the local business community.
7. Local food and drink businesses should be encouraged to remain open during the period of the switch-on events given the numbers of people who attend them. Conversely, the opportunity to use such businesses during these events might also encourage more people to attend them
8. The high profile of the Lord Mayor's competition for best-lit houses at Christmas time was noted. The Panel proposed that there should be a competition for best decorated and lit shop window displays, preferably one for each town centre. Promotion of such a competition could be combined with issuing information about the timing and other details of switch-on events. This might also encourage greater interest in their involvement in Christmas Lights by local businesses.
9. There should be further investigation into the practicalities of Christmas Lights remaining up all year round.
10. Regarding the development of Christmas Lights in the District's larger villages, it was felt that this was generally a good idea. However, there would be revenue implications through a contractor, probably SERCO, installing and maintaining the lights, and capital implications through initial purchase of lighting stock. Realistically, the responsibility for Christmas Lights will remain for some time with the villages, perhaps with the future opportunity to seek financial assistance from the City Council.
11. Signs in lights similar to those seen in Maidstone welcoming visitors to the town should be created for all three centres in the District, and designed to be as specific as possible to each centre.
12. The commissioning of public art pieces using light sculpture techniques should be considered, and external funding for the involvement of artists in this way explored. A good precedent exists with the "Stairway to Heaven" sculpture in neon light on the tower of St Peter's Church, Canterbury, in 2000, commissioned from the artist Ron Haselden by The Marlowe Theatre's Corridor Arts. The involvement of KIAD might add weight to arguments to Arts Council England that it should support such work, together with Canterbury recently being designated as one of the ACE's Centres of Cultural Leadership. Within existing budgets there are sufficient funds at least to provide the basis of a bid for larger sums from external sources.

Christmas Lights Scrutiny Review Action Plan

No.	Action	Responsible Officer(s)	Estimated Cost	Start Date	Delivery Date
1	Campaign to encourage more businesses in Whitstable and Herne Bay to participate in, and contribute towards, the cost of Christmas Lights within their area.	Head of Regeneration & Economic Development	£3000	April 2004	December 2004
2	Enhance and expand switch-on events through the involvement of local societies and organisations, and developing ideas such as “Christmas at Canterbury”.	Head of Regeneration & Economic Development Head of Culture & Communications	N/A	April 2004	December 2004
3	Actively encourage local businesses in Whitstable and Herne Bay, in particular cafes and other refreshments providers, to remain open for the duration of switch-on events so as to contribute towards the attractiveness of these events to a wide range of the public, and their enjoyment of these occasions.	Head of Regeneration & Economic Development	£600	September 2004	December 2004
4	Explore ways for the design and implementation of new rope lighting and other specific lighting effects, including the commissioning of public art using light effects, exploiting all possible sources of external funding to achieve this.	Head of Culture & Communications	N/N	September 2004	December 2005
5	Establish an annual competition, with sponsored prizes, in each town centre for best-dressed and lit shop window displays, and explore ways by which the competition and its results can be publicised through the Council’s promotional media.	Head of Regeneration & Economic Development	£600	September 2004	December 2004
6	Subject to funds becoming available, create individual welcome signs in lights for each of the three centres.	Head of Transportation & Engineering	£6500 pa	April 2004	December 2006