

Edinburgh's Hogmanay Royal Bank Street Party cancellation - Interim report

City of Edinburgh Council

1 February 2006

Purpose of report

- 1 To provide a review of the circumstances and conditions that led to the cancellation of Edinburgh's Hogmanay's Royal Bank Street Party (RBSP) on 31 December 2006.

Main report

Edinburgh's Hogmanay

- 2 Edinburgh's Hogmanay is a four day festival attracting visitors from all over the world who stay in the capital for up to 3 days. The RBSP is the high spot of the four days and is an international iconic event not only for Edinburgh but also for Scotland.
- 3 With regard to the other events, The Torchlight Procession on the 29 December attracted a capacity audience of 15,000 people taking part and many others viewing the procession along the route. The festival continued with the Night Afore International celebrations on the 30 December. This free event took place in perfect weather conditions with a capacity audience of just over 26,000 enjoying traditional Scottish culture blended with European Street Theatre.
- 4 1 January saw a range of popular activities to participate in, from the One O'clock Run down the Royal Mile to the Loony Dook at South Queensferry. In addition, an increasing number of tourist attractions, museum and galleries are now open throughout the city on New Year's Day. Unfortunately, the husky dog races – Dogmanay - could not go ahead, not because of the weather, but because key staff and equipment were delayed by the cancellation within the RBSP area.

The Royal Bank Street Party - cancellation

- 5 Following the cancellation of the RBSP in December 2003, a great many improvements were made to the event infrastructure (including more resilient stages, a three level firework display with each level capable of being fired independently) and better operating procedures (including employment of a Met. Office Adviser and enhanced communications systems). These measures increased the robustness of the event and enhanced the capacity to withstand inclement weather.
- 6 No major outdoor event can ever be made completely weather proof and this is especially relevant during the winter months in Scotland.
- 7 The severity and prolonged nature of the weather during the early evening and night of 31 December 2006 was such that to ensure public safety the only course of action available was to cancel the RBSP.
- 8 The RBSP decision making structure follows standard event management procedures with the establishment of a 'Gold Group' to receive and evaluate information and to make strategic decisions based on this information.
- 9 The Gold Group is chaired by the Director of City Development. The Director is supported by Edinburgh's Winter Festivals Manager and representatives from Council Public Safety, Corporate Communications and Services for Communities as well as the event producers - Unique Events. Lothian and Borders Police are represented at Deputy Chief Constable level. In addition, there is support from technical advisors from the Met Office, Scottish Ambulance Service, event security and fireworks specialists.
- 10 The normal pattern is for the Gold Group to meet informally in the three days preceding the event and formally from 12.00hrs on the 31 December then again at 18.00hrs, 20.00hrs and, usually, finally at 22.00hrs if there are no event critical incidents.
- 11 Prior to the event detailed weather reports are received daily from the Met. Office and a Met. Officer is contracted to provide detailed analysis of the forecasts. On the 31 December, with the first formal meeting of the Gold Group, the Met. Officer is in attendance to interpret weather forecasts and weather patterns and provide technical support to the Gold Group.

Timeline of events

- 12 The Gold Group met at 12.00hrs. All event preparations were proceeding as intended no agency reported any undue cause for concern and no reason to consider cancellation. The weather forecast was for stormy conditions with a deep low across Scotland. High wind speeds and heavy rain were predicted although the level and timing of peak winds were difficult to assess with a high degree of accuracy at that time. There was no knowledge of any other cancellations of Hogmanay events elsewhere in Scotland.
- 13 The Gold Group met at 18.00hrs at the Joint Agency Control Centre (JACC) at Police HQ at Fettes. Event preparations were beginning to be affected by the worsening weather and gusts of up to 50mph had been recorded. There were

temporary closures on all stages as a precautionary measure and the big video screens at the East and West ends of Princes Street had been lowered. Performers were still willing to perform if it was safe.

- 14 The weather update was for wind speeds to increase further although the heavy rain would subside. Western Scotland would experience stronger winds, gusting to 70mph; the presumption was that Edinburgh would not see this level although there were concerns of wind 'funnelling' through Princes Street. Reports of minor damage outwith the RBSP area had been received. If wind speeds were to continue to rise and remain high there was a possibility that the RBSP would have to be cancelled. It was agreed that the RBSP area would be 'locked down' immediately, this meant access to the area would be restricted and no one would be allowed to enter. This facility is normally in place to ensure that during the RBSP the maximum capacity of 100,000 people is not exceeded and entry is only allowed with a RBSP pass.
- 15 By this time it was confirmed that Glasgow, Stirling and Belfast had cancelled their events. In Belfast, being much further west the effects of the stormy weather had brought their event preparations to a halt just after 12.00hrs - expected audience 7,500. In Glasgow, the cancellation was caused by a short cataclysmic period of extreme weather at approximately 15.30hrs that wrecked some of the main elements of the event infrastructure and had caused major health and safety concerns - expected audience 25,000. In Stirling, the event area is the esplanade of Stirling Castle and as such is a very exposed site. The severity of the conditions and the greater degree of exposure made it clear that their event could not go ahead. They cancelled at approximately 16.00hrs - expected audience 7,000. It should also be noted that while significant the Hogmanay events in these other cities are on a much smaller scale to Edinburgh's.
- 16 By this time it was quite clear that there was a very strong possibility that the event would be cancelled, hence the 'lock down. There was a balance to be struck between a decision to cancel the event and the fact that the RBSP is the headline event of the four days of Hogmanay that had drawn a large number of people from elsewhere in the UK and abroad. Almost two thirds of the RBSP audience are visiting the city from out with Scotland. While public safety cannot be compromised (hence the precautionary lockdown of the area) it was decided to monitor the wind speeds at the stages as the key determinate of event safety. At this point average wind speeds were still within performances margins.
- 17 The Gold Group met at 20.00hrs. Between 18.00 and 20.00 the wind speeds had increased significantly and were gusting beyond safe performance levels. The Ross, Waverley and St David's Street stages had all been evacuated and Council public safety and event health and safety advisors had imposed exclusion zones of 45 – 60 metres due to concerns regarding potential wind blown debris. Concerns were being expressed regarding the structural integrity of the stages as the wind speeds were well in excess of operating parameters and power to the East Princes Street Garden ceilidh stage had been lost. Two security staff had suffered minor injuries. Event infrastructure elements, temporary toilets, barriers and external gates had been buffeted by the wind and had become potential hazards.

- 18 In addition, reports of significant structural damage to permanent buildings out with the RBSP area were received. The Forth Road Bridge was closed to all traffic. The highest wind speed of the night, 92mph, was recorded at the Waverley Stage. Advice from the Met. Officer suggested that peak wind speeds had still not been reached. In light of these conditions and the information available the Gold Group took the decision to cancel the RBSP with immediate effect. It should be noted that the measures taken to improve the structural integrity of the stages, following the cancellation in 2003, proved generally effective.
- 19 The primary factors taken into consideration in arriving at the decision to cancel the RBSP were the impact of the worsening weather conditions on public safety, the safety of staff and the safety of performers. The decision taken by the Gold Group was unanimous. The weather was seriously compromising the safety of everyone and at that point not only was the event cancelled but staff on duty in and around the arena was reduced to the minimum to limit the number of people in potentially dangerous situations.
- 20 Contingency procedures were activated to communicate the decision to all communications and operational staff, the media, elected members, senior CEC staff, sponsors, partners and the general public.
- 21 Operating from the JACC at Fettes, Council Corporate Communications Officers prepared media statements which were quickly disseminated. Information was fed directly to Edinburgh's Hogmanay's PR Agency and Edinburgh's Winter Festivals staff at the 'on site' press office in the Royal Overseas League to be relayed to the accredited media who were waiting for information.
- 22 The Edinburgh's Hogmanay web site was updated within the hour. All internal communications systems carried notice of the cancellation to as many event stewarding staff as possible and standard contingency communication procedures to contact elected members, senior Council staff, sponsors and partners were activated. The cancellation message was also relayed through the Police safety text messaging system to all members of the general public who had registered to receive safety information through this new facility.
- 23 In addition, a press conference was held at 22.30hrs at the Police HQ at Fettes to fully explain why the decision had been made to cancel the RBSP, the circumstances that led to it, to provide full information and give an opportunity for the media to ask questions. This was very successful.
- 24 The Council's own web site was updated as soon as possible on 1 January and communication updates continued throughout the following day.
- 25 Most of the Seven Hills Fireworks display did, in the end, take place although the display from Edinburgh Castle lasted for approximately 5 seconds. The pyrotechnic experts, PYRO1, advised the Gold Group that the safest course of action, if the weather allowed, would be to fire the display. There is an increased health and safety risk to staff in 'derigging' a firework display. It was agreed by the Gold Group that the decision to fire the display, which would be totally dependent on the local weather conditions on each of the seven hills, be

at the discretion of PYRO1 with the final decision being communicated and confirmed by the JACC.

- 26 A key factor in why it was safe to launch the firework displays on Calton, Corstorphine, Craigmillar, Braid, Blackford hills and Arthur's Seat is the fact that these hills are much more remote from built up areas in comparison to Castle Hill.
- 27 The high level of uncertainty surrounding whether the Seven Hills Fireworks display would go ahead or not made it impossible to give prior warning to the general public. In addition, there was a desire to avoid confusing the public as it was agreed at 20.30 that the full display from Edinburgh Castle was definitely cancelled and the displays on the other 6 hills were very weather dependent.
- 28 Overall, the media and general public's reactions to the decision to cancel have been ones of understanding, the weather conditions were obvious to everyone, and also huge disappointment. Some concern was expressed by the media and others that the decision seemed to have been taken quite late. Leaving the decision to the last possible moment was due to three main factors, the uncertainty around the weather, the inherent robustness of the event following the changes made since 2003/04 and the desire not to cancel the event if at all possible.
- 29 Information that a full refund of the face value of all tickets and passes that had been purchased was also confirmed. Details of this process were released to the press and placed on Edinburgh's Hogmanay website. In the case of purchases made by credit card at the Hub, Edinburgh's Hogmanay box office, this would be an automatic process. Customers who had purchased tickets and passes from other outlets or had used a payment method at the Hub other than credit card were advised to contact the original point of purchase.
- 30 A further report on Edinburgh's Winter Festivals 2006-2007 detailing the overall performance, customer responses and findings of the market research for both programmes of events, Edinburgh's Christmas and Edinburgh's Hogmanay, will be reported to the Council Executive as usual in March.

The Future

- 31 Scotland's capital city is inextricably linked with celebrating Hogmanay. The sense of place and the shared experience of a large number of people gathered together to celebrate makes Edinburgh's Hogmanay unique, iconic and world beating. The overall economic impact of the Festival is second only to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in the summer.
- 32 Edinburgh's Hogmanay Street Party is not the biggest in the world; Rio de Janeiro is the largest with audiences estimated at almost 2 million on Copacabana Beach, Berlin has audiences of 1million and New York over 700,000. However, time after time independent surveys confirm Edinburgh's standing as *the best place* in the world to celebrate Hogmanay and it provides global exposure for Scotland and Edinburgh

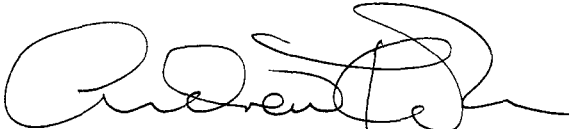
- 33 Lessons will be learned from this year's event, as they are every year, and incorporated in planning Edinburgh's Hogmanay Street Party 2008. There is no indoor equivalent that could offer a plan B solution. Trying to recreate Edinburgh's Hogmanay Party indoors would cause that sense of place and those iconic world renowned images to be lost.
- 34 Audiences will not stay away from Edinburgh because of the weather, or even because of cancellations. However, they will quickly find an alternative if they perceive that Edinburgh offers a second class experience.

Financial Implications

- 35 The RBSP is covered by inclement weather cancellation insurance and there are no additional financial implications identified at this time for the Council beyond existing departmental resources.

Recommendations

- 36 To note the contents of the report.
- 37 To note Edinburgh's Hogmanay's pre-eminent world class celebrations are a major tourism asset for the city.
- 38 To note that a further report will be submitted to the Council in March on future options for Edinburgh's Hogmanay Street Party.



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27.1.07.

Appendices	None
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Wards affected	All
Background Papers	None