

Council Meeting – 9 December 2014

Christmas Lights in Taunton

Motion proposed by Councillor Jefferson Horsley and seconded by Councillor Habib Farbahi

Taunton Deane Borough Council has a proud record of supporting its town centre and has always acknowledged the importance of the Christmas period in providing the retailers with the best opportunity of being commercially successful in the calendar year. In recent years it has expanded the customer offer by extending its reach to Somerset Square, Castle Green and further up the High Street with its renting of stalls to market holders on those days when it puts on events for the traders such as the Christmas Lights switch on.

It further acknowledges the role played by the Events Organisers which has raised money towards the lights and ensuring that all visitors are welcome. It notes that the figures provided by the Economic Development Team and by the Manager of the Orchard Centre also show a year on year increase in numbers in the town centre. Taunton can be also proud that its current level of void sites is down to 4% compared with the national average of 14%.

It is disappointing to note however that for the past two years the extent of the Christmas Lights only reach nearly as far as Debenhams to the north on North Street and to well short of Primark on East Street and does not include much of High Street to the south. This means that Bridge Street and Station Road to the north, the eastern part of East Street and the whole of East Reach has no Christmas Lights nor does Corporation Street to the West. These important secondary shopping areas are getting no benefit from the Christmas Lights “project”.

Business Rates have not come down in the recession whilst market rents have halved for even the premium sites. This has led to a high volume of appeals against the Rateable Values by many owners in their attempts to reduce their outgoings. The future of Christmas Lights is going to remain a “will we, won’t we” battle every year which only creates uncertainty for the retailers and traders

Taunton Deane Liberal Democrats note that the recent Traders Survey identified that 77% of the traders believe that Christmas Lights should be “safeguarded”. They also believe that with the demise of the Town Centre Company, the responsibility for supporting a fair and longer lasting strategy for making Taunton Sparkle is for the Council to agree to (a) extend the Christmas lights to the secondary areas mentioned above and (b) to agree to provide funding until Christmas 2018.

Accordingly it asks the DLO or other such organisation to cost out a programme to cover the extended area for 2015 onwards and to examine whether to hire or

purchase. The funding for this should come from any under spend in the previous year.