

LYMM PARISH COUNCIL

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Carols from The Cross

Report and recommendations following the event on 24th December 2023 Full Council Meeting 15th February 2024

1. Background

Lymm Parish Council took over the organisation and running of Carols from The Cross more than 8 years ago. As an event, it has been taking place for much longer than this. The exact year it started is unknown.

The event has traditionally taken place on Christmas Eve in the centre of the village, from 7-8pm. Since COVID, the Parish Council has worked in partnership with Lymm's radio station, Cheshire's MIX:56, formerly Lymm Radio, to deliver the event, both physically and virtually, where restrictions allowed.

2. Carols from The Cross - 2023

Carols from The Cross 2023 was held on 24th December 2023 and was attended by thousands of people despite the wind and rain. There was a change to the format, the delivery organisations and the involvement of the brass band. More detail is included in the breakdown below, along with recommendations for 2024.

3. The team

Parish Council officers started planning the event in late summer / early autumn, ensuring the relevant documents, insurances, road closures, risk assessments and volunteer team were in place as soon as possible.

An Events Working Group comprising Councillors, officers and residents was set up and held its inaugural meeting on 4th April 2023. The planning for decorating the village for Christmas and Carols began in September. The working group reports to the Events Committee.

4. Location

The event was initially held around The Cross monument with just a small crowd, and when it grew in size, was held using a lorry for a stage placed outside a local business on the road – outside number 19 The Cross. The decision to move the event to the Lower Dam, The Cross highway not the monument, was made by the Parish Council due to safety. The cobbled area surrounding the monument becomes slippery in wet weather and, in the dark, presents a double risk. The streetlights on The Cross are currently out of order, for which the Parish Council is awaiting quotes for their repair. In addition, due to the success of the event and the large volume of people that attends, crowds that gathered near Rectory Lane were spilling onto the highways – both Rectory Lane and Pepper Street. Neither of these roads are part of the road closure as they need to be kept open and clear for access, both for residents and also for emergency services. Holding the event at the Lower Dam (The Cross highway) allows a safer distribution of the crowds.

RECOMMENDATION: Continue to locate the stage at the Lower Dam.

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5. Traffic Management and Road Closures

The details of the road closure are included in the Event Management Plan that is submitted to Warrington Borough Council 12 weeks ahead of the event. The pavement at the Lower Dam / The Cross was arranged to be closed from 11am. Unfortunately, this did not happen. Pedestrians had to cross the road at the Lower Dam, towards the Sunken Gardens, in order to pass the Lower Dam.

The road closures were put in place earlier in the day in 2023 – 5pm instead of 5.30pm - due to the extended stage, sound and lighting plans. Roads were arranged for a 5pm closure and planned to reopen at 9pm.

Unfortunately, the road closures were lifted earlier than required and were reopened at 8.30pm. This caused issues for the staging company who needed the extra time to securely remove the stage and speakers, and also for the event team who were litter picking the roads and pavements. Some of the signs and cones have been left in the village and have still not been collected or removed.

RECOMMENDATION: Follow up the pavement closure with Warrington Borough Council.

RECOMMENDATION: Meet with Warrington Borough Council to discuss the traffic management company used for Carols from The Cross and also for previous events with issues.

RECOMMENDATION: Extend the road closure to include Bridgewater Street to Whitbarrow Road, and the road from Bridgewater Street to Henry Street car park entrance/LYCA car park.

RECOMMENDATION: Consider a barrier on the pavement from the Lower Dam to Sainsbury's to allow access for the event team.

RECOMMENDATION: Talk to the traders about the impact of Carols on business.

6. Date

Traditionally Carols from The Cross, is held on Christmas Eve.

Partner organisations have expressed an interest in holding the event on a different date due to their workload / capacity. In addition, the availability of volunteers proves difficult every year, with securing the required number of volunteers (in good time to ensure the correct level of training and briefing) problematic.

Some residents have also asked for a change of date to allow themselves and their families to be involved.

RECOMMENDATION: Ask delivery partners (St Mary's Church, St Peter's Church, MIX:56, volunteers) and contractors (sound, stage and traffic management companies) what the costs for both other dates would be – including the 23rd and 24th.

RECOMMENDATION: Conduct a residents' survey regarding the date for Carols to be held in future.

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7. Timing

The main Carols event is held between 7pm and 8pm. Some of the comments from 2023 included the possibility of changing the timing of the event to earlier in the day so that more children can take part.

In 2023, MIX:56 hosted an hour of music to warm up the arriving crowds. This was also aired on the radio. Songs included festive songs that local schools and choirs had recorded.

Carols from The Cross has traditionally been held between 7pm and 8pm, and in 2023, Full Council made the decision on 12th September 2023 to hold the event at the same on Christmas Eve, as in previous years.

There is a huge amount of work carried out by officers, Councillors and volunteers to plan the event in the weeks and months running up to the event. Increasing the duration of the live entertainment placed another burden on the delivery and planning team. It should also be noted that Christmas Eve was on a Sunday in 2023. More often than not, Christmas Eve is on a weekday, and Councillors and volunteers also have full time employment. Changing the time to earlier in the day would impact the delivery team, making it more difficult to source volunteers and therefore to safely open and hold the event.

RECOMMENDATION: Reduce the warmup time from 1 hour to 30 minutes.

RECOMMENDATION: Conduct a residents' survey about a preferred time of day to hold the event.

8. Sound, stage and lighting

a. Sound

In 2022, there was a number of issues with the sound quality both in the village and on the output on the radio (Lymm Radio at the time). A number of complaints were received that the band could not be heard and that the singing was not audible in order to prompt when the audience should join in. To address this in 2023, a different contractor was engaged, that provided a larger sound system that covered a wider area of the village.

An unexpected outcome of the improved sound distribution was that the audience was more spread out through the village. The front of the stage area was not as tightly packed as previous years, making it easier to move throughout the village if required.

Some complaints, however, were received about the volume in the village being too loud.

RECOMMENDATION: Investigate volume levels for 2024.

RECOMMENDATION: Continue with the locations of the speakers for 2024.

b. Stage

The addition of a professional staged area, high enough for the audience to see the presenters and choir on stage, was well received. A backstage area with access with

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backstage passes was created to ensure the safety of those on stage and to create a safe space backstage. This was unfortunately compromised by a resident/visitor on The Grove.

RECOMMENDATION: If necessary, use a larger stage for 2024 to allow for a brass band to be present. This will impact on the road closure as a larger stage will extend onto the highway.

RECOMMENDATION: Adjust the barriers to ensure that no members of the audience or residents can enter the backstage area.

RECOMMENDATION: Continue to have backstage passes for the Stage Manager to use to manage the stage area.

c. Lighting

In addition to an improved stage area, lighting was also improved in 2023. The Council made the decision to give the event a visual focus with a stage and lighting, allowing all the audience of all heights the ability to watch the show as well as join in.

9. Warrington Brass Band

The band has been providing a musical element to Carols from The Cross for many years. Performing without a fee, the band collects donations on the night.

The band was offered the warmup hour – 6 to 7pm – at the event in 2023 due to the stage being too small to be present with the presenters and the choir. Discussions with the band in preparation for the 2023 event led to an agreement that it was not practical (stage size and availability of equipment) or safe for the band to perform.

RECOMMENDATION: Investigate how the band can be involved in 2024 and if involved, what the financial arrangement will be.

10. Partners

a. MIX:56

A decision was taken in 2020 during Covid to involve Mix56 (Lymm Radio as it was then). This was a huge bonus for the event, meaning that the tradition could be carried on even without a physical gathering in the village. The resulting radio partnership and output was a huge success and is something that is aimed to be continued. This output is enjoyed by many, especially those unable to make it into the village. It is relied on by care homes and the elderly, as well as others in Lymm and beyond, for whom getting into the village on a December evening is no longer a practical proposition. In 2023, the partnership with MIX:56 continued and the presenters gave up their time to compere the event. The commercialism of the event attracted a small amount of criticism. This has been discussed and suggestions on how to adjust this slightly have been suggested.

RECOMMENDATION: Liaise with MIX:56 to discuss involvement and ways of working in 2024.

RECOMMENDATION: Liaise with MIX:56 to provide a commercial balance.

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b. St Mary's Church

Although the event is non-religious, Reverend Jameson attends the event and delivers a short reading for the community.

c. St Peter's Church

Father Michael normally attends however was not available this year.

d. Andrew Powell (AJ), Lymm's Town Crier

Since the passing of Peter Powell, former Parish Councillors and Town Crier, Peter's grandson, AJ, has become Lymm's new Town Crier. Peter previously hosted and led the singing at Carols from The Cross. Peter's absence was felt in many ways.

AJ led a cry from the stage during the 2023 event.

e. Smiley Tunes Choir

Smiley Tunes, a local choir was also asked to join the presenters on the stage in order to provide the singing and the support both in the village and for the radio audience. Due to the size of the stage and lack of space for the band and presenters, it wasn't possible to provide enough space and microphones for each of the musicians. The decision was taken to use pre-recorded music with a choir to lead the crowds. Although there were only four singers on the stage, it was a successful element to the event. More voices would balance the sound, especially for those listening by radio.

RECOMMENDATION: Work with the choir to ensure the backing track is the most relevant version.

RECOMMENDATION: Engage with the choir/choirs earlier to allow for more singers to be present at the event and improve the live and radio experience for all.

11. Repertoire

During the working group meetings for 2023, the repertoire was discussed, with some of the more traditional carols being felt to be less common and therefore led to a 'lull' in the energy and mood. The Carols event is a community event, not a religious event.

MIX:56 suggested running a listener / residents' poll to choose a new repertoire of favourite festive songs and Carols. The poll ran until mid-December and gathered hundreds of votes. This provided a new set list for the event which, for the first time, included three pop songs to the repertoire.

At the 2023 event, it was noticeable that the village was rather quiet for the first 6 songs (these were all traditional Carols) however on playing the first pop song – WHAM's Last Christmas – the village erupted with song and dance, lifting the mood, in spite of the rain and wind.

RECOMMENDATION: Repeat the inclusion of pop songs in the repertoire, potentially increasing the amount in 2024.

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RECOMMENDATION: MIX:56 to carry out another poll for songs in 2024, possibly with the ratio of Carols to pop songs.

12. Song sheets / booklet

Following the closure of the poll on [insert date], there was insufficient time to design and print new booklets. In addition to this, increasing quantities of the existing song sheets were deemed to be getting towards the end of their lives and the decision was made to move with the times and to go digital. This not only saves the council a substantial amount in costs to print the song sheets, it is also significantly more environmentally friendly, plus the cleaning up exercise after the event is significantly reduced. In addition, the volunteers all want to get home to start their Christmas celebrations.

RECOMMENDATION: Gather quotes for the production of a printable version.

RECOMMENDATION: Continue to provide a phone friendly version accessible in advance or through a QR code available on the night.

RECOMMENDATION: Add an option to make a donation when the booklet is downloaded.

RECOMMENDATION: Stewards to continue to have lanyards with the QR code.

RECOMMENDATION: Ask stewards to download the song sheet to their phone and airdrop to audience members.

RECOMMENDATION: Engage with the choir/choirs to make sure the lyrics match the music and what is being rehearsed.

13. Audience

It became clear from the communication in the run up to the Carols event in 2023 that it is an event that attracts visitors from far beyond Lymm and Warrington. It was also evident on the night that children and young people attended the event to listen to their school songs being played across the village.

In terms of the radio, there were 1228 active connections from 6-8.30pm. Radio wise, a household of 2.4 calculates that this was an audience of just under 3000 listeners. MIX:56 has broken this figure down to 75% local and 25% outside Cheshire, and included listeners in the USA, Germany, Belgium, France, Australia, Canada and Spain. This only includes listeners on smart speaker, app and website and not on DAB. The DAB figures cannot be tracked.

RECOMMENDATION: As part of the residents' surveys, ascertain how many of Lymm's residents actually attend the event.

RECOMMENDATION: Liaise with local businesses about the impact and importance of Carols for the local economy.

RECOMMENDATION: Continue to use local schools' song recordings to involve local children and develop the audience.

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RECOMMENDATION: Contact that local care homes and increase their involvement with the event.

14. Stewards

a. Briefing

Due to the village hall being closed for capital work, the radio station was used as a central meeting point. This was a more central location than the hall. Stewards arrived at various times on the night which proved time consuming for the Event Manager.

RECOMMENDATION: Hold the stewards' briefing session a week before the event.

RECOMMENDATION: Ask MIX:56 if the studios can be used as the HQ on the night again.

b. Training – terrorism

All those who were stewarding at the event were asked to complete a short on-line training course and were asked to send the completion certificate to officers. A total of 20 stewards supported the event with 3 of these confirming they had completed the training.

RECOMMENDATION: Aim to bring this forward in 2024, ensuring that all stewards have the completed the training.

RECOMMENDATION: Obtain a quote for a professional team of stewards to secure the road closures for the event, easing the demand on finding volunteers.

15. Volunteers

All Parish Council organised village events are supported by volunteers. Events simply cannot happen without the support and good will of volunteers.

Core Roles – the six core roles were filled by four Councillors and two residents. The team met on the night. In future, a meeting will be planned for the core volunteers prior to the event in order to discuss the roles and the event documents in advance.

RECOMMENDATION: Continue to ask volunteers to come forward to support village events.

RECOMMENDATION: Set up the volunteer event in the village hall.

RECOMMENDATION: Bring the core roles team together in advance of the event.

16. Stalls

Some local businesses maximise the opportunity of visitors to the village and have stalls selling food and drink in the road closure. This is not included in the Parish Council's planning documents especially the event management plan, risk assessments and insurance.

RECOMMENDATION: Manage stalls in future years, ensuring they are set up correctly, legally and safely.

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RECOMMENDATION: Consider selling festive merchandise to the audience on the night to raise funds.

17. Marketing

Marketing and communications took place via social media, the website, press releases and notices on boards in the village.

RECOMMENDATION: Consider a photographer and drone footage to record the event.

RECOMMENDATION: Consider creating a document such as 'What you need to know before the event' to share with attendees.

RECOMMENDATION: Have a stall at events such as Dickensian festival to attract volunteers and to raise funds.

18. Police and security (Martyn's Law)

PCSO Daren Dennis was on shift on Christmas Eve and reported:

"After not having attended at the last few carol services (covid included) this years event was a pleasure to attend. The new set up was very professional and the sound system was excellent. And having the carol words available via a QR code on your phone meant everyone had easy access to the words. The location of the stage was good as this meant we didn't have as many people congregating at the junction of The Cross and Rectory Lane. The volunteers were well briefed and though there were issues with traffic at the take away on Bridgewater street these issues were soon sorted. Despite the rain the turnout was excellent and whilst walking through the crowd and talking to members of the public the feedback I received was all positive. Well done to the organisers and volunteers of this event."

Two breakouts erupted at the end of the event that required police intervention including six squad cars.

Martyn's Law is likely to impact the planning and delivery of an event in 2024.

RECOMMENDATION: Clerk to keep up to date with the progress of Martyn's Law and a new Terrorism Bill.

19. Communication during the event

Walkie talkies were used to communicate on the night. Some technical issues emerged, including picking up other transmissions. In addition, the stewards by the stage area could not hear the walkie talkies above the noise from the speakers.

RECOMMENDATION: Use a different channel for the radios.

RECOMMENDATION: Use earpieces so stewards can continue to communicate.

20. Expenditure

Current costs stand at £7174.61 (excl VAT). An invoice for costs for the traffic management company is still outstanding.

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21. Income

a. QR codes

Between the stalls and the QR codes that were shared across the village, a total of £456.40 was raised. £165.60 was paid digitally and cash donations of £290.90 were made from stalls at The Cross on the run up to the event and by using QR codes on newsletters, noticeboards and lampposts.

RECOMMENDATION: Repeat the QR codes for donations for 2024.

RECOMMENDATION: Other options to increase income were unable to be executed within the limited timeframe however these can be explored for 2024.

RECOMMENDATION: Parish Council to run the teas and coffees in the village hall at events such as Dickensian to raise funds for events such as Carols.

b. Sponsorship

A sponsor was found and contributed £500 to the event. After the event, the sponsor confirmed they were satisfied with the promotion that they received. A suggestion was to print the banners landscape instead of portrait to have increased impact on the stage.

RECOMMENDATION: Seek a sponsor for 2024 and start the process earlier in the year.

22. Thanks

Lastly, thanks to all those who gave their time for the planning and execution of Carols from The Cross. It is a year-round task to ensure that the event runs safely and smoothly and can be enjoyed by the thousands that attend.

RECOMMENDATION: Hold a thank you event after 2024's event for all the volunteers and partner organisations that make the event a success.

END