Christmas Light Festival 2014

Evaluation Report
INDEX

1. Introduction and event overview
2. Audiences
3. Artistic Programme
4. Production
5. Marketing, Communications and Website
6. Summary and Recommendations

APPENDICES

1. Christmas Light Festival Survey summary data
2. Cultural Partners structured debrief meetings summary
3. Christmas Light Festival Delivery and Participation Statistics
4. Marketing Report
5. Christmas Light Festival Team debrief summary
6. Day of Song Feedback Summary
7. Light Installation teacher survey monkey
INTRODUCTION

Overview

In 2013 there was a transition from an event that took place over the Friday evening only, into a 3-day festival which incorporated a large outdoor event footprint in St Giles with a festive market and stage, a lantern procession on Friday evening, choir performances on Sunday and other cultural programming across venues on the Friday evening. In response to feedback about the level of disruption caused by the road closures necessary to make this event footprint safe, it was decided that a different footprint would need to be developed for 2014 that would not require any road closures but that would build on public engagement through cultural programming in venues.

In 2014 Oxford’s Christmas Light Festival remained a ‘free’ 3-day cultural event but did not include the lantern procession or event space in St Giles. It took place over the weekend of 21-23 November and was a collaboration between more than 20 venues in Oxford providing live music and dance performances, arts installations and free cultural activities for the communities of the city. Programming for the festival responded to the theme “See Your City in a Different Light.”

The festival was produced by Oxford City Council’s Culture Team and Ian Nolan Events in partnership with over 20 cultural organisations on behalf of communities across the city.

Features of the 2014 festival

- **3 days of programming across cultural venues** including locations beyond the immediate city centre such as the Street Light Festival on Magdalen Road, Ice Station Digital at the Ice Rink and including 3 city centre sound installations produced by OCM
- **Youth engagement project** with 6 schools in the city’s regeneration areas working with 6 museum partners
- **Festival information hub at Gloucester Green** including evening entertainment with Fireflow produced by Arts at the Old Fire Station
- **Day of Song** involving a community choir trail of performances in venues in addition to a Schools Choirs concert and a finale event featuring a newly commissioned piece of music.
- **Festival Film** created by a team of volunteers
- **website** featuring cultural listings for the 8-week festive season, starting with the festival, to encourage residents and visitors to enjoy Oxford’s rich cultural offer [www.oxfordschristmas.com](http://www.oxfordschristmas.com)
- **Festival brochure**

Feedback and Evaluation

- Feedback surveys were distributed to festival audiences through all cultural venues and the festival hub followed by an online version circulated to the following groups; schools, key stakeholders, retailers, sponsors, participating choirs and councillors.
- Feedback meetings were held in December 2013 and January 2014 for the event team and cultural partners
- This Evaluation report addresses every aspect of the festival and draws on quantitative and qualitative data to summarise what worked, what didn’t work and what we could do differently. See appendices for raw data and detailed feedback summaries.
AUDIENCES

This year more than 14,028 people participated directly in festival projects and activities with 3,810 of those being children and young people, with total audiences reaching 30,545 across all the venues and activities.

Demographic Profile

The demographic profile gathered from the 255 people surveyed about the event was as follows:

- Gender: 35% male and 65% female
- Ethnicity: 84% white or white British, 8% Asian or Asian British, 5% Mixed or multiple ethnic group, 2% Black or Black British, 2% other ethnic group
- 10% of respondents answered that their day to day activities were limited because of a health problem or disability lasting or expected to last at least 12 months
- Of the 213 valid postcodes disclosed the postcode profile of attendees was as follows: 57% Oxford, 28% Oxfordshire, 15% outside Oxfordshire.
- Of the 57% of Oxford attendees, 10% were from OX1, 19% OX4, 13% OX2 and 15% OX3.

Economic impact

The previous festival footprint with a large outdoor event resulted in a measure of increased footfall within the city centre and an assessment regarding the economic impact this increased footfall would have generated. The 2014 footprint did not result in significant increased footfall within the city centre streets, however those surveyed at the different cultural events, did report a significant level of spend as a result of their trip to the festival. People surveyed were asked how much was spent as part of their trip to the Christmas Light Festival and of the 256 people surveyed 207 responses to this question were received. In total the 207 respondents spent £6,454.00 with a mean average spend per attendee of £31.18. This average spend calculation is impacted by 3 respondents with a reported spend of between £300-£500 therefore the following table shows that 48% of respondents spent between £10 and £30.

Amount spent as part of trip to the Christmas Light Festival

![Amount spent as part of trip to the Christmas Light Festival](chart.png)
Respondents were asked to rate the specific events they attended throughout the festival and 330 ratings were received. 92% of these ratings were ‘good’ or ‘Excellent’.

When those surveyed were asked what would make the festival even better, 185 suggestions were received. These suggestions were categorised and the following table details the most popular suggestions mentioned 10 or more times:
ARTISTIC PROGRAMME

The artistic programme for the festival consisted of activities programmed and organised by cultural partners, projects funded through festival programming grants and specific projects organised and delivered by the core festival team.

Cultural Partner Programming
We worked with 31 cultural partners and venues in 2014, including venues outside the city centre with meaningful collaborations between many of the partners to deliver 59 events/activities over the weekend. 62 artists were employed in delivering festival activity and 32 new pieces of cultural works were produced.

Day of Song
On Sunday 23rd November Oxford’s Day of Song took place with 3 strands of activity, performances from community choirs in venues across the city, a schools choir concert and a finale event at the town hall.

The community choirs strand involved 500 singers from 19 local community choirs. The venues for these community choir performances included, the Westgate Shopping Centre Oxford, Clarendon Centre, Debenhams, The Old Museum, OVADA, The Story Museum, Pitt Rivers Museum, St Michael at the North Gate and Oxford Castle Unlocked.

The schools concerts took place in the Wesley Memorial Church during the afternoon and involved 6 schools including Windmill Primary School, Chalgrove Primary School, St Andrews C of E Primary School, Garsington CE Primary School, Wolvercote Primary School and St Mary and St John Primary School.

The finale event at Oxford Town Hall started with some congregation carols led by the schools choirs and concluded with a premier of the new commission "Share Your Light", composed especially for
the Festival by local choir leader and singer Cat Kelly. Around 200 singers from the adult community choirs joined the school children in the finale performance of the new piece.

**Light Installation Project**
During November six local primary schools worked together with ‘skills for the future’ education trainees from Oxford University Museums and Collections to find inspiration for giant light installations. Working together with artist Nikki Gunson, each school created a light sculpture which was then displayed outside the Museum of Natural History and Pitt Rivers Museum on the University Museums’ Lawn.

Each school participating was paired with a city museum as follows:
Bayard’s Hill with Natural History Museum
Wood Farm with Museum of History of Science
John Henry Newman with Botanic Gardens
Rose Hill with Museum of Oxford
Blackbird Academy Trust with Pitt Rivers
Cutteslowe with Ashmolean

It should be noted that in 2015 the funding programme which Skills for the Future contributed from will not be available. This funding was used to pay for the leaders of the workshops with the children.

**Christmas Light Festival Programming Grants**
Oxford City Council awarded three local creative groups a total of £4,610 funding to produce exciting and inspiring activities for the festival in 2014. The three groups awarded the grants were: The Ark T Centre, Magdalen Road Studios in partnership with Pegasus Theatre and Arts at the Old Fire Station.

The Ark T Centre created a 12 minute performance piece ‘Stardust and Snowflakes’ which was performed at the University of Oxford Natural History Museum lawn on Friday 21st and Saturday 22nd November from 6.30pm. The performance was produced by Oxford Youth Dance (The Uthers) with Cecilia Macfarlane and Groovy Su, Artistic Director and Costume Designer. It included 25 dancers embodying the magical movements of snowflakes against a dramatic backdrop of Oxford’s architecture.

Magdalen Road Studios worked in partnership with Pegasus Theatre to create a Pop-Up festival called Streetlight. The Pop-Up festival was open from 11am – 5pm on Saturday 22nd and Sunday 23rd November throughout shops, pubs, cafes and businesses along Magdalen Road including Magdalen Road Studios and Pegasus Theatre. Streetlight included live music, art, performances and family activities.

Arts at the Old Fire Station produced an Artistic Takeaway experience for Gloucester Green on Friday and Saturday evening where the public were able to watch artists create work live, make their own and take some art away.

**What went well?**

The quality of the activity within cultural venues was considered to be Good or Excellent by 92% of those surveyed.

Comments from cultural partners included;
• Cultural partners reported being able to reach a wide range of audiences/age groups who might not usually get involved promoting; to people outside of the city centre what cultural venues have to offer
• Representatives from cultural venues felt the festival gave them the opportunity to try new things and work with new partners which produced some unusual offerings. It created new and challenging artistic pieces and activity with potential for development in the future

What didn’t go well?

Overwhelmingly, the most recurrent comment from those surveyed and from cultural partners was that the festival suffered from the lack of a flagship outdoor event/activity to drive public engagement. Cultural partners noted that this was important in providing a ‘hook’ for all their additional programming as part of the festival. The most frequently made comment was around reinstating the lantern procession.

The core festival team debrief noted the need for clearer artistic direction in order to give the festival a coherent vision and for it to make sense for the public as one event rather than lots of exciting yet disparate elements.

Without the road closures needed to provide a central event space and infrastructure/stewarding to accommodate large crowds there was an overly conservative approach to outdoor and street programming which resulted in the perception that the festival was inaccessible, only taking place behind closed doors.

What could be done differently?

• The festival needs to reclaim a flagship ‘spectacle,’ ‘event(s)’ or project that can be delivered within budget but to a high quality and that will drive accessibility and public engagement; providing other cultural partners with a ‘hook’ for all their additional programming as part of the festival
• Having come out of a transitional year in 2014 there is an opportunity to re-focus the offer and not stick rigidly to the idea of a 3-day festival which may spread resources too thinly
• The reinstatement of some outdoor programming could generate more festival visibility, accessibility and atmosphere
• There has been overwhelming feedback requesting the reinstatement of the lantern procession therefore the team should look at the financial and logistical feasibility of doing this
• The festival now needs to develop a stronger artistic vision. In the absence of having the budget to employ an artistic director it is suggested this is achieved this by pulling together a small working group of key cultural partners to lead on crystallising a clear artistic vision for 2015
**PRODUCTION**

The production management of the festival was provided by Ian Nolan Events and stewards were supplied by City of Oxford College as part of an on-going partnership arrangement providing training and experience to students. There were a total of 75 students working over the weekend.

**What went well?**

- The event was perceived to be safe and enjoyable by the partners of the SAG. With the exception of one noise complaint; the residents and businesses within Gloucester Green were supportive.

- The event brought in services of the City Council’s Direct Services for extended hours of public facilities and highways sanitation.

- Positive relationships with New River Retail lead to a production office located in an empty property at Gloucester Green and the lantern exhibition moved to Templar’s Square for two weeks.

**What didn’t go well?**

- Rain meant the young people’s light installation exhibition couldn’t be left out on Saturday night. Future projects should be waterproof if they are to be left out.

- Relatively late in the planning process concerns were raised about anticipated crowd levels for one cultural partner’s event which resulted in last minute resources needing to be sourced in order to provide appropriate levels of stewarding and production support.

**What could be done differently?**

- The production for Day of Song should in future be incorporated into the central festival production plans more in advance and in greater detail as on the day additional support was required to effectively manage the two day of song concerts.

- Although the students were fantastic at crowd management and direction, it was felt the arrangement would benefit from a professional manager working for the event who then manages this team.

- Participating venues with the potential to attract large crowds should address and commit to serving own security needs where necessary.
**MARKETING, COMMUNICATIONS AND WEBSITE**

The Christmas Light Festival 2014 saw a change in identity and consolidation of name; previously having two parts consisting of the launch event named ‘Light Night’ and the weekend of events named ‘Light Festival.’ This year the only name used was Christmas Light Festival, which also reflected the absence of the lantern procession and stage programme in St Giles on the Friday evening.

The change in identity was seen as a marketing challenge due to the previous popularity of these launch events which last year attracted over 100,000 people to St Giles’ alone. The messages needed to be clear that these events were not happening and yet strongly communicate that the festival itself was still an exciting and attractive offer for the people of Oxford.

The majority of events programmed for the festival were free which was communicated to help increase engagement from members of Oxford’s community who would not normally engage with arts, heritage or culture. It was important to Oxford City Council that this event was accessible for all.

Festival coverage:
- The festival website received a total of 17,538 sessions with an estimated 12,267 unique users. Usage of the website peaked on Friday 21st with a total of 4,150 sessions.
- The estimated reach of the twitter handles @OXChristmas and #OxLightFest13 was 47,207 and 80,680 respectively between 23rd and 26th November.
- Coverage about the festival was generated in local press with 11 articles about the festival appearing and with 3 local radio interviews.

Of those surveyed at the event, people heard about the event through:

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<th>Method</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Count</th>
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<tr>
<td>Festival website</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>(46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus stop posters</td>
<td>3%</td>
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<td>(4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
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<td>(10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word of mouth</td>
<td>57%</td>
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**What went well?**

The festival brand established in 2013 was consolidated and strengthened in 2014 despite the change to the event footprint. The continued use of the website along with a new festival brochure helped to showcase the Light Festival with the majority of cultural partners reflecting that the new brochure was a positive addition to the festival marketing profile.

The festival team included a freelance marketing specialist with dedicated responsibility for the print, website and drafting of press releases. With a project of this size with multiple partners this dedicated role proved to be invaluable and essential in providing a coordinated approach to delivering on the marketing and press needs of the festival as identified in the evaluation findings of the previous year.
What didn’t go well?

Feedback noted;
- Numerous survey respondents called for there to be more advertising of the festival.
- Suggestions from some that brochure distribution and website information was too late.
- Cultural partners requested the need to be included in a proofing stage for the festival brochure.
- Marketing consultant reported the need for increased participation from council press team to highlight press releases as ‘hot topics’ to generate more interest from media partners.
- Cultural partners suggested that venue branding provided by the central festival team would support the perception of the individual programmed events as being part of one cohesive festival.

What could be done differently?

- Future-proof the map of the website to avoid maintenance hours in updating. This might mean the facility being added where by the map can be edited by the administrator.
- Consider adding in editable areas on the homepage to enable the administrator to include messages where needed e.g. no road closures or Christmas Light Festival is 21st – 23rd November see the calendar for the programmed events.
- The printed programme was very popular and might be useful in larger quantities as a more prominent marketing tool and if possible, delivered two weeks earlier which would require programmed events to be confirmed by the beginning of October.
- The website has proven popular and could be published earlier in the year if programmed events – especially from cultural partners – were able to confirm details earlier in the project timeline.
- Press releases to have a more collaborative approach with the press officer. The best performing press release issued was identified as a ‘hot topic’ by the council’s press officer. If the press office were included in some of the programming meetings they would be able to identify strong stories for the festival.
**SUMMARY**

The 2014 Christmas Light Festival was a free event for the communities of Oxford and Oxfordshire, attracting 30,545 people to enjoy a programme of high quality cultural and community activity. The festival footprint was adapted quite substantially from 2013 to accommodate feedback received in 2013 in relation to the disruption caused by the road closures required to deliver the outdoor activity safely. The evaluation has identified the results of this rapid adaptation in relation to a perceived lack of festival atmosphere and key outdoor event to drive public engagement.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Changes should be made to address:
1. Need to increase public engagement in accessible spaces
2. Need to clarify artistic direction of central festival offer
3. Need to re-focus marketing to better utilise the most effective marketing tools