

**Stonehaven Business Association  
Aberdeenshire Council – Festive Lights Workshop  
Inverurie Academy – 18<sup>th</sup> April from 7pm to 9.15pm**

I attended the workshop on behalf of the SBA. Kath Boyne and Julie Lomax were also there on behalf of Stonehaven Horizon Group, as the meeting also covered hanging baskets (“attachments to street lighting columns”). There were about 20 representatives from various groups throughout Aberdeenshire Council, and half a dozen Council staff. Margaret-Jane Cardno (the Garioch Area Manager) chaired the evening. We were rotated round three groups to consider different aspects of the Council’s policy documents.

I understand that policy documents had been sent to Councillors last year, but they wanted further consultation to be carried out and that was the purpose of the evening. If anyone wants them, I have copies of the most recent draft documents, which are

- Festive lights and attachments to street lighting columns – Policy (9 January 2018) – 4 pages
- Banners, bunting and attachments to lighting columns – Manual (9 January 2018) – 19 pages
- Festive lighting – Manual (29 March 2018) – 10 pages

After any changes arising from the discussions, the policy documents will then go back to Councillors in June 2018. It is envisaged there will then be a 2-year transitional period before the policies are fully in force.

The policy statement is as follows:

Aberdeenshire Council recognises the contribution festive lights and other seasonal decorations can make to enhancing our streetscapes and in creating a sense of place and we will cooperate with community groups, seeking to ensure that all such installations are safe and secure.

We will:

- Provide clear guidance on what is acceptable in a “Festive-Lighting Manual” and a “Banners, Bunting and Attachments to Lighting Columns Manual”.
- Reject applications for installations which do not comply with the requirements in the manuals.
- Remove unauthorised installations and seek to recover costs from the responsible persons.
- Only consider applications for column-mounted festive lights within the main footfall areas of settlements.
- Recover, from applicants, the cost of electricity consumed by festive lights.
- Liaise with community councils or other community groups to consider need for strengthened columns when preparing column replacement programmes for relevant locations.
- Assist communities to investigate alternatives where column mounting of Christmas lights is not appropriate or practicable.

**Stonehaven Business Association  
Aberdeenshire Council – Festive Lights Workshop  
Inverurie Academy – 18<sup>th</sup> April from 7pm to 9.15pm**

The three groups that I took part in discussed the following matters:

**Payment for electricity**

The Council has no budget to pay for electricity used by Christmas lights, and intends to recover the full costs from communities. It was pointed out that the admin costs of invoicing would exceed the amounts recovered in some cases. However the view was that some £12,000 could potentially be recovered and that the costs of collection would be absorbed by the department concerned.

For Stonehaven, we have quite a number of older lights, which have higher wattages. The cost depends on the wattage, and how many days the lights are up for. The Council assumes they are on 16 hours a day (with the street lights) and will charge accordingly. I did not see the Council's estimate of what the cost would have been for us last year. My own estimate of this is £900. The charge applies from 2021.

**PAT testing of lights**

Every light needs to be tested every year, to make sure it was safe. There was some discussion about whether annual testing was needed, but the Council had concerns about how some lights were stored, meaning they could be damaged in storage.

The SBA already pays the contractor who installs the lights to carry out the necessary testing.

**Inspection of lighting columns**

For columns less than 7 years old, we (i.e. the SBA, not the Council) would need to get written confirmation from the manufacturer that the column can take the additional load of a light or hanging basket. For the vast majority of columns that are older, we would need to provide a report from a "professional organisation" confirming that they have assessed the structural capacity of the proposed additional load. Such a report would have to be done every 30 months (so it would cover 3 years). One of the council officers said that the council could help organise the reports, but the community groups would have to meet the costs. The anticipated cost was £30 per lamp post (i.e. £10 per lamp post per year). At my table, the view was expressed that we were having to pay to do the council's job for them.

For Stonehaven, I think we used 44 street lighting columns last year. The cost would therefore be £1,320 every third year (averaging £440 per annum). It remains to be seen who the Council would accept as a "professional organisation", and whether it would be accepted that some communities might have the expertise to do this themselves.

**Other matters**

The council want Christmas lights applications and all the associated paperwork in by 1 September. The view at my table was that was too early in the year, and 1 October was more practical. Even then, where lights had failed testing and needed repairs, that timescale was difficult. The council offered some flexibility about retest paperwork following later.

The council will only permit Christmas lights in the main footfall area of each settlement. Nothing was said at the workshop, but it was previously indicated that Stonehaven has two areas – the Market Square/Town Centre and also the High Street – and therefore it did not comply.

Lights or baskets must not be attached to columns what already had road signage on them. Commercial sponsorship names and logos are not permitted on lights.

**Stonehaven Business Association  
Aberdeenshire Council – Festive Lights Workshop  
Inverurie Academy – 18<sup>th</sup> April from 7pm to 9.15pm**

Lights on columns must give a 2.5 metre clearance for pedestrians. They must be 1m from the top of the column. None of the Stonehaven lights go over the road; we will now need to make sure they are not within 0.5 metres of the road. This will cause problems in some towns. Lights above the carriageway would have to give a 5.8 metre clearance.

For Stonehaven, the Christmas Tree will need to be protected by a suitable robust barrier which keeps the public at least 2 metres from the display. Free standing displays must not be connected to the street lighting electricity supply, and there are rules for private electrical supply connections.

Bunting falling on to roads and pavements has been a problem. Permission must be sought in advance to use street lighting columns – the council's response may take 3 weeks. It must be erected no more than 14 days before an event and removed within 2 days thereafter. Public liability insurance of £5m is required. Spans must be less than 20 metres and designed to snap under excessive loading. There is a simplified procedure for places without vehicle access. Similar rules apply to banners.

Hanging baskets need consent too. Approval will be granted for a maximum of 30 months. Baskets must be the wrap-around type, or in matched pairs so the load is balanced. Baskets fixed to private buildings don't need council permission, but must not cause any hazard to pedestrians etc.

Where columns are replaced by the Council, in high footfall areas town centres they would use steel columns suitable for lights. In other areas, if there were existing fittings they would replace with like for like. Where columns had already been replaced and the replacements were not suitable for lights, they could be replaced but only if community groups met the full cost of replacements.

### **Conclusion**

The formalisation of the rules into a policy document and manuals is well intentioned. However the adding of further layers of bureaucracy and cost is unwelcome and will undoubtedly cause some communities to abandon their attempts to brighten up their towns.

To put up lights we will need to

1. Apply in advance (by September) specifying which lights are going on which columns, providing details of wattages and windages, providing electrical PAT testing certification, and providing confirmation of insurance.
2. Apply in advance specifying the date the cherry picker is being used to put the lights up
3. Pay for electricity usage
4. Pay for three-yearly inspections of the street lighting columns that we use
5. Apply in advance specifying the date the cherry picker is being used to take the lights down

Up to now we have paid a contractor £4,000+ per annum just to test and install the lights. That does not include the costs of buying new and replacement lights. Going forward, I expect that annual running cost to increase to £6,000+ per annum and the SBA will need to take a view as to whether it is willing and able to meet that expense for something that is relatively peripheral to its objectives.

Charles H Sands  
20 April 2018