

Statement by Lord Mayor

Meeting of Dublin City Council, Monday 7th November 2022

As discussed at the group leaders' meeting, I want to provide each political grouping with an opportunity to set out their views on the Mansion House crib issue in two-minute statements. But before that, I'd like to outline what I have in mind for this Christmas.

As we're all aware, since the mid-nineties there has been a 'live crib' at the front of the Mansion House for visitors to view. When initiated this was an innovation. It was the decision of the Lord Mayor of the day to do this, and Lord Mayors since have decided to stick with this formula.

I decided that it was time for a significant revamp, letting go of the element where live animals were involved, but also innovating to create a more attractive and hands-on experience for visitors, and especially for children and families.

While not obliged to do so, I decided to consult with our Protocol Committee at its meeting on Thursday 27th October to gauge the opinions of my colleagues. I was aware that the move would be a break from what previous Lord Mayors had chosen to put in place at the front of the house at Christmas time. None of the members of the Protocol Committee, which is representative of all political groupings on the Council, raised concerns about the plan. It is unfortunate, from the perspective of the Council, that a member of the Protocol Committee informed the media before my Office had an opportunity to contact the IFA or DSPCA with whom there is an established relationship.

I'd like to reassure people that what we are aiming to do is to make the experience better this Christmas. Let me first deal with one misunderstanding that has arisen from some erroneous reporting in some traditional media and social media: there will be a crib at the Mansion House this Christmas. The only difference is that there will not be live animals in the crib. But what's exciting is that there will be more than just a crib.

The reality is that the current offering is a little underwhelming for families. In the last few years the experience has been limited, where people enter what is effectively a big shed at one end, and passively view some farm animals for a few minutes, lately behind a Perspex screen, before exiting the other side. I believe that we can create a better experience, one where children can interact with the displays at the Mansion House, where play and fun are at the centre of it.

We're planning to improve the experience. There will be more for children and young people to do and enjoy. I'm working actively with the staff at the Mansion House on planning for the event. While all the details aren't firmed up yet, we're likely to include,

alongside the crib, a Christmas postbox, a sleigh that children can get into, and a 'Christmas Trail', where children can explore their surroundings, including through the Mansion House garden. We're planning to involve children in workshops, and we're going to bring in children's choirs and dance groups, all the time emphasising children's participation and play. We hope to put even greater effort into the fundraising element, where we raise funds for charities, helping these organisations to continue their valued work in our communities.

As this is a matter for the Lord Mayor of the day, there is nothing to prevent the next Lord Mayor or any future Lord Mayor from innovating further, or going back to what had been done in previous years, or indeed choosing an entirely different approach.

I'm disappointed that my initiative, intended to improve the experience of families visiting the Mansion House this year, has been the subject of an opportunistic political attack by Fine Gael. It is curious that Fine Gael has chosen to highlight this issue in particular, given the many serious challenges that Dublin faces, such as homelessness, drug use, rising costs, staff shortages and the pressure our city retailers are under due to online shopping.

A few months ago, I set out my hopes and vision for my year as Lord Mayor through the themes of Youth and Biodiversity. Doing better for the children and young people of this city is at the heart of this initiative. This is not some "culture war", it is an attempt to do things differently, to do things better.

I also believe in 2022 we do not need to use animals to create a great Christmas experience and I know speaking to children and young people they don't either. While the farm animals in the crib have undoubtedly been well looked after, I don't believe a busy and noisy city centre is the right location for them. Circuses have moved away from using animals in this way and I think Dublin City Council should also do so. Let's lead by example. There is already a motion going through our Arts SPC to request DCC to move away from the use of animals for other DCC events.

I understand that there are differing views across the council on this issue, some in favour, some against. My request to you, my fellow Councillors, is to wait and see, to simply give me the space to try something new. As I outlined, the next Lord Mayor can revert to the old way, or change it in any way they see fit. We need to be brave and try out new ways of doing things, and I hope you can join me in this effort. It has been a hard two years during Covid, let's unite in making this a great Christmas for all our citizens and visitors to this fine city.