

1. The Attraction

Winter Wonderland was a temporary attraction located in Rochester Castle Gardens between 6th December 2002 and 12th January 2003. The centrepiece of the attraction was a 300 square metre ice rink, composed of synthetic “ice”. The rink was set up on a platform with two timber lodges for ticketing and skate hire. Festive lighting surrounded the rink and the site.

For the first two weeks, the ice rink was accompanied by a Fun Fair. Food and drink kiosks were available throughout the period of the ice rink opening.

2. Performance

The performance of the ice rink was badly affected by the appalling weather of the festive season. Of the 36 days on which the attraction was in place, it was not able to open on six (the torrential rains of the period 29th December to 2nd January and the heavy snow days of 8th and 9th January when the Castle itself was also closed due to the hazardous conditions). Beyond these days, the weather was generally dull and often wet. December 2002 has been recorded as the wettest December in the south-east for 30 years.

Despite the weather, visits to the rink were still a little disappointing. It is quite normal for a new attraction or event to not “take off” in its first year. Even the Dickens Festival took several years to establish itself and we are also experiencing a similar “low awareness stage” for the Will Adams Festival.

The fact that two other outdoor ice rinks were operating consecutively in north Kent created an element of competition that had not been expected. At the point of contracting with the rink provider, we knew of the possibility of the Bluewater rink but not of the Maidstone rink, which contracted much later. In the event, the weather badly affected both other rinks and the Maidstone rink closed six days earlier than scheduled.

The total number of skaters at Winter Wonderland over the 5 week period was 5,603, 40% below the target which had been set in the early stages of planning in June. It is fair to say that 20% of the shortfall can be attributed to the 6 days when the rink was closed (4 being peak days during school holidays). The realistic shortfall in numbers was thus more to the level of 20% below target.

Clearly the disappointing numbers have reflected on the overall net costs to the Council (see below). However, we conservatively estimate that for every skater, there were four additional visitors such that some 28,000 people visited Winter Wonderland in total over the five week period.

3. Positive Aspects

It is important to reflect that Winter Wonderland was not just a temporary visitor attraction but an initiative to raise the profile of Medway as an exciting, vibrant destination. It was therefore an appropriate use of funds from the tourism budget.

Some of the positive aspects of the initiative can be listed.

- The ice rink was used as the carrot to persuade ITV's "Wish You Were Here" to film a full destination piece of around 8 minutes on Rochester and the Dickens Festival. This will be broadcast at a peak TV slot with an expected TV audience in the region of 8 million viewers (provisional broadcast date is 23 February). This alone is a major coup for Medway. The peak time national advertising cost for this slot is around £55,000 for a 30 second advert. The feature is thus the equivalent of around £880,000 worth of advertising spend.
- Considerable media coverage was gained by the attraction at local, regional and national levels. The local media coverage was well co-ordinated by the Council's communications unit and very favourable. TV coverage included Sky News and Meridian. The local and regional media coverage alone has been estimated as having a value of some £16,000 had we elected to buy advertising space.
- Winter Wonderland was a new and dynamic addition to the Dickens Christmas Festival and contributed to the particular success of the Festival in 2002.
- A mainstream cash sponsor was attracted to the Winter Wonderland (Sea France), the first major festival sponsor which Medway has attracted in a number of years. The cash sponsorship was exclusively for Winter Wonderland (not for any future events) and Sea France have expressed interest in working with Medway in the near future.
- In addition, there were three other cash sponsors and four in-kind sponsors who participated. These were HSBC, Veena Leisure, Castle Catering, CSM, Diggerland, Cleanaway and Southern Sheds.
- Despite the legitimate concerns of many that synthetic ice would not prove popular, the feedback on the skating experience and value for money was good. Only very experienced skaters claimed to find the experience disappointing though even they acknowledged it as "different" or "interesting"
- Winter Wonderland offered something new for local people and an attraction for young people and families in particular to enjoy over the Christmas break.
- Though we have yet to gather full feedback from the High Street traders, some positive anecdotal feedback has been received, especially from restaurateurs, though they shared our disappointment with the weather and number of visitors.
- There were no injuries amongst the 5,600 skaters other than the odd bruise from a fall or slight cut if skates were ill fitting. There was a single incident during the Dickens Festival when an ambulance was called to aid a young lady (prone to fainting and epilepsy) who

temporarily lost consciousness after coming off the ice. Her condition was not related to the skating experience.

- There were no major security incidents and no damage to equipment other than some slight damage to the ladies toilets in the Castle Gardens, which were immediately repaired. There were some major concerns about security prior to the opening of the attraction which perhaps led us to invest in more stewarding than was ultimately necessary.
- The new community safety street team made frequent visits to the Castle Gardens and assisted with guaranteeing the sense of safety for visitors to the attraction.
- The atmosphere on the busy days was very engaging, with families and young children in particular enjoying the skating.
- The attraction was professionally managed at all times. The local operator, Starburst, though as disappointed as the Council in terms of the weather and number of skaters, has commented that the rink was ideal for young children as an introduction to skating and should help to generate new levels of interest to sustain the Gillingham Ice Bowl in the future.
- Only one resident complaint letter has been received.
- The experience of managing and marketing the attraction developed a stronger bonding and working relationship between the Tourism and Communications units.

4. Negative Aspects

There were weaknesses to the attraction and some negative aspects.

- The original vision of “Winter Wonderland” was not achieved. The site could have been dressed up further and the quality enhanced. The eventual product was something of a compromise borne out of a reluctance to spend too much money on a new venture. Certainly the Fun Fair was not “Victorian” and rather ordinary and the lighting could have been more artfully presented.
- We perhaps conveyed the image of a more glamorous product via the marketing literature than we were ultimately able to deliver. Certainly this was the case with the Christmas market held over two weekends, which some visitors had expected to be larger.
- The attraction should have been for 4 weeks rather than 5 weeks (i.e. closing on 6th January) as the last week proved to be less attractive for visitors.
- Research was conducted on a sample day which indicated that 60% of visitors were from Medway and 40% from beyond. From the small sample taken, only 15% were first time visitors to Rochester. This backs up our analysis that the rink did not succeed in attracting as many genuine tourists as had been anticipated. Its real tourism value was in the media coverage attracted and the future spin off benefits which will result.

- The level of group bookings from companies, schools and local associations was disappointing. Unfortunately, there was a general lack of engagement in the project from other departments of the Council. Opportunities to engage schools and social services in particular were not maximised.
- There has been some damage to the grass in the Gardens. We will be working closely with the parks and gardens team over the next month to re-establish the grass in the damaged areas.

5. Costs

Originally, gross costs were estimated at £60,000 with income estimated at £30,000, leaving a net cost of **£30,000**, to be funded by the tourism budget.

In the event, gross costs increased to around £95,000, largely due to increased provision for site management, security, stewarding, insurance and lighting. Income achieved (concessions, sponsorship and our share from the operation) was also less, at £23,500, due to the lower than expected number of skaters and the shortage of sponsorship* income compared to original target.

Final **net cost** will thus be between **£70,000** and £75,000, considerably more than had been envisaged. This will still be funded from within the 2002/3 tourism revenue budget (note – TV advertising was not commissioned this year) with commitments elsewhere having been postponed or cancelled to accommodate it.

* It should be noted that in-kind sponsorship to the value of £7,000 was also received – not reflected in the costs/income – eg the Christmas tree, second timber lodge, waste clearance

Unfortunately another major sponsorship opportunity could not be delivered. If it had and the target visitor throughput had been achieved (so receiving an extra £7,000 from operating revenue) the net cost would have been between £55,000 and £60,000.

The project has turned out to be a relatively expensive one but should be viewed in the context of other tourist initiatives, which Medway has undertaken in the past. A television advertising campaign, for example, has typically cost in the region of £75,000. The table below illustrates the cost per visitor of Winter Wonderland when compared to some of Medway's other events.

Event	Visitors *	Net Budget/Cost	Cost per Visitor
Sweeps Festival	40,000	£40,000	£1
Dickens Festival	50,000	£90,000	£1.80
Will Adams Festival	3,000	£40,000	£13.30
Dickensian Christmas	60,000	£40,000	£0.67
Castle Gardens Concerts (2002)	11,000	£50,000	£4.55
Winter Wonderland	28,000	£70,000	£2.50

* Visitor numbers are estimates

6. Conclusions

Ultimately, the project failed to reach its visitor targets but had some very beneficial aspects. The product fell short of some people's expectations but much has been learned from the exercise.

The use of synthetic ice was a calculated risk which certainly kept costs down but perhaps did disappoint some visitors. However, our research has shown that a real ice rink and associated infrastructure would have cost another £20,000 to £25,000 at the very least.

In the final analysis, the Castle Gardens present a very pleasing backdrop but does not benefit from the passing footfall that a successful ice rink needs to sustain good usage levels. We would like to think that, with the knowledge and experience we have gained from the project, we could consider bringing an ice rink back to Medway in the future – to a different site.

The project was conceived as an innovation to a Festival that had not substantially altered for many years and as an opportunity to deliver something new and exciting to be enjoyed by residents and visitors alike. We did not achieve the original vision but we carried off a difficult project which will attract some long-term benefits to tourism in Medway.