

**OSWESTRY TOWN COUNCIL**

**REPORT FROM THE TOWN CLERK, AND RETAIL MARKETS & EVENTS  
MANAGER TO COUNCIL – 27<sup>th</sup> MAY 2020**

**MARKET START UP PLAN**

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**PURPOSE**

The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an overview of actions taken throughout the pandemic and provides plans and proposals for future planning.

Most of the matters are operational but still require endorsement from elected Members. The report also sets out a proposal to encourage and enable traders to access business support.

Members also need to approve a policy for rent.

**BACKGROUND -OSWESTRY MARKETS – DEALING WITH THE CORONA VIRUS**

First and foremost, the main aim for Oswestry Markets was to ensure all traders and customers remained safe, and measures were quickly put in place e.g. toilets and touch areas were cleaned regularly, and traders were given advice.

Following Government guidance, all non-essential market activities ceased from 25<sup>th</sup> March 2020 allowing traders selling essential goods to operate. Only three essential food traders continued to operate from the Indoor Market for a further week; however, a mutual decision was then made to close the market to the public. Some traders have needed access to manage their online businesses and delivery services

This has had a major impact on the Town Council finances with an estimated loss of income of £6,800 per month. Whilst some cost reductions have been achieved the Council are not able to access grants or rates relief and are still paying business rates on the market.

The Council have maintained communication with the traders throughout to inform of any site changes and of Government advice, grants etc via email, social media or text.

All market events up to the end of May have been cancelled and any planned events for June onwards are being reviewed including the Oswestry Food and Drink Festival.

The traders themselves have been very grateful for the support from the Town Council during this time and have been vocal in doing so.

## **NABMA ACTION**

NABMA has now prepared a five-point summary of support that is urgently required from Government to sustain and safeguard the market industry.

- Support for Traders and Small Businesses.
- A Business Interruption Compensation Scheme – reflecting “lost rents”.
- A Market Start Back Grant Scheme – to get markets back up and running again.
- Business Rates – 100% relief for all markets.
- A national support programme to restore markets and market trading.

Behind the scenes NABMA has been campaigning with the Chancellor, key Members of Parliament, the Local Government Association and the Government’s Town Centre and High Streets Policy Team, operating within the Cities and Local Growth Unit

Oswestry supports this stance recognizing the impact COVID-19 has had on markets, the many thousands of self-employed and small businesses who rely upon them as an outlet for their own businesses also highlighting the support package that is needed to assist markets, when market trading can recommence.

## **RESTARTING OSWESTRY MARKETS**

Once restrictions are lifted and trade is once again permitted, it is predicted that trading will be difficult for the foreseeable future. It is likely that the opening of services and certain types of business will also be staggered, and which will need managing.

A recession is also likely, resulting in the reduction of disposable income and job security. The elderly and most at risk will probably be encouraged to continue to isolate for a longer period which will again have a continued impact on the market, as many customers fit this demographic.

**USP** - In some ways, markets and market traders are best placed to survive such difficult times as they are more flexible than larger businesses, can adapt quicker and bring local communities back together.

There is the possibility that whilst online shopping will increase, supporting local businesses will be important to local people. Sustainability and a reduced environmental impact will also become an important part of retail and again markets can be in a strong position to achieve this.

Future marketing campaigns will focus on the traders and people who shop at Oswestry markets. The value of community shopping and local support will be at its hub and there will be a need to plan how to reduce the impact on the environment with better recycling and reduced packaging. This too can then be promoted.

Certain trades are likely to fair better than others and there could very well be some business closures. Before the pandemic there was a small waiting list for the indoor

market, People on this list have been contacted to highlight the possibility of future vacancies.

As domestic tourism later this year may increase, Oswestry is well placed to capitalise on this being en route from central and southern England to North and Mid Wales, and back. Situated beyond the last proper service station heading west and trumpeted on signs as a historic market town the market should be a destination visit for those breaking their journey. The town needs to make the most of this strategic opportunity.

## **GOVERNMENT SUPPORT**

Currently, financial support from central government for market traders in particular has been low as any support has been mainly based around retailers located in rateable premises. At the moment it appears that any self-employed traders who produce their annual tax returns will be able to receive 80% of any profit made although this is likely not to be available until June. Universal credit appears to be another option.

The situation appears to be changing all the time with the Government recently announcing some additional business support aimed at small businesses. This additional fund is aimed at small businesses with ongoing fixed property-related costs. The Government will be asking Shropshire Council to prioritise businesses in shared spaces, regular market traders and small charity properties that would meet the criteria for Small Business Rates Relief, and B & B's that pay Council Tax rather than business rates. But local authorities may choose to make payments to other businesses based on local economic need and the allocation of funding will be at the discretion of local authority. It will be for Councils to adapt this approach to local circumstances and further guidance for local authorities will be set out shortly.

## **INNOVATION**

What is impressive is the number of Oswestry Market traders who have adapted to the situation by improving their online services to enable postal deliveries and online ordering. Others have provided personal deliveries or have introduced retail elements in other locations. The worry of course is that once the ban is lifted, they may continue to trade in this fashion rather than trading through the market.

However, there is no indication of this and all the traders who have been in contact intend to continue to trade at Oswestry market once it reopens. It must be noted that the majority of the traders have been unable to earn during this period as not all of the businesses are suited to online sales and in some cases, stock has not been available to purchase.

## **ACTION PLAN**

The key issue is to get traders back to work and to get people shopping with confidence.

Plans are indicative and subject to constant review as guidance from Government

comes forward.

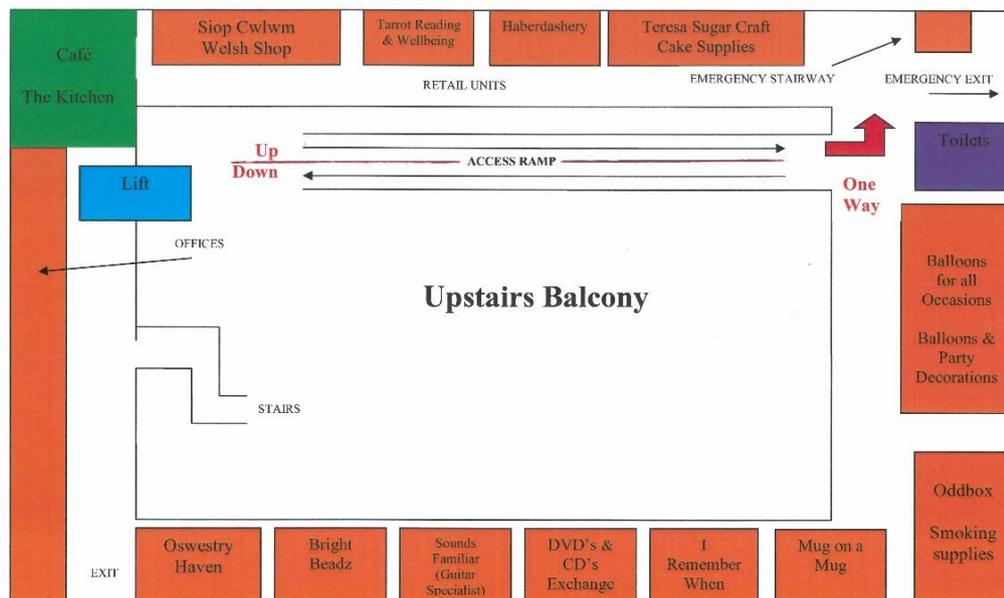
Any trader vacancies, although disappointing, could result in opportunities to remodel the indoor market, in particular as space may be available and/or there may be opportunities for potential new traders to start business within any vacated units. There has been consideration towards creating a food court inside the market with a centralised seating area, but major investment would be needed to achieve this as only a small number of units have the waste and water facilities to enable food production.

Markets will need to be considered a safe place to shop. Visible cleaning and consistent high standards will need to continue every market day and social distancing will need to be encouraged.

This will mean any queues will need to adhere to the 2-metre rule and the layout of the market will need to discourage dwell time and close contact. Professional descriptive signage will be implemented to inform and direct customers safely and floor management will also be required at peak trading times to limit the footfall into the Powis Hall. NABMA advice has been received and considered.

Reducing the number of entrances into the market hall has been considered. Routes around the markets will be reviewed regularly as traders return.

The ramp to the first floor will be divided and customers will be directed to the left, creating a one-way system around the mezzanine floor.



## **SAFETY PROCEDURES SUMMARY**

Further actions will be taken including:

- Placing clear signage outside of the market explaining the social distancing measures in place that customers should follow.
- Place markings within the market using tape to assist correct queue spacings.
- Schedule trader deliveries to avoid crowding in delivery areas.
- Provision of cleaning stations at front of store including hand sanitiser and disinfectant wipes or spray and tissue for lift doors and toilet areas. The lift will be limited to two same-family users at one time.
- Placing clear signage throughout the store reminding customers of the social distancing measures and asking them to follow these rules.
- Constantly review the layout of the store to ensure aisles/walkways are as clear as possible to accommodate 2m social distancing. It is anticipated some stalls will open sooner than others which will determine the customer flow.
- Leave non-essential doors open to minimise the number of people who touch them. This does not apply to fire doors.
- Customer sales points should be set up to ensure the 2m separation either by floor markings or by limiting the number of customers that can wait at a time. Identified are number of hot spot stalls which attract a greater number of customers and will require more queue management. These being Mickey

Finns Fish, Hartshorne Butchers, Llyncllys Farm Shop, Sugarcraft, Balloons for all Occasions and both hairdressers.

- Encourage cashless purchases through signage. Approximately 45% of Oswestry indoor traders currently operate using card machines. This percentage may need to increase, and recommendations of affordable options will be provided to everyone.
- Consider whether it is safe to keep customer toilets open. If open, regular cleaning should include touch points such as door handles, flushes, taps. etc. Baby changing facilities should be available and included within the regular cleaning rota.
- If cafes and restaurants are to remain closed until further notice, they will be securely closed off to ensure customers do not use them for seating. All communal seating will also be removed.
- The traders themselves will need to be educated and encouraged to manage their space, providing hand sanitizer and discourage close contact for example.
- Communicating to our customers through social media will be important. Groups entering the building will be discouraged, and the use of contactless cards payments encouraged as much as possible.
- The use of paper and cotton bags and packaging will be encouraged wherever possible, as evidence suggests the virus remains viable for less time on porous surfaces than it does on plastic. It also reduces the amount of one-use packaging.
- Customers will be asked to try and not pick up and put down items of produce while they are shopping. Most importantly, ensure to wash any uncovered purchases when they get home, and wash their hands thoroughly before and during cooking. Customer information signage packages will be issued to each trader for display.
- Unnecessary travel restrictions may continue. Our trader delivery services will be promoted through the market website and social media. Assuming online sales will continue to be a prominent force some improvements will be needed to the market website.

## **FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

More than ever it will be important to consider all financial implications in order to regain some of the losses in the Council's budget.

- It is anticipated that retailing conditions will remain challenging for at least 12 months. In order to assist the traders some financial support may need to be considered during this period. Members will recall that the normal 3% increase on rent will not be implemented in 2020/21.

If Members are mindful to do so then a phased approach will be applied:

- 25% of normal rent for the first four weeks;
- 50% for the second four-week period;

- 75% for the third four-week period and return to full rent after this, giving all the traders time to rebuild their customer base.
- Any rent will only be applied to businesses who are permitted to trade but traders who can trade but chose not to, will be charged;
- Traders can only continue to self-isolate for medical reasons and a doctor's letter will be required.
- Additional market days could be offered to provide further retailing opportunities.
- A small number of traders are in rent arrears, in most cases due to the timings of the lockdown. There are also some outstanding electric bills, again due to the timings. It is anticipated that most arrears will be paid on return, however any traders in financial difficulty will be provided with a written repayment plan.
- It will be important to save costs as much as possible. Savings can be made by reducing the traditional advertising spend and being as efficient as possible in all non-essential budget activities. Using social media as the main promotional tool will be essential for the markets.
- Continue to pursue the solar panel scheme on the roof of the Powis Hall recognising the cost savings and positive environment impact. Other ways to become more environmentally friendly as a market and as individual traders will be investigated and implemented.

### **MARKETING – FOOTFALL GROWTH**

It will be important to encourage footfall back to the market as soon as possible.

- A marketing plan of action will be developed to focussing on community, great value, localism, the strength of independent traders and customer service.
- Reintroduction of the Saturday live music and entertainment programme on the Bailey Head and looking into providing as many free activities as possible, helping to create a vibrance and energy in the market area. These events can be themed to provide further focus.
- Continue to aim to attract food businesses to both the indoor and outdoor market, although the idea of seating areas may now have to be removed for the short term. Businesses who offer food to consume at home will be more favourable. This can be achieved by contacting potential traders using the existing database.
- Finalise the large signage proposal on the front of the market building helping to advertise its purpose better and to promote the key messages such as community, localism, etc.
- Refresh any areas of the market which need a face lift and investigate ideas to help create a more attractive retailing space.
- Recognising its strength consideration needs to be given to roadside advertising alongside the A5 promoting Oswestry as a place to stop heading west. Members will be aware that BID have set out some ideas and a proposed marketing effort to promote the town as 'open' again and welcoming people 'back'.

## **NEW BUSINESS OPORTUNITIES**

Although these are difficult times for retailing, there are still opportunities for new businesses or for existing businesses to relocate to the market:

- Work with the Marches Hub to promote markets as a low risk set up opportunity for any potential new business start-ups, offering rental incentives, business and IT support.
- Highlight the potential of market trading to any small cottage industries or future startup businesses
- Promote the opportunity to start trading on the market, as a low cost, low risk opportunity.

## **SUPPORTING EXISTING TRADERS**

Appreciating the changing retail environment, some support will be needed to help existing traders adjust:

- Encourage traders to team up with similar businesses to provide an increased package to the consumer. For example, Balloons for all Occasions produce work for many local weddings so by collaborating with the Yellow Bike Company, they could also provide some catering options.
- Provide social media and website development training to market traders to encourage improved online promotion and home delivery options to their businesses. The internet will need to be especially embraced until consumer confidence returns to some normality and it will be imperative that as many businesses as possible have an online presence.
- The more experienced traders will be asked to mentor other traders in need of some online support and to share advice and good practice which will potentially save money and increase sales. Traders in need of this facility will need to be identified and the service then promoted through the trader newsletter.

## **Business Support**

Traders need to drive the restart up plan – it cannot be left to the Council. Those businesses who can innovate and can diversify should be encouraged to do so; those who cannot, should be given the opportunity to gain skills and confidence to enable them to do so. Officers have been working to develop a business support package with local company *Be a better fish*, recognising that:

- Some businesses will need support to adapt their business to safeguard their existence;
- Some will need some support to develop new propositions and/or new channels to sell their products and services in a changed retail landscape; and
- That the market community needs to work together as a whole to adapt.

## Offer

*Be a better fish Club* would provide:

- Initial 1:1 'how can we help' consultation with individual traders;
- Access to information and expertise and, where needed, training;
- Events and workshops for the trader community; to work together on common challenges and opportunities;
- Ongoing support to traders as their businesses evolve;
- An onsite resource for support, with the presence of a *Be a better fish Club* stall. This would also be an opportunity for new businesses to trade.

## Financial Implication

- In practical terms some parameters need to be applied. It is suggested that over two rounds, the Council could offer up to 10 traders (20 in total) a free no-obligation 'How can we help?' session.
- For those that see the benefit and would like to join the Club, the Council could offer to pay the first 2 membership (£25 per month). This way the commitment from the Council would be no more than £250 per month and capped at £1,000. The existing marketing budget would be utilised.
- For traders that are not interested then there is no cost to them or the Council.
- If the take-up is low, then this will be a learning point for the Council.

*Be a better fish* cite Cave Valley Kitchen as a case study

<https://beabetterfish.com/news/f/in-1-month-our-turnover-has-doubled/> , they are also working with the Three Parishes Big Local <https://beabetterfish.com/three-parishes>

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This report details a series of actions for the Council to consider. It recognizes the difficulties that the operator and the traders will encounter in the short and medium term.

Most of the matters are operational but still require endorsement from elected Members. The report also sets out a proposal to encourage and enable traders to access business support.

Members also need to approve a policy for rent.

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