

## **Notes from Market Working Group meeting held on Friday 9<sup>th</sup> August 2024**

### Attendees:

Cllr Peter Williams  
Cllr Anne Eves  
Cllr Matthew Cornish  
Cllr Robert Eggleston  
Steve Cridland – CEO  
Liz Clark – Head of Projects  
Alice Banister - Projects & Market Officer

The Working Group was reminded the Burgess Hill Town Market was established by the Town Council as one of its Bridge the Gap initiatives to support Burgess Hill's shops and businesses by attracting footfall into the town centre. The monthly Saturday market was launched in September 2020 attracting at its peak around 15-20 stallholders and was well supported by shoppers, existing shops and businesses. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic the market had to adapt its operations in line with the government's restrictions/lockdowns plus faced severe weather conditions, and as a result the number of market traders attending each market fluctuated between 7 and 21.

The market had been run in house by the Head of Projects, however to free up officer time for other projects plus give access to a large database of market traders, in September 2021 the Town Council agreed to appoint an external market operator to see the market grow and make Burgess Hill a destination.

At a meeting of the Market Working Group in 2022, it was reported that the market operator had decided to give the Town Council notice to withdraw after the September market. Despite the operator's best efforts to find new traders to join the monthly market the number of traders had been dwindling each market day. The market operator felt the enthusiasm for regular markets had changed since Covid-19 and created a rollercoaster of changes in shopping habits with many people now preferring to do most of their shopping online and those getting out and about wishing to do it in a more leisurely way. Burgess Hill Town Market had not been viable for the operator and in the current climate they felt it was unlikely to become so in the foreseeable future.

The Market Working Group discussed the feedback and decision by the market operator; the Group was disappointed the market operator was not able to make a success of the monthly market. The Market Working Group agreed that the agreement with the operator should finish after the July 2022 market, and to take the operational management of the market back inhouse with a view to expand the market and allow stallholders to trade every Friday as well as the monthly Saturday market. The Head of Projects raised concerns over resourcing and available capacity to manage the market given an increase in workload, and requested a new part time position be created to support the department's workload. A part-time position was created to support the Head of Projects with initiatives and project, along with the operational management of the market.

In April 2022 the Town Council applied for planning permission for a change of use to hold a market on any day of the week on Church Road, Burgess Hill for a maximum of 30 stalls. Planning approval was given. By doing this it enabled traders to trade on days when they weren't already committed to other markets on Fridays/Saturdays. Previously the Town Council had to apply for a street traders' licence.

In 2023, the Town Council installed an external electricity supply to enable food/drink traders a hook-up for a nominal fee. The facility could also be used for the Town Council's events hosted in Church Walk. A couple of market traders took advantage of this facility, however these traders reported they felt cut off from the main market area and missed out on footfall. The regular market traders were not keen to move down Church Walk from their normal pitch as customers knew where they were. It would not have been an issue if the number of traders had increased to fill up Church Walk. The Head of Projects explored the possibility of installing free standing power supply units, similar to the set up at Horsham Market, at several points along Church Walk to make it more attractive to prospective traders but had had no joy with progressing the idea. An alternative power supply was available at the Bandstand subject to The Martlets Shopping Centre manager's permission, however traders still felt it was too far away from the other traders.

The Burgess Hill Market has remained challenging with regards to attracting and retaining new traders. Adverts to find traders were posted on social media (boosted paid adverts), the National Market Traders Federation, Sussex Living Magazine, About Town, Town Council noticeboards, etc., and officers visited other local markets to try and entice traders to Burgess Hill. Our loyal traders have also promoted the Market to their fellow traders and some have come but not stayed due to low footfall.

Overall, the market was initially attractive to traders, with free pitches, electricity on site, free advertising for stallholders and the potential for expansion, however it could take up to 6 months for traders to establish a regular customer base and many of the recent traders who have attended the market were anticipating an immediate captive audience and were not prepared to commit for the long-term without this existing consumer base.

The on-going economic crisis and the change in people's shopping habits has also had a negative impact on the market's viability and can be seen at other well-established markets within Sussex. The delay with the redevelopment of The Martlets Shopping Centre, and outcome of the joint venture between Mid Sussex District Council and New River had also had a negative impact on footfall around the town centre.

Traders won't come due to the low footfall and customers won't come along to the market due to the lack of traders.

To support the Burgess Hill Community Crafters who hold quarterly Saturday markets at The Kiln, the Town Council agreed to hold a Saturday market in Church Walk on the same day to make the day a bigger attraction and bring in additional footfall. In addition to stallholders, the Town Council funded live music and children's free face painter. The Festive Market in December 2023 and the Summer Market in June 2024 were successful and attracted additional footfall into the town centre.

The CEO updated the Group on the forthcoming staff changes within the Town Council and that the current 'Projects & Market Officer' position would not be filled, and suggested the Burgess Hill Market be put on hold for a period of at least 2 years to see what effect the Martlets redevelopment has on footfall.

A discussion ensued with the following points raised:

- The Head of Projects and Projects & Market Officer were both thanked for all their hard work to make the Burgess Hill Market a success.
- The proposal by Wayne Howard to establish a regular market and car boot sales was noted. Cllr Williams reported he and the Head of Projects had met with Mr. Howard to explain he would need permission from the District Council as the proposed sites/land were under their ownership and would probably need planning approval so it was recommended he submit a pre-planning application in the first instance to gain the District Council's support. Cllr Williams advised he had not received an update from Mr. Howard on whether this had happened.
- Liked the idea of car boot sales from May to October. Rotary Club hold them at Burgess Hill Academy.
- How successful was the Continental Market? Would they come back? The Projects & Market Officer advised the Continental Market organiser had approached the Town Council and coordinated the traders' paperwork. Unfortunately, the District Council's Environment Health/Food Safety Team were not happy with some of the trader's paperwork in relation to food hygiene standards and had attended on the day to monitor the traders. Traders reported the day had not been successful as not enough footfall, and though the Town Council did not charge them a pitch fee they had to pay their market organiser a fee, so they would not come back.
- Liked the idea of one-off markets, e.g. Festive Market, Summer Market.
- The old indoor market in Market Place was good as it was open every day.
- Retailer support towards the market wasn't always positive as they paid business rates and market traders do not have the same overheads.
- Joni's Fresh Fish market trader had commented the market needed to be in a central location, like Horsham Market is in the Carfax, not on one side of the town centre.
- Continue to support The Kiln and the Community Crafters. Anything else the Town Council can do to support them?
- Town events organised by the Town Council were very popular and attracted footfall into the town centre. Retailers/businesses have the opportunity to offer special discounts, hand out promotional leaflets, give out samples, etc. It was agreed the town centre events need to continue and if possible, subject to staff resource, grow the events.
- The Town Council's Christmas Lights and the 'It's Christmas' Lights Switch event were a great success.
- There were funds available in the Bridge the Gap budget which could be used to grow the Town Council events and support The Kiln Community Crafters.

### Way forward

- The Working Group agreed the weekly Burgess Hill Market should be put on hold for at least 2 years, to see what happens with the joint venture between Mid Sussex District Council and New River Retail.
- The Town Council to grow the town centre events, subject to staff resources, using additional funds from the Bridge the Gap budget, and to ask the Community Team to research what they could deliver on top of the existing plans for the 'It's Christmas Lights Switch On event with an additional £5k budget.
- The Town Council to continue to support the Burgess Hill Community Crafters and their quarterly markets.