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DORCHESTER MARKETS INFORMAL JOINT PANEL

NOTES OF MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY 16 DECEMBER 2020

Present: Cllrs Jean Dunseith, Alistair Chisholm, Janet Hewitt, Susie Hosford, Tony Lyall, Robin Potter, Dave Bolwell, Jill Haynes, Nick Ireland, Molly Rennie, Jane Somper, Roland Tarr and John Worth

Apologies: Cllrs Simon Gibson

Officers present: Adrian Stuart - Clerk to Dorchester Town Council, Graham Duggan, Bill Wilberforce and David Northover

1. Election of Chairman

Resolved

That Councillor Mollie Rennie – Dorchester Town Council – be elected Chairman for the remainder of the year 2020/21.

2. Appointment of Vice-Chairman

Resolved

That Councillor Jill Haynes – Dorset Council – be appointed Vice-Chairman for the remainder of the year 2020/21.

3. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Simon Gibson – Dorset Council.

4. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 29 January 2020 were confirmed.

5. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of pecuniary interests.

6. Public Participation

There was no public participation at the meeting.

7. Terms of Reference

The Panel's Terms of Reference was noted. Whilst understanding the need for and importance of political proportionality on both Council's Committees and Panels The panel recognised – if at all practicable - the need for it to be representative of those with a affiliation for Dorchester and the wards served by it Whilst this was provided for in the TOR , currently this was unable to be put into practice. This was acknowledged with the means for this being achieved in the future being actively pursued so as to ensure the Panel was as representative of the town as it could be.

8. **Presentation of an overview of Dorchester Markets**

The Panel received a presentation updating on the fundamentals of the market – its purpose its heritage and its legacy – and what it had to offer to the town in terms of economic, social and civic benefits. How it had been managed, how it was being managed and what visions there were for its future were all detailed.

As a market town, of the County Town, it was something of which to be rightly proud and was considered an asset, on Council owned land, in supporting other Council activities. It provided an opportunity for traders, a boost for the local economy and was a business seedbed. It attracted footfall locally and from visitors afar and acted as a social service - providing value for money goods that were not necessarily able to be sourced by other means. It was community focused, vibrant and stimulated local contact, being adaptable in reflecting changing needs and trends.

In terms of finances, the net surplus distributed was allocated 65% to Dorset Council, 35% to the Town Council, this being some £123k in 2018/19, with the net surplus from the Car Boot being distributed as community grants – some £19k in 2018/19.

However, there were issues which needed to be addressed these being falling footfall and income; Ensors' contract ending in 2026 and the management arrangements at Fairfield, with limited offer and loss of retail offer being of concern at the Cornhill site.

To address these issues, engagement in partnership with Dorset Council was needed on an asset review so as to:-

- develop a strategy for the markets
- improvements to the communication with the Fairfield operator
- planning for the end of the current Fairfield operator contract
- a review of markets management arrangements
- engagement with stakeholders about Cornhill/South Street offer and how to improve this.

The Panel appreciated this review of issues considering that, as well as the economic benefits to be gained, the social and welfare benefits of the market were of considerable value too.

It was accepted that the Fairfield market should be invigorated so as to provide something unique and relevant to the customer of today, to meet their

expectations - were that be more street food outlets, demonstrations or heritage exhibitions.

This would go a long way to ensuring the market's viability was maintained and gave a valid reason for people to continue to visit it in the numbers previously seen. It was accepted that the pandemic had seriously affected what could be done in the recent past, but they saw no reason why this trend couldn't be reversed going forward.

Given that during that period the market still operated as best it could and attracted custom, there was an obligation to ensure this loyalty was recognised in the coming months and years so that it remained a place attractive to go and spend time.

The Panel noted the differing scenarios with regard to trade and performance of the different market entities. It was disappointing to see the decline in performance and returns from the weekly Dorchester market but the reasons for this were understood and recognised. However, the Panel considered that, in recent years, significant investment had been made in the infrastructure of the site to benefit Ensors and what it was able to offer. What options there were for the market's operations and management in the future and how this could be best achieved needed to be identified and assessed, which would serve as some basis for how the market could operate successfully going forward.

The Panel acknowledged the benefits of the market and what it not only had to offer in itself as an entity – as a means of trading goods, services and produce which might not otherwise be readily accessible directly between suppliers and public - but its wider value and contribution too, in attracting visitors to the town and what that too had to offer. Moreover, in being an historic market town, the essence of maintaining a viable and successful market was critical to the fabric and vitality of Dorchester. Issues for consideration would be how the market operated; how it could best adapt to meet the needs of today's consumer; what the means of doing this would be; what arrangements were necessary to achieve this; what rental, licencing and contractual arrangements were necessary to secure its continuation; and how it could improve its efficiency to ensure its viability was maintained. The Panel wanted it to be successful and continue contributing to the economy of the town and be seen as a social and community asset for years to come.

Whilst recognising the challenges the market faced as a commercial enterprise the Panel considered that there was a considerable will to see it succeed. Maintaining a positive relationship between both Councils and Ensors was essential in this being achieved and members saw no reason why this shouldn't be the case. It was in the interests of all parties for this to happen and, it was anticipated that a means of doing this might be identified so as to ensure the long term successful future of this valued asset.

The Panel considered that issues at their meeting in January should be made readily accessible as normal, and as far as practicable, but it was recognised that some part of that meeting should be held in confidential session so that

finances and commercial contract arrangements could be discussed whilst respecting the sensitivities of this.

9. **Financial Outturn 2019-20**

The Panel considered the Financial Outturn 2019/20 and were asked to approve the income and expenditure statement for 2019/20.

What the operational issues had been, the reasons for this and how these had been managed were described, together with what influences there had been on the accounts being presented - with the total income for the year being £160,546 compared to the budget of £182,374. The main variance was a reduction in the fee paid by the market operator, with the decrease from the Cornhill Traders related to a credit note of £4,329, relating to 2018/19. How these issues were being managed and addressed were noted.

What was happening with town centre retail and custom and significant changes to retail habits accounted for much that was being seen, as well as the part the pandemic was to play in the ability to operate the markets as before and the consequent reduction in footfall.

Whilst disappointing, the Panel recognised, and accepted, the reasons for this and the bearing this had on the budget.

Resolved

That the income and expenditure statement for 2019/20 be approved.

Reason for decision

To enable the Panel to consider and approve the Accounts for the year ending 31st March 2020 and ensure the budget was being managed as well it might.

10. **Market Management Report**

The Panel received the Dorchester Market Operator's Report from Ensors' for the period 1st April to 30th November 2020, with the:-

- Income and Expenditure – Wednesday Market - the gross income totalling £44,167, compared with a figure of £ 91,367 for the same period in 2019.
- Income and Expenditure – Sunday Car Boot Sale - the gross income totalling £12,883, compared with a figure of £32,267 for the same period in 2019.

Understandably this had been an exceptionally difficult year for trading due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which had necessitated the closure of the market for short periods during lockdown followed by lengthy periods of restrictions on selling “essential items” only, resulting in a substantial drop in income.

Given this and in view of the substantial reduction in income of the market this year, and the fact that restrictions were to be in place until at least Spring 2021, the operators considered that their monthly payments on account should be agreed at £3000.00 per month.

That being said, they hoped that normality would resume during the latter half of 2021 and were committed to discussing the future of the market and making any necessary improvements.

Ensors' report confirmed that they were wholly committed to the market and were avidly trying to encourage new traders to attend to support the market.

The Panel were pleased to see this commitment and noted the benefits this would bring. It was recognised that trading in open air markets during the pandemic was seen to be safer than shopping in-store and that the operators had rigorously ensured compliance with the Covid-19 regulations in the working practices of its traders.

The Panel noted that with the hiatus in trading of the Farmers Market and Cornhill operating when it was able, the Fairfield site provided a regular weekly commitment in ensuring locally sourced produce, goods and services could still be obtained during the pandemic and what benefits were gained from this. Whilst this was a long established location, it was recognised that a high street setting might lend itself more readily to attracting more modern retail practices in meeting the needs of passing trade.

Officers confirmed that they would assess the request for a monthly payment reduction and report to the January Panel meeting on this.

The Panel considered this to be a practical and reasonable way forward in managing the situation.

11. **Car Boot Fund**

Distribution of Grants from the Dorchester Market Car Boot Fund for the Financial Year 2019/20

The Panel received an update on the distribution of grants awarded from the Dorchester Car Boot Fund during 2020, together with an illustration of the type of organisations; local projects; initiatives and activities which benefited from the fund, as a result of the income generated by the weekly Sunday Car Boot Sale held at Dorchester Market. The Dorchester Market Car Boot Fund was financed entirely by the income from the car boot sales.

The Grant Awarding Panel had met during the summer to consider the applications, and assessed them against the necessary criteria and on the merit of each, being allocated on their relevant necessity and benefit. How initiatives were being delivered and the benefits they brought were critical considerations in the way in which the fund was allocated. In total, 11 community and voluntary organisations had been successful, and the total amount awarded was c. £13k.

The Panel were pleased to see how the fund was being used and how beneficial this would be to the viability and success of projects and initiatives in them being able to contribute towards what Dorchester had to offer.

Resolved

That the distribution of the Dorchester Market Car Boot Fund for the financial year 2019/20 be endorsed.

Reason for Decision

So as to ensure the available funding was allocated so as to be as beneficial as it could be to Dorchester.

12. Market matters

The opportunity to raise other market matters was not needed as all had been covered previously in the meeting.

13. Date of next meeting

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as Wednesday 27 January 2021.

14. Urgent Items

There were no urgent items for consideration at the meeting.

Duration of meeting: 2.00 - 4.00 pm

Chairman

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