

DORCHESTER MARKETS INFORMAL JOINT PANEL

23 FEBRUARY 2022

MARKET STRATEGY

Background

1. Markets have existed in Dorchester for over a millennia. The reasons for holding markets in Dorchester have broadly remained the same throughout, although at different times the relative priority for each of those reasons has changed
 - They have been a core component of the local economy, allowing local people to bring goods to market to sell to local people. Often sellers will use the market as a cheap way of trialling their product
 - They provide an opportunity for local people to buy goods at an affordable price, routinely in an atmosphere that breeds a sense of community
 - They generate an income for the local authority to deliver services - Dorchester's local Council(s) have benefitted from the toll revenue generated from markets activity within 6 2/3 miles of the town centre since their creation around 400 years ago
 - To stimulate interest in, and drive footfall towards, the town. Market and Fair days have always been among the busier days in the town's calendar, benefitting a much wider local economy than the market itself. Most recently the climate emergency has increased an added impetus to "buy local"
2. Since the resolution of a key disagreement resulting from local government reorganisation in 1972, in Dorchester two local authorities, the Town Council and West Dorset DC (now Dorset Council) share oversight of the markets through the Informal Joint Panel, with Dorset Council providing professional support and both parties benefitting from a net surplus generated from market activity (65% to Dorset Council, 35% to Dorchester Town Council). While technically entitled to benefit from all markets taking place within their area the primary focus is on activity on two sites:-
 - Fairfield – the Panel has a lease on the site that runs until 2078 and can use the site when it wishes for market activity. When market activity is not taking place the site is used by Dorset Council to provide parking. The activity currently taking place on site includes
 - The weekly Wednesday Market – a management agreement is in place with Ensors who operate the market, paying 80% of the net trading surplus across to the Panel. This agreement ends in 2026. The markets ethos has traditionally focused on essential and low value goods
 - The Sunday Car Boot Sale – also managed by Ensors on the same basis, the surplus from the Boot Sale is distributed by a Sub-Panel to local community projects operating within 6 2/3 miles of Dorchester
 - An assessment of the net Income generated from parking on site across the two trading days is paid direct to the Panel. This has been a fixed notional figure for the past 15 years
 - Tenants of the Market Café and the Corn Market building (Dukes Auction House) pay rent, which is received by the Panel
 - Corn Hill – potentially one of England's oldest market sites, with trading dating back to Roman times on and near to the site, the market is operated six days a week by Cornhill Market Traders Ltd on a licence agreement.
3. Markets change in response to the needs of sellers and buyers. The best markets adapt to these changes; those that don't fail but are often replaced. There are lots of examples of markets in Dorset that have failed, and just as many that have been re-energised. Sometimes change is driven by the local authority, sometimes by the traders themselves. There are no

examples of Markets that have remained the same and also remained successful over a long period of time.

Fairfield Market has been in gradual decline for over a decade, today generating only 30% of the pitch fees that it enjoyed in 2005. Cornhill Market was in decline until about 10 years ago, when it gained new energy, but has recently struggled as a result of changes in retail and work trends, exacerbated by Covid and lockdowns. Neither are in strong health at present.

4. Elsewhere, however, markets are being seen as an important part of economic stability and health. New “Independent” markets are catering to a new breed of seller, delivering arts, craft, food and drink to a new buyer, routinely at the weekend and in a location of character. In Dorset a number of new markets are taking place, although only Bridport’s Saturday market has successfully adapted away from its historic offer to offer a market with an “independent” feel. In 2021 an independent market took place on two occasions at Poundbury.
5. Until recently seasonal fairs had virtually disappeared from Dorchester. New one off opportunities such as the Dorset Food and Drink Fair at Poundbury, the Thomas Hardy Victorian Fair in the town centre, and most recently a revamped Dorchester Cracker, have demonstrated that there is an appetite from both sellers and buyers to create themed events that have wider benefits to the area where they take place.
6. Any strategy that the Panel develops needs to take account of all of the above issues. The primary role of the Panel is to ensure the continuance of the market tradition in Dorchester.

Fairfield Wednesday Market (and Sunday Car Boot Sale)

7. For many local residents Dorchester Market means the Wednesday market at Fairfield. The market is currently operated by Ensors, who until recently were also the owners and operators of the once highly successful Wimborne Market. The current lease dates from April 2001 and runs until April 2026. Ensors took on operation of the market at a low point, invested in the large covered area adjacent to Weymouth Avenue in 2001, and built income to a stage where the Panel received a distribution of £190,000 in 2005/06 at the Market’s peak.
9. Ensors have been offering to invest in the site in exchange for an extension to the lease for a number of years, and have also previously sought to acquire the site. Their view is that investment in buildings infrastructure is necessary to safeguard and rebuild the market, which had declined to a level where, even before Covid, the Panel distribution was £48,000 in 2019/20. For a number of reasons, at any time, one or other or both Councils have not supported a lease extension. The Procurement Officer at Dorset Council has confirmed that the lease itself does not make provision for an extension and that there do not appear to be grounds for an exemption to introduce an extension. Nonetheless Ensors remain keen for an extension to the lease.
10. Members are invited to consider the options available to the Panel:-
 - Explore grounds for an extension of the current lease beyond April 2026
 - Prepare for a new procurement of the market operation from April 2026
 - Bring management of the market in house from 2026 – note that neither Council currently has the skillset or resource to manage the Fairfield market
11. Irrespective of which long term solution is selected it is important that in the short term the Panel works with Ensors to ensure that the market is well managed and well promoted. At present there is limited resource allocated to this task.

Cornhill Market

12. The “Town Pump” market consists of up to 12 stalls, operating 6 days a week, within a marked area in the main shopping street of the town. Prior to Covid the market was operating successfully, providing an income of over £25,000 a year, with pitches full in the summer period

but quieter in the winter period and when weather is bad and footfall reduced. Once managed by West Dorset DC's Parking team, after a short period operating as a co-operative the market has been operated by Cornhill Market Traders (CMT, two directors, both trading at Cornhill) for the past 5 years. The option to choose a particular trading day presents opportunities for a wide number of existing and new traders, while the presence of the market helps to animate one of the more traditional gathering spaces in the town.

13. Covid and lockdown has caused significant damage to the trader base that sustained the market and its income. A separate report on the agenda discusses options to support the market and its current operator. If the Panel accept the recommendation contained within the report then officers will continue to support CMT to re-establish the market.
14. The Town Council is currently promoting a scheme to refurbish the Cornhill public realm, which will necessitate the temporary relocation of some stalls to elsewhere in South Street in the near future.

Sunday Markets and Fairs

15. The Panel has hitherto focused its energy into its two traditional market offers, with no strategy to develop other forms of market. In recent years new groups of traders have emerged offering a new range of products to a different audience. The "Independent" brand, offering quality food and drink, arts and crafts and vintage is now well established elsewhere and the creation of the Poundbury Independent, which has now run two small but successful market days, demonstrates the appetite for such an offer in Dorchester. The Independent market sector has often grown to meet a demand, rather than being sponsored by the public authorities.
16. Meanwhile the Town Council has supported the development of new fairs operating along a closed High Street, based around Thomas Hardy and the town's Heritage, while the longstanding Cracker event moved successfully to Sunday this year. The August Poundbury Food and Drink Fair is also now well established.
17. Town Council officers have been exploring the potential to co-ordinate a monthly programme (March-December) operating in the High Street and at Poundbury to provide a consistent approach to traders and to provide a consistent message to visitors, and in addition to liaise with the local business community to ensure that footfall benefits are felt more widely. Advice has been sought from existing independent operators from other towns and several have expressed an interest in working in a consortium to share the load of organising a programme.
18. A new market programme also offers an opportunity to determine new standards regarding the way the events will operate, for example in relation the climate or how products are sourced. One key consideration is who would expect to benefit financially from operating the markets or whether, like the already established Boot Sale, any surplus income might be used to promote community initiatives. In the early days at least a surplus is unlikely.
19. Appendix 1 offers an early idea of a programme for 2023, that builds on some of the current events that are already pencilled into the calendar for 2022 and 2023. It also lists some possible new themed events that could be developed over time.

Overall Strategy

20. It is **RECOMMENDED** that the following strategy is adopted

Market Type	Strategy
Wednesday Traditional Sunday Boot Sale	?Decision re Ensors lease extension/Procurement in 2026?

	Support the markets in their current method of operation for as long as there are sufficient traders and users to make it relevant and viable
Cornhill Daily	Support the operator to rebuild the market Respond to short term need for alternative pitches due to changes in footfall patterns and new public realm works
Sunday Markets and Fairs	Develop programme for 2023 by building partnership of existing and new event operators Focus on environmental and community benefits of the market, rather than income generation

Adrian Stuart
Town Clerk
Dorchester Town Council

APPENDIX 1

DORCHESTER SUNDAY FAIRS AND MARKETS PROGRAMME

Month	Market	Location
<i>March</i>	<i>Science themed</i>	<i>High East/West Street</i>
April	Independent Maker	Poundbury
<i>May</i>	<i>Community themed</i>	<i>High East/West Street</i>
June	Thomas Hardy Victorian Fair	High East/West Street
July	Independent Maker	Poundbury
August	Food and Drink Fair	Poundbury
September	Heritage Open Day	High East/West Street
October	Independent Maker	Poundbury
<i>November</i>	<i>Halloween/Pre-Christmas themed</i>	<i>High East/West Street</i>
December	Cracker	High East/West Street

Status: **Established** Emerging *To be developed?*