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DORCHESTER MARKETS INFORMAL JOINT PANEL

NOTES OF MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY 30 JUNE 2021

Present: Cllrs Jean Dunseith, Susie Hosford, Tony Lyall, Dave Bolwell, Simon Gibson, Jill Haynes, Nick Ireland, Molly Rennie, Jane Somper, Roland Tarr, Frances Hogwood and Stella Jones

Apologies: Cllrs Janet Hewitt and John Worth

Officers present (for all or part of the meeting): Adrian Stuart - Clerk to Dorchester Town Council, Graham Duggan, Bill Wilberforce, Kevin Evans, Karyn Punchard and David Northover

Public Guest Speaker

Grant Jones

26. **Election of Chairman**

Resolved

That Dorchester Town Councillor Mollie Rennie be elected Chairman for the 2021/22 financial year.

The Chairman took the opportunity to thank Councillors Chisholm and Potter for their valued contribution to the Panel over the years and welcomed Councillors Stella Jones and Frances Hogwood to the Panel from Dorchester Town Council.

27. **Appointment of Vice-Chairman**

Resolved

That Councillor Jill Haynes be appointed Vice-Chairman for the ensuing year 2021/22.

28. **Apologies**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Janet Hewitt (Dorchester Town Council) and John Worth (Dorset Council).

29. **Minutes**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 27 January 2021 were noted with a correction being made to minute 21 - Appointments to Car Boot Fund Panel – to delete reference to the Mayor/Deputy Mayor.

30. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest at the meeting.

31. **Public Participation**

There was no public participation at the meeting.

32. **Financial Outturn Report 2020/21**

The Panel received the financial outturn report for 2020/21 and considered what it entailed and were being asked to approve the income and expenditure statement for 2020/21.

The total income accounted for during 2020/21 was £87,303 against a budget of £165,198, leaving a significant income deficit of £77,895. The main underlying reason for this shortfall was the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic, and in particular the effects of the numerous lockdowns & restrictions imposed during 2020/21.

Officers took the Panel through the report explaining that, at present, there was a significant debt outstanding relating to Cornhill Market. Preliminary discussions with the operators had identified that the operator was unable to operate the market for significant parts of 2020/21 and that much of this debt would therefore not be recoverable.

The operator had also highlighted that there was significant risk that they would not be able to make payments during 2021/22 due to the impact of the pandemic on local retail and footfall. Accordingly, a recommendation was included that a reduced fee be negotiated with the operator and it would be prudent to assume no further income from this source until negotiations have been concluded.

Given the circumstances the Panel were 'minded to' agree with the principle of this recommendation.

Resolved

1) That the Head of Community and Public Protection (Dorset Council), in consultation with the Town Clerk (Dorchester Town Council) and with support from the Property and Finance Divisions of Dorset Council, be authorised to agree a reduced fee for the years 2020/21 and 2021/22 with the operators of the Cornhill Market.

2) That the panel approve the income and expenditure statement for 2020/21.

3) That the Head of Community and Public Protection (Dorset Council), in consultation with the Town Clerk (Dorchester Town Council) and with support from the Property and Finance Divisions of Dorset Council enact the Panel's 'minded to' decision.

Reason for Decision

To enable Members of the Panel to consider and approve the Accounts for the year ending 31st March 2021.

33. **Market Operations**

The Panel took the opportunity to consider Market operations, what these were, how these should be delivered and what could be done to make the most of this asset so as to ensure the markets in Dorchester would be viable and a successful attraction. They were pleased to hear from Grant Jones – on behalf of the Cornhill market traders – about what was happening in Cornhill; how things were being done there and what his experiences – and those of other traders - were.

Given the limitations in being able to run the market as had been done prior to the pandemic, trade - in terms of sales, browsing and passing trade – had all been curtailed significantly over the recent months. Whilst this was generally understandable, every effort had continued to be made to ensure what trade possible was maintained, with social distancing rules being applied. Despite the hardships experienced, there was still a keen appetite for pitches when these became available. Mr Jones had met with officers to see how best the Cornhill market could be run, what might be offered and where best this might be situated.

Options for how this market – and Dorchester markets generally – could remain vibrant and viable going forward were considered and where any expansion might be able to be accommodated and how this might be done.

The Panel saw this as welcomed news and, in recognising how popular the Cornhill market was, were pleased to see that there had been some resurgence in trade and interest now a degree of normality had returned. They acknowledged there was a loyal and dedicated patronage of the stalls and saw no reason why his shouldn't continue to thrive into the future. The Panel thanked Mr Jones for his valued contribution and continuing positive approach.

The Panel considered what options there were for the future of Dorchester markets - in terms of trading activities; locations; popularity and footfall; access; legal and contractual commitments and obligations; and cultural and social community considerations - with a presentation from the Town Clerk facilitating this discussion and the panels understanding.

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 together with how it had been managed, how it was being managed and what visions there were for its future, were all considerations.

As a market town, of the County Town, it was something of which to be rightly proud and was considered an asset in providing an opportunity for traders, a boost for the local economy and was a business seedbed. The Panel understood they all played their part in attracting footfall locally and from visitors afar and acted as a means of 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.

The Panel appreciated having the opportunity to be able to 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.

Whatever options were available, it was accepted that the markets 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 their 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.

Consideration would continue to be given to the differing scenarios and various options with regard to trade, performance and management of the different market entities, in identifying and assessing how this could be best achieved so as to serve as some basis for how the markets could operate successfully going forward. What was being done at Bridport Market in bringing about its success was worth looking into.

The Panel acknowledged the benefits of what the markets brought to Dorchester and what they each had to offer in their own way, not only 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 their wider value and contribution too, in attracting visitors to the town and as a social and community asset. 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 markets operated; how they 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 their continuation; and how they could improve their efficiency to ensure viability was maintained.

Most importantly the Panel wanted to see them successful and continue contributing to the economy of the town and be seen as a social and community asset for years to come and there was a considerable will to see these valued assets succeed.

It was considered that the pandemic had provided the opportunity to reassess and re calibrate what was being done and the process for doing it. Whilst the principles on what to do, how to do it and, where it should be done were accepted, it was recognised that there was a need for any

further detailed discussion at this stage again should be held by a Working Group in confidential session so that finances and commercial contract arrangements could be discussed, whilst respecting the sensitivities of this.

An assurance was given that whatever options were considered, there would be a need for this to go through a formal decision process – in a public forum setting – with no decisions being taken discretely. For now, those options would be considered and assessed, with any recommendations being then formally considered by both the Town Council and Dorset Council before any implementation was considered.

The Panel considered that, in the circumstances, what was being proposed was as practicable as it could be in managing the way in which the markets operated and in them being prepared to meet future needs and trends.

Duration of meeting: 2.00 - 3.40 pm

Chairman

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