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DORCHESTER MARKETS INFORMAL JOINT PANEL

NOTES OF MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY 23 FEBRUARY 2022

Present: Cllrs Laura Miller, Stella Jones, Frances Hogwood, Janet Hewitt, Susie Hosford, Tony Lyall, Simon Gibson, Nick Ireland, Molly Rennie, Roland Tarr and John Worth

Apologies: Cllrs Jean Dunseith, Dave Bolwell and Jane Somper

Also present: Mr John George - Ensors

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

34. **Apologies**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Dave Bolwell, Jean Dunseith and Jane Somper – all Dorset Council.

35. **Appointment of Vice-Chairman**

Resolved

That Councillor Laura Miller – Dorset Council – be appointed Vice-Chairman for the meeting.

The Chairman took the opportunity to thank the previous Vice-Chairman - Councillor Jill Haynes - for her contribution to the work of the Panel in the past.

36. **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 30 June 2021 were confirmed.

37. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest at the meeting.

38. **Public Participation**

There was no request for public participation at the meeting.

39. **Financial Outturn Projection 2021/22 & Proposed Budget 2022/23**

The Panel welcomed John George – of Ensors - to the meeting and were informed about their plans for the Fairfield market and how improvements

might be made to how it was run and managed. He provided an insight into how both Dorchester and Wimborne markets were run - including their similarities and differences.

Ensors were willing to make further investments in the market so that it built on its success but to be able to do that required some commitment from the Panel that Ensors would still remain the operators going forward.

What Mr George envisaged for how the market could operate was drawn to the attention of the Panel, with the provision of local artisan craft and produce sellers being encouraged to set up within the market itself, and in the Linneys in particular. He could see these being self-contained units, secured and fit for purpose, with a Victorian feel and look.

He considered that the indoor aspect of the market was now dated and wanted to see this opened up more – still covered, but with the sides removed. He felt this would make it more accessible and attractive.

He considered the market still had a lot to offer and hoped his vision could be taken into serious consideration by the Panel. The Panel recognised that Mr George was providing his vision for the future arrangements for the market and thanked him for this insight.

The Panel were then provided with the Management Accounts from the Market Operator with the Projected Outturn for 2021/22 - the total projected expenditure is forecast to be marginally over budget with a potential cost of £44,218 against a budget of £43,968. There was projected to be a significant deficit on the gross income budget. Current projections indicate potential income of £124,655, against a budget of £165,165. However, the latest supplementary management accounts from Ensors cautiously indicated an improved position compared to the 2020/21 outturn, which saw income severely suppressed due to Covid-19 induced restrictions.

Overall, the sum available for distribution to the Panel was forecast to be £80,437, against a net budget of £121,197, the relevant shares being split as follows: Dorset Council - £45,388 (against a budget of £66,493), Dorchester Town Council - £24,440 (against a budget of £35,804) and transfer to the Car Boot Reserve of £10,609 (against a budget of £18,900).

The Budget 2022/23 comprised a proposed expenditure budget is £44,313 with the proposed income budget is £166,379. Accordingly, the budgeted surplus for distribution was £122,066 - with Dorset Council due £67,058 and Dorchester Town Council £36,108. The budgeted top up to the Car Boot reserve would be £18,900.

Members were aware that income was significantly suppressed during the 2020/21 Financial Year as a direct result of the Covid-19 Pandemic, including associated lockdowns and restrictions. There were early indications that income levels had improved for the 2021/22 outturn, and it is hoped trading activity may return to nearer normal levels during 2022/23.

Members acknowledged the circumstances under which trading had been operating during the last years and given this accepted the figures that had been presented to them as being as reasonable as could be expected.

Resolved

That the current projected outturn position for 2021/22 be noted, and the 2022/23 budget proposals be approved.

40. Fairfield Linneys

It was explained that the Fairfield Linneys were two lengths of animal sheds, one backing onto properties in Great Western Road (North Linney), the other onto Fairfield Road (South Linney). Their appearance, dimensions and purpose were described, these having fallen into disrepair in recent years.

Members recognised that any neglect related to their condition, use and maintenance and, that given they had not been utilised to their full extent since being used to house fowls on market days some 40 to 50 years previously, this decline in their condition was understandable.

However, they had in recent years been blighted by vandalism and graffiti and as a means to deter this by improving their overall appearance and condition it was now being recommended to repaint the walls of both Linneys, at a cost of some £10,000 to make good and coat with anti-graffiti paint. Irrespective of the long-term future of the Linneys, the northern Linney walls were essential as a boundary with residential properties in Great Western Road, and it was also unlikely that the wall bounding Fairfield Road would be removed. These works had therefore been actioned to minimise the risk of a repeat damage. It was confirmed that the works could be accommodated within the Panel's maintenance budget.

Officers would also implement other remedial works aimed at limiting future damage

- Litter would be removed from the caged area of the North Linney
- Guttering will be removed from the Linneys – it served no useful purpose and was an easy target for vandalism
- Consideration was being given to extending the cage in the North Linneys to a natural break point where there was an existing breeze block wall.

When resources permitted, Officers would prepare a report for the Panel to give more detailed thought to the long-term future of the structures, which were looking increasingly worn and would inevitably continue to suffer periodic bouts of anti-social behaviour. The Chairman took the opportunity to thank officers for their quick response in dealing with the most gratuitous graffiti which had recently appeared.

The Panel considered what was being proposed to be a reasonable and practical remedy in improving the Linneys appearance and condition and hoped that they could still play some practical part in how the market was able to operate in the future - welcoming a report from officers on what options would be available in this regard.

Resolved

That c. £10,000 from the maintenance budget be authorised to make good and coat the inner walls of the Linneys with anti-graffiti paint and that the other remedial works, aimed at limiting future damage, be approved too.

41. Market Strategy

The Panel considered a report by the Town Clerk which set out a proposed strategy for the operation of markets in Dorchester, the history of the markets and how they had evolved over time, how they operated, what the practical issues were for running them and what they achieved.

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.

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

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 enthusiasm for pitches and being part of the set up by vendors.

The Panel saw this as welcomed news and, in recognising how popular the markets all were, 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 this shouldn't continue to thrive into the future.

They were pleased to hear about what the planned strategy; how things were being done and what might be able to be done, and how this might be achieved.

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.

Accordingly they considered the options being recommended:-

- 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

Irrespective of which long term solution was selected, it was important that in the short term, the Panel worked with Ensors to ensure that the market was well managed and well promoted.

Ensors had been offering to invest in the site in exchange for an extension to the lease for a number of years, and had also previously sought to acquire the site. Their view was that investment in buildings infrastructure was necessary to safeguard and rebuild the market. For a number of reasons, at any time, one or other or both Councils had not supported a lease extension. The Procurement Officer at Dorset Council had confirmed that the lease itself did not make provision for an extension and that there did not appear to be grounds for an exemption to introduce an extension. Nonetheless, Ensors remained keen for an extension to the lease.

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.

Town Council officers had explored 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. This new market programme also offered an opportunity to determine new standards regarding the way the events will operate, for example in relation the climate or how products were sourced. One key consideration was who would expect to benefit financially from operating the markets and how this might be achieved. Fairs and other events should also be given consideration in the round.

As a market town, of the County Town, the Panel considered its markets were 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.

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.

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 the strategy to be implemented and built upon to ensure any success was maintained.

As part of this they agreed that it would be in the interests of Dorchester and beneficial to prepare for a new procurement of the market operation from April 2026, with Ensors still being able to tender for a continuation of their operations. This option would provide for a re-evaluation and reset of what Dorchester wanted from its markets, how they should be operated and what improvements could be gained in doing so.

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.

Resolved

That the recommended Option be to authorise officers to prepare for a new procurement of the market operation from April 2026.

42. **Exempt Business**

Resolved

That the following item be considered in closed session.

43. **Cornhill Market**

The Panel discussed the finances of the Cornhill market and the considerations around its operation.

Resolved

That the Head of Community and Public Protection be authorised to enact the recommendation contained in the Town Clerk's report.

Duration of meeting: 2.30 - 4.30 pm

Chairman

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