

REPORT TO: Corporate Policy & Performance Board

DATE: 7th September 2021

REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director, Enterprise, Community & Resources

PORTFOLIO: Corporate Services

SUBJECT: Widnes Market Update Report

WARDS: Boroughwide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The purpose of the report is to provide Members with an update on Widnes Market, highlighting the investment which has gone into the Market in the recent past and outlining other initiatives which are contributing to the Markets current performance.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That the report be noted

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Background

- 3.1 In October 2018 the management arrangements at Widnes Market were changed, whereby the responsibility for the Market was transferred from the Regeneration Team to Property Services Operations team.
- 3.2 This saw the creation of a new post, that of Technical Support & Property Manager, with the main responsibilities being the overall management of Widnes Market, along with the management of the Property Services Helpdesk team and responsible for the effective development and implementation of the Council's accommodation plan.
- 3.3 Other posts were amended to reenergise the markets, and the market management team now consists of a Market Officer, Trader Liaison Officer, and a dedicated Promotion and Sales Officer. All the staff now in post for these positions are new to the market and have brought a wealth of knowledge and experience which has enabled the market management team to go from strength to strength. The team are supported by Attendants and Security, who all ensure the market and surrounding areas are kept clean and secure.

Audit Reports

- 3.4 In February 2019 HBC's Internal Audit carried out a report on Widnes Market in respect of the existing controls and measures in place, which provided an Adequate Assurance level with 7 priority issues, covering items such as fees and charges, stall occupancy, risk management, insurance, cash collection and new trader checks.
- 3.5 Following this, the Market Protocols were updated and amended and approved by Executive Board on 11th April 2019, minute ref EXB121.
- 3.6 In February 2021 Internal Audit carried out a follow up report to assess how effectively the outstanding risks identified in the February 2019 report had been addressed. All 7 of the original priority issues had been addressed and a Substantial Assurance level was given.

Occupancy

- 3.7 At the time of the restructure in October 2018 the indoor market stall occupancy rate was 83%.
- 3.8 After the first lockdown in March 2020, only two indoor traders and one outdoor trader chose not to return. Since then the market management team have actively encouraged new traders bringing in new and diverse commodities which will appeal to the public.
- 3.9 The stall occupancy rate now stands at 97%. There are 185 stalls on the indoor market and there are currently 6 empty stalls, which hopefully will soon be let to more new and varied traders.

Arrears

- 3.10 There are currently no rent arrears for the outdoor market traders. There is a small amount of arrears for the indoor market traders however these are being actively pursued by the Council's Debtor team with payment plans in place to help the traders spread the payments over several months.
- 3.11 There are outstanding arrears for ex-traders, again these have payment plans in place and the debt is being reduced annually.

Investments

3.12 Since 2018 there has been significant investment in Widnes Market, which started with the reroofing of the main market hall at a cost of just over £1,000,000, which was completed in 2019.

3.13 Since then over £489,000 has been spent on some much needed maintenance and improvement works to the market which has been carried out to enhance the overall appearance of the Market:-

- Replacement of evaporate cooling system £117,000
- Redecoration to entrance areas including high level painting, redecoration to all internal columns, toilet corridor areas £12,000
- Redecoration and renewal of flooring to 1st floor corridor by traders toilets and store rooms £28,000
- Redecoration to all outdoor market stalls steel stanchions £8,500
- Repainting of 2 ornate external lampposts, gates, railings and parking bollards £4,500
- Replacement of outdoor gutters, downpipes and roofing panels £198,000
- Relocation and upgrade of all indoor market electrical distribution boards £62,000
- Replacement of 2 No. automatic doors £12,000
- Changing Places Facility £47,000

Community of Widnes Market

3.14 The main goal of the market management team is to make Widnes Market a community hub for the people of Halton, and surrounding areas. Several new facilities and services have been added, or are in the process of completion, such as:-

3.15 **Changing Places Facility** - this facility is designed to be completely accessible and provide sufficient space and equipment for people with profound and multiple learning disabilities or with physical disabilities such as spinal injuries, muscular dystrophy and multiple sclerosis often need extra equipment and space to allow them to use the toilets safely and comfortably. The room is designed to accommodate a user and up to two carers, plus mobility equipment. The room has facilities such as a specialist hoist, a rise and fall sink and an adult changing bench, all of which offer discreet toilet facilities to members of the public that may otherwise be deterred from visiting the market. This is one of only two of these facilities in a retail environment in Halton, and the only one in Widnes town centre.

- 3.16 **Nursing Room/Quiet space** - this is a great new area which offers parents the option to breastfeed, express or feed their baby in a private and comfortable area while visiting the market. The room will be registered with the Breastfeeding Network and also with local baby and toddler groups throughout Halton. The room also acts as a quiet space for members of the public who live with autism and Asperger's Syndrome. The room is private and will offer a relaxing setting that we will be registering with CHAPS (Cheshire Autism Practical Support) and other relevant authorities
- 3.17 **Multi-Faith prayer room** - we have relocated our multi-faith prayer room to a more discreet position, with the added benefit of the room now having a walled front and entrance door to preserve the privacy of the user. The room will be clearly signposted and will be available to all denominations on all trading days as a space for private prayers and reflection.
- 3.18 **Water bottle refill point** - a soon to be installed free facility for the community where they can refill water bottles, which will help to discourage the use of single use plastic bottles. Once installed a promotion will be carried out giving away free reusable bottles to the shoppers with the market logo on. The market will be the only place in Widnes town centre which will have a free water refill point.
- 3.19 **Student Trading Days** - following discussions with Bryan Doyle and Rebecca Moorhead of Riverside College and Cronton College regarding student trading days at Widnes Market, these days are proposed to be part of the curriculum of four different business studies courses. The plan is to allow monthly Thursday outdoor market trading to students to run a small business for a day, selling primarily hand-crafted products. On our part, we would equip all students with a 'trading pack' which would include a copy of market protocols, marketing materials, specimen copies of applications forms, a tenancy at will and a traders newsletter. This initiative is to be run in conjunction with both colleges, with the added 'attention grabber' of there being a competitive edge to the trading days for the students. We are hoping to launch the programme in the next academic year of 2021-22.
- 3.20 **Creative competitions at Widnes Market** - Initial plans for 2021 included 2 competitions that would use publicly submitted photography ('Picture Halton') and artwork ('Creative Halton'). Both competitions would take place on separate occasions, in our public area, with display stands in place for 2 weeks, at the end of which it was hoped to have a college lecturer and the Mayor of Halton judge for prize winning submissions. The aim here is to be as inclusive as possible and appeal to all age groups in the community. This would offer both good PR and footfall as it appeals to a wide cross section in both entrants and viewers. Due to the difficulties with social distancing, these events (previously scheduled for July and August) are currently on hold until such a time that we feel it is safe to conduct the event.

3.21 **Sunday Markets** - the market management team have been working hard to arrange Sunday Markets at Widnes, and there are currently 3 planned and if these prove to be successful more Sunday markets will be planned for 2022. Sunday markets will not only increase the revenue potential for Widnes Market but also for our existing traders, and also to support local craft traders.

3.22 Sunday 5th September - Celebrate Music Halton

Widnes Market will be joining in with the celebrations for the Borough of Culture Music Weekender on Widnes Outdoor Market. There will be a wide range of musical acts, showcasing the great array of cultural talent we have here in Halton. We will also have food and drink available and some great local traders. Doors open at 11am and it is free entry for the public so they can come along and see just some of the great acts on show at Widnes Market

3.23 Sunday 24th October - Autumn Craft Fair

Widnes Market will be holding an Autumn Craft Fair this October where there will be a wide variety of handmade and locally created goods. There will also be seasonal food and drink for sale throughout the day to make it an Autumn Sunday to remember. Entry to the fair is free. With free parking for all our visitors it is hoped to attract people from all surrounding areas.

3.24 Sunday 28th November - Christmas Craft Fair

Widnes Market will be hosting a Christmas Craft Fair which will be the place to get unique hand crafted Christmas gifts for friends and family. There will be Christmas themed stalls, hand crafted and bespoke items, seasonal food and drink, free entry and free parking throughout the day and a great array of stalls that are sure to offer something for everyone.

3.25 **Food and Drink** - the market management team have done some research and looked at the positives from other local markets such as Warrington and Altrincham which are both popular and successful due to a wide variety of food and drink. Therefore, we have been sourcing and encouraging new food and drink traders and we now have a great mix of food offerings to suit all tastes:-

- Sweetie Pies – A great breakfast, lunch and home delivery attraction for low income families and children, serving ice creams, pancakes, waffles and many more sweet treats.
- Fenn's – A new, fully plant based café. A great attraction for people to visit Halton and the market, a sign that Widnes market is unique and modern.
- Our existing Market Café and Koffee Korner are now able to diversify their own food/drink offer to meet the requests of their loyal customers who visit them daily.
- Redi Noodle bar – A Chinese/Indian takeaway offering noodles and rice boxes as well as other dishes. A great option for local businesses to come in and grab a quick lunch on their dinner hour.
- Thai Style – A new Thai dine in restaurant offering authentic Thai Cuisine.

- Robs Rolls – Our outdoor food truck offering a variety of breakfast and lunch deals. Soon to have its own seating area in the outdoor market to encourage socialising and combat loneliness that many of our customers may suffer with.
 - Legally Blondies – Our new sweet treat trader introducing a younger, social media obsessed crowd to Widnes Market, offering everything from brownies to rocky roads to milkshakes.
- 3.26 **Wednesday Market** - the popular Flea and Collectors market was reopened on Wednesday 19th May, with all traders now being registered with full insurance. The number of traders are increasing weekly, with traders coming from far afield such as North Wales. There is always a unique and diverse selection of goods sold to interest customers.
- 3.27 **Event Space /Charities** - the Event Space in the indoor market is available free of charge for registered charities, such as Cancer Support UK, The Dogs Trust, Vision Support UK, where they can give help and support to members of the public. In November 2020 the Royal British Legion used the space for 2 weeks to collect for the Poppy Appeal and have booked the space again for November 2021.

COVID-19

- 3.28 Throughout each of the 3 lockdowns since 2020 the Widnes Market traders have been fully supported by the market management team and the Council. All the indoor traders were eligible for the Business Support Grants and the outdoor traders for the Discretionary Grants and Retail Leisure and Hospitality Grants.
- 3.29 During each lockdown no rent was charged to the traders, this was seen as an investment in the future of the market as it was quickly realised that if rent was charged during the lockdowns, regardless of any grants they could apply for, a lot of traders would give up their tenancy and we would be reopening with only half a market, and the other half having significant debt which they would never be able to repay. As it was, after the first lockdown only 2 indoor traders and 1 outdoor trader choose not to return. This enabled us to reopen the market with the majority of traders, and since then we have even increased our trader numbers.

Advertising/Social Media

- 3.30 The market management team actively encourage all traders to promote their business via all social media platforms. We are living in a social media age where a lot of shoppers use these platforms to decide their shopping habits, and the markets own social media platforms are updated daily advertising the market and the goods which are available.
- 3.31 To complement the social media advertising and to ensure that not just the population of Halton are aware of Widnes Market but also the surrounding areas, we also carry out regular adverts in local papers such as:-
- Full page advert in Widnes/Runcorn Weekly news 19th August and 26th August 2021.
 - Quarter page advert in Widnes/Runcorn Weekly news 22nd and 29th July.
 - Quarter page advert Warrington Guardian, Knutsford Guardian, Northwich Guardian, Winsford Guardian 12th July 2021, which also included the RHS Flower Show special.
 - Half page advert in Prime Northwest for 3 bi-monthly editions, August, October and December 2021
 - Front page advert in Widnes/Runcorn Weekly news advertising Christmas 2020 on 10th and 17th December.
 - Front page advert in Liverpool Echo advertising Christmas 2020 on 4th December, 11th December, 13th December, 15th December.

Trader Representatives

- 3.32 Following on from suggestions by traders, we are in the process of all the market traders having the opportunity to nominate trader representatives, who will attend regular meetings with the market management team to put ideas forward, ask questions and cascade information back to traders, which will be followed up by written minutes.
- 3.33 The suggestion to have multiple trader representatives attend a regular meeting, does not mean the market management team are unavailable to discuss matters with traders on a daily basis. The market management team will continue to support all traders and have an open office policy for anyone who feels they want to discuss matters privately.

The Future of Widnes Market

- 3.34 The main aim of the market management team is to ensure that Widnes Market remains at the heart of Widnes Town Centre. Whilst maintaining a traditional market feel with some businesses and traders that have been with us for over 50 years, also welcoming new and unique traders to the market family.
- 3.35 Free parking in Widnes Town Centre is a big draw for the shoppers, as no other local town centre offers this in the area.
- 3.36 We want to give aspiring new traders the chance to try market life by using our “Pop-Up Stall” which is offered at a competitive daily rate, where they can trade for a short while giving their business the chance to grow, before they go on to become a full time trader.
- 3.37 Widnes Market is the place to shop, eat, socialise, a meeting place to form new friendships helping to combat loneliness, and inclusive for the whole community.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The market is run in accordance with the Council’s policies and procedures, in particular the Market Protocols, which consist of:-
Section 1 - Market Regulations
Section 2 - Contravention of the Regulations Procedures
Section 3 - Market Charging Policy

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Sections 3.12 and 3.13 of the report outline the capital investment that has been allocated to the markets in recent years.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL’S PRIORITIES

6.1 Children and Young People in Halton

None

6.2 Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton

Encourage new traders to set up small businesses within Widnes Market, which will employ people.

6.3 A Healthy Halton

None

6.4 A Safer Halton

None

6.5 Halton's Urban Renewal

A thriving market can contribute to urban renewal.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

There are no significant risks associated with the above course of action.

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

None

9.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

Document

Place of Inspection

Contact Officer

None under the meaning of the act