

16 October 2012

Markets Working Group update

Ward(s)

Portfolios: Cllr A Andrew - Regeneration

Executive Summary:

The purpose of the report is to provide an update on the work of the Markets Working Group established by the Panel to lead a number of workstreams aimed at reviewing the current position with Walsall markets and identifying ways in which the markets can be enhanced to play a greater role in the attractiveness and prosperity of the town and district centres.

In particular, the Working Group has agreed to concentrate its initial attention on the relocation of Walsall market and a series of comprehensive surveys with market traders, businesses and shoppers which will help to understand demand, inform decisions on economic viability, and sustain improvements to Walsall, Willenhall and Bloxwich markets.

Those workstreams remain in progress and this report will summarise the work undertaken so far by GVA / The Retail Group in considering the options for the relocation of Walsall market, and progress on the consultation surveys undertaken by both consultants and officers; the intention is that these workstreams will be completed such that the Working Group will be in a position to make recommendations on these matters to the Panel at its meeting on 27th November.

Reason for scrutiny:

The Panel has established a Working Group to consider matters relating to Walsall markets. In particular, the Working Group, at its meeting on 21st August, agreed terms of reference which included an assessment of the options for delivering the relocation of Walsall market and ways in which the viability of and demand for Willenhall and Bloxwich markets could be improved.

It is anticipated that the Working Group will report its outcomes to the Panel at its meeting on 27th November with recommendations presented to Cabinet in early 2013.

Recommendations:

That the Panel note progress on the workstreams being led by the Markets Working Group and agree to receive a detailed report at its meeting on 27th November.

Background papers:

None

Resource and legal considerations:

The costs of appointing external consultants to consider the options for relocating Walsall market can be met from existing budgets. The consultation surveys in Willenhall and Bloxwich markets have been undertaken using using in-house resources.

Citizen impact:

Walsall's street markets have a long tradition and play an important role in the offer provided to shoppers, visitors and businesses alike in the town and district centres. The consultation surveys have involved all stakeholders in order to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the impact of the markets.

Environmental impact:

Improvements to the markets and the proposed relocation of Walsall market in particular, will aim to result in a positive environmental impact.

Performance management:

The scrutiny exercise will endeavour to result in conclusions on the demand for and future viability of the markets which will inform the management of the Council's performance in respect of the markets service.

Equality Implications:

An Equality Impact Assessment will need to be carried out in respect of the options for the relocation of Walsall market.

Consultation:

Consultation with a wide variety of stakeholders – including traders, businesses and citizens - is key to the workstreams of the Working Group and will inform the proposed outcomes.

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1. **Walsall Market Relocation: Overview**

The project is well into the research and analysis phase. Research areas completed include:

- Project Immersion
- Information Requirements & Sourcing
- Retail Review
- Planning Policy Review

Areas underway include:

- Retailer Discussions
- Trader Survey
- Industry Best Practice
- Public Sector Funding Options
- Stakeholder Discussions
- Locations Appraisal
- Optimum Market Definition

Areas to be commenced:

- Feasibility Analysis
- Financial Analysis
- Recommended Future Market, including Location
- Conclusions

Further detail on progress for key research areas and emerging findings are detailed below:

Retail Review

The Retail Group (TRG) has completed its field based review of the existing market and potential sites. GVA has assessed the market on a variety of standard measures, including quality of fixtures, standards of presentation, adjacencies, sense of arrival, signposting, sightlines, facilities, layout and information availability.

GVA are now analysing findings, however some initial observations would include the following.

- It is clear the existing market is long overdue investment and upgrading. Initial sightlines are basic at best and mostly uninspiring and low quality.
- The initial stalls on approach from all directions are not great (other than down Park Street). There is little in the way of effective signage or information share.
- Entrance points to the market are visually poor due to the condition of the stalls.
- Whilst the standard colour stall tops work well, the coverings are tired and in need of replacing, as are the tables/ horizontal wooden boards that traders use to serve from.
- Few traders use dedicating racking or fixtures.

There appears to be no zoning of product categories, other than the food sellers around The Bridge, which would work well if the stalls, tables and chairs appeared better

quality. Market cleanliness and rubbish management on the whole is relatively good and better than most markets we have experience with. An initial summary of strengths and weaknesses includes:

☺	☹
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Popular 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tired and dated environment – in need of refurbishment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality of fresh produce offer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invisible from prime pitch locations - best stalls are hidden in the market
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product presentation of fresh produce 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of branding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proximity to the bus/ train station 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor retail standards from most traders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easily accessible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor/ non-existent weather protection
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visible at bottom end of Park Street/ main drag 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weak signage – theme of each day is not clear
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large scale/ number of stalls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No ‘announcement/ entrance’ for the market
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small ‘finger signs’ throughout the town centre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No uniformity
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited catering offer
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic shopper facilities
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Old fashioned stalls
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited choice – especially depth
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of interesting/ different stalls
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disconnect between the market and the remainder of the town centre

These emerging findings are providing one level of input into developing the filters with which to assess the alternative sites put forward for the market.

Trader Survey

TRG has surveyed traders in the town centre on a range of issues with regards the existing customer base, recent performance, issues and improvements wanted. Traders were issued with a letter of introduction via the markets management team. The surveys were picked up by TRG researchers on the same day that they were handed out, as this typically generates the best response. Approximately 150 traders were handed surveys face to face starting Friday 5th October.

TRG met with the Market Traders Association along with officers to explain the process, and provide assurance of confidentiality. The traders appeared to be supportive and also agreed to distribute further surveys if required.

It was noted that Traders performance is still good with 90% occupancy on all days except Wednesday. There also remains strong demand for market stalls in the town.

Retailer Survey

GVA have spoken to key retailers (either anchor and/ or adjacent to the market) and undertook a vox pop survey of their views of the market. Retailers spoken to so far include M&S, River Island, Debenhams and Body Shop. Further conversations will be had with Boots, International, New Look and CeX. Topics discussed include their view of the existing market, its issues and how it needs to change to improve.

The responses so far have been mixed. Whilst every retailer wants a market to continue in the town centre all retailers feel that the market needs to be improved from its current state to include improved quality of stalls i.e. fixtures and fittings and their presentation and a review to be undertaken of the variety and type of goods sold. One of the key issues that will be considered is the means by which this investment can be generated to deliver such a change i.e. availability of public funding sources. All retailers want to see a thriving market, which creates hustle and bustle but also looks appealing, attractive and high quality and is 'future proofed' so to make a positive contribution to raising the profile of the town and its retail offer.

The retailers also want to keep Park Street as prime retail (as endorsed by the 2010 GVA Study), with no market activity or food vans/ kiosks along this prime Zone A retail area of the town centre. We note that the food vans/ kiosks are not part of the Market and in this light the Council department responsible for the management and location of these vans/ kiosks will need to be consulted with as part of the locations options appraisal.

Policy Review/ Funding

GVA have completed the planning policy review which considers the impact of relevant national and local planning policies and has started to consider the scope of public sector funding sources that may be available for the market.

GVA will assess the relearns funds application criteria to see whether the market would be eligible for funding which will, of course, be dependant on the business case prepared and the availability of funds. The outcome of our appraisal of locations and the cost benefit analysis will help filter which types of funding packages can be considered.

Project Next Steps

GVA will have spoken to contacts within the industry regarding best practice in regards to supporting, planning for and investing in town centre markets, as well as the benefits of operating indoor versus street markets. GVA will also be speaking to key retail stakeholders in Walsall in regards to their latest plans/ views of the market.

GVA will then draw together the results of all the various research areas, and formulate conclusions in terms of the best market for Walsall, as well as which is the optimum site to pursue including the feasibility and financial implications.

GVA will also advise on what public sector funding may be available which could in part form a cocktail of funding sources that could facilitate the necessary investment in the market to improve its appeal, offer, presentation and its fixtures/ fittings which in turn will help to raise the profile of the town centre by delivering an attractive and viable market that is future proofed as an integral part of the town's retail offer.

Assuming that the Council led Retailer and Consumer Surveys will be completed by the end of October the intention is to make a Draft report (that will incorporate the findings of the above surveys) available by the end of the first full week of November (9th).

2. Consultation Surveys

A public market questionnaire was launched on 3 September 2012 in order to capture current perceptions and expectations from customers using the markets and those who rarely or never use Walsall Markets. The following methods were used to distribute the questionnaire:-

- The questionnaire was put on line using the Walsall.gov.uk website and hard copies were distributed to our libraries, First Stop Shop and key businesses within the borough where footfall is high.
- A press release and social media feeds were utilised to attract public interest
- An external agency was contracted to complete 600 telephone interviews largely throughout the borough of Walsall but also including the areas of Bilston, Cannock, Lichfield, Sutton Coldfield and Wednesbury in order to reach non-users of the markets. 30 on street face to face interviews in each of the centres of Walsall, Bloxwich, Brownhills, Aldridge, Darlaston and Willenhall.
- Over 125 questionnaires were also issued to ethnic minority groups using our Creative Development Team to manage these groups using existing contacts.

The public consultation period has now ceased and data has now been inputted from the hard copies of the completed questionnaires. This data is being analysed and a full report will be circulated within the next few weeks.

Retailer Consultation

A retailer questionnaire has been carried out in Walsall, Bloxwich and Willenhall and this data will form part of the full report.

Market Trader Consultation

Market traders at Walsall Town Centre market has been carried out by The Retail Group, consultants recently instructed to carry out the Market Appraisal for Walsall Market. An introductory meeting has already taken place with the chair of the Market Traders Association and traders received an introductory letter from the Retail Group on 5 October.

Traders in Bloxwich and Willenhall have each been given the opportunity to complete a trader questionnaire and again these results along with those mentioned above will be drawn together. This will enable us to understand the needs and expectations from our customers, businesses and market traders which will ultimately facilitate and inform how we manage and deliver Walsall markets.