

**BRIDGNORTH TOWN COUNCIL
TOWN COUNCIL MEETING
TUESDAY 18TH AUGUST 2020**

LJ/2020

10th August 2020

REPORT TO TOWN COUNCILLORS

AGENDA ITEM 10 – BRIDGNORTH HIGH STREET SATURDAY MARKET / ROAD

AIM

1. *To receive a report on the recent operation of the Saturday Market in the High Street in Bridgnorth and the associated road closure, and consider the options going forward.*

BACKGROUND

2. Following comments and observations regarding the lack of opportunity for social distancing in Bridgnorth High Street on Saturday's (market day). Public health officials advised that the market operation (on the one side of the High Street) could not continue as it was if it were to operate in a Covid-19 compliant manner.
3. As the Saturday market takes place on the public highway, Shropshire Council (SC) Highways department have taken the lead on ensuring that the High Street area is Covid-19 compliant (they have the powers of enforcement, regarding road closures, pavement licences, traffic orders etc).
4. SC officers discussed the options available with Bridgnorth Town Council (BTC) Officers (and the Mayor/ Deputy Mayor) and felt that the only reasonable course of action for the immediate future was to have a road closure for most of Saturday.
5. A road closure has been in place since Saturday 25th July with the aim of allowing the market to operate at near full capacity. All charges associated with traffic management and marshalling are falling to either SC or BTC.
6. Town Council officers and the Mayor will continue to discuss with Shropshire Council the options open to them and the measures that they might wish / need to implement.
7. DISCUSSION/ COMMENT

This is intended to give a general picture of events to date and in part contains opinion and reasonable assumptions; it seeks to prompt some reasonable debate. It is not intended to cover all aspects and all discussions and the Town Clerk will be

available to offer information and views on other items that might be relevant at the Council meeting at which this report is considered.

Introduction.

8. The operation of the Saturday market appears to be complicated. The market is unregulated and therefore, there is no central management. Other than for a few stalls operated under licence from BTC, it is understood that each market pitch has either their own individual arrangement with the shop that they trade outside or, some time ago purchased in some manner the right to trade at a location.
9. The lack of any clear management structure for the entire market has made implementing changes as a result of public health advice a difficult task. In essence, it can be considered as 20 or so different businesses, of which many are sub-let; obtaining a consensus is proving to be difficult.

Road Closure

10. It was generally agreed (by SC and BTC) that the main area of concern regarding the ability to social distance was on the thoroughfare between the Town Hall and shops running up from St Mary Street. The 3 market stalls that operated adjacent to the Town Hall could not realistically trade in that location and maintain the same offering (there were some other lesser 'pinch points').
11. 18th July – Officers (BTC and SC) visit market to obtain contact details of market traders (in order that any changes can be communicated effectively) and advise that there is strong likelihood that the road will be closed (on Saturday's) from 25th July and that some stalls will likely need to be relocated (or not trade).
12. Week of 20th July – SC and BTC discuss options which included:
 - a. Close High Street to traffic and relocate 3 or 4 stalls.
 - b. Introduce a running lane down the high street for traffic and allow market stalls to move away from the pavement.
 - c. Close the market in its entirety.
 - d. Close some of the market stalls (those operating in the pinch points) and keep the road open as usual.

Protection of public health was seen as the overriding priority. Option A was chosen as it would create additional space and allow some economic activity. The intention was for the road closure to operate for several weeks to allow a more permanent solution to be found – one that allows traffic through the High Street. It was noted that the road closure would have a detrimental impact to a number of groups (e.g. residents who have parking spaces off the High Street and delivery vehicles). It was felt that those inconvenienced might tolerate the changes for a few weeks, but not any longer.

13. Week of 20th July - Public Health officials through SC liaise directly with all market traders to explain the new temporary arrangements.
14. 25th July – First High Street Saturday market with road closed – a number of issues identified as needing to be ironed out (including, access for residents, timings of road closure, signage, manpower requirements, space taken up by traders, traders access to clear up)
15. 1st and 8th August - 2 relatively 'settled' weeks of operation (some issues remain difficult to resolve – access for residents).
16. Review meetings have sought to resolve consistent issues.

Observations / General Comments

17. There have been many comments noted via social media, direct correspondence, or passing comment.
18. There are a mix of views and opinions presented. There has been some anecdotal evidence circulated but little hard evidence, e.g. (apparently):
 - Some High St retailers are suggesting that they are benefitting (slightly) from the road closure; others say that they are suffering and some see little or no difference.
 - Some market and some High St traders are losing buyers of bulky items, because vehicles cannot be parked beside shops or market stalls to load.
 - Restricted access is frustrating internet deliveries to High Street households.
 - A number of visitors comment that they like the space to wander and the market is now an attractive venue.
 - A number of residents have commented that they feel safer and are more likely to visit the High Street.
19. There has been a tendency for some market traders to fill gaps that have been created for social distancing purposes, which in part defeats the object.
20. Market Traders have traditionally used thoroughfares for their customers to purchase from – In the current situation this practice eats up valuable space that could be used for social distancing or free-flow of pedestrians.
21. A number of residents who have parking off the High Street are becoming more frustrated with severely restricted access with each week that the road closure continues.
22. Large delivery vehicles that deliver to Whitburn Street are unable to exit the High Street through Northgate (height restrictions) and are required under supervision to return down Whitburn St the wrong way.

23. A number of people (generally elderly) suggest that the High Street is now out of reach for them because the buses no longer stop/ pick up in the High Street.
24. In general almost every comment / argument put forward has had the opposite or near opposite view expressed. There is (not unreasonably) always with such things going to be some element of self-interest or lack of understanding of unintended consequences.
25. There appears to have been much comment and some heated debate over many years about pedestrianising (or not) of the High Street, to facilitate the market. Having attended numerous conference calls and video meetings there has been absolutely no consideration given by BTC or SC to closing the High Street to vehicles on permanent basis or on a 'Saturday Market only' basis.
26. It is not clear under what circumstances the High Street might return to normal. E.g. crowded and no requirement for social distancing measures.
27. If you consider each market pitch as an individual trader, with their own individual rights, it might be appropriate for them to consider themselves how they might trade within their own territory in a manner that is acceptable to public health, as would be the case for each of the High Street shops.
28. There are no metrics currently available that can reasonably be used to measure the financials of market traders or High Street traders. It is likely that most businesses are struggling but some might be struggling more than others.
29. There appears to be 2 conflicting demands here:
- i) The desire to increase footfall to help drive the economy.
 - ii) The desire to keep people spaced out and socially distanced.

FINANCIALS

30. Estimated costs are in the region of £1,000 per Saturday market day. The costs of administering and delivering the required road closure are not insignificant with BTC providing a number of its staff. Furthermore, SC are providing at least one member of staff and incurring the costs of a contractor to provide, set up and remove traffic management furniture/ signs. There has been to date no contribution from the independent/ unregulated market traders towards costs to maintain their business activity.
31. The continued provision of staff and other costs for the road closure are unlikely to be affordable without some external grant funding or a rise on levels of Council Tax for Bridgnorth residents.

SUMMARY

32. In challenging times, some difficult decisions have been made without their being any existent overarching management of the High Street market; the task has (with no particular desire to do so) fallen to Shropshire Council as a result of public health concerns and its legal powers to close the Highway.
33. Shropshire Council continues to have dialogue with BTC (albeit we have no powers in the matter) in order that BTC's local knowledge can be used to inform. Furthermore, BTC are bearing some of the financial cost and staffing resource.
34. The current situation was intended to be a temporary measure.
35. While many visitors and shoppers like the closed High Street arrangement these are likely to be in the main transient. However, a small number of regulars are being inconvenienced each week.
36. The current situation (road closure) is unsustainable without significant investment and additional resource. The Town Council will need to consider if and how it might fund an ongoing commitment beyond a few weeks.

OPTIONS

37. There are no doubt a large number of variations that could be considered that might take some time to obtain some reasonable consensus however options for Shropshire Council might include:
- a. Shropshire Council continues with the current Saturday road closures until Covid-19 disappears.
 - b. Have the market operate as previously (down one side of the High Street) and require all market stalls to trade in a Covid-19 compliant manner within their own area; e.g. not rely on public space (the footpath) as their place to carry out transactions.

RECOMMENDATION(s)

38. The Town Council/ Town Councillors will likely need to offer Shropshire Council a view on how the Saturday Market might operate in light of the current pandemic.
39. It is recommended that the Town Council states its position with regard to the Town and its residents, and taking into account that there might be some substantial costs along with some significant inconveniences with the current situation (road closure).



Lee Jakeman

Town Clerk