

WIDNES MARKET BUSINESS PLAN 2022-2025



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1.0 Executive Summary

This Business Plan for Widnes Markets identifies the priorities and actions to be undertaken by the Market Management Team during the period April 2022 to 2025. The Performance targets outlined in the document will be monitored by the Market Management Team.

The Business Plan sets out the environment in which Widnes Market is operating. It identifies the key ingredients needed to continue to make Widnes Market successful. The Business Plan also highlights the priorities and actions needed to grow and sustain the market in the future.

The Business Plan provides financial information relating to income generated and expenditure incurred in operating Widnes Market, and current levels of outstanding trader debt. Overall, the market generates a modest profit.

An analysis of occupancy and footfall rates is provided, however there is a downward trend in relation to the footfall figures, but Widnes Market is still a place that people either wish to visit, or set up and run their retail business.

The Business Plan does not focus on operational detail but allows the organisation to take a long-term strategic view of the key priorities and actions needed to make our market commercially viable and successful. This Plan will also help us to respond more proactively to any changes in the retail sector including online and social media influencers. The market team will refresh the plan on an annual basis.

2.0 Introduction to Widnes Market

Based in the town centre on Bradley Way since a change of location in 1995, Widnes Market is positioned as an alternative shopping venue in a competitive marketplace. Primary competitors are made up of a number of private sector retailers, mainly Green Oaks, Albert Square, Widnes Shopping Park, four local supermarkets, the High Street and of course, online retailers.

The venue will aim to remain competitive in the marketplace by continuing to be a traditional and alternative option for the local community, giving a unique experience to visitors, and offering something its competitors cannot.

The Market encourages a varied and unique range of traders, offering visitors a personal service, which will drive retention and repeat visits, helping sustain a consistent footfall, which will support local traders.

Its position will be underpinned by improving the marketing structure, enhancing and developing its relationship with new and existing customers and further building its online presence.

Developing a strong offer is a key challenge for Widnes Market in its bid to develop its position in the marketplace, given the competitive environment and potential threat of large brands in the retail sector.

Widnes Indoor Market : The indoor market consists of 185 stalls and is open from 9:00am to 4:30pm five days a week - Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

Widnes Outdoor Market : has 80 stalls with space for 2 food vendors, and has the following markets:-

Retail Market - open from 9:00am to 3.00pm three days per week – Monday, Friday and Saturday.

Flea and Collectibles Market – every Wednesday from 7am which offers a vibrant mix of second hand goods.

Best of Both - an exciting new venture which runs every Thursday and is a mix of both retail traders and flea and collectible traders, offering the customer the “best of both” new goods and second hand goods.

Staff Resources

Widnes Market employs the following staff:-

Technical Support and Property Manager – 1 FTE

Market Officer – 1 FTE

Trader Liaison Officer – 0.8 FTE

Sales & New Business & Marketing Officer – 0.8 FTE

Security Guard – 2 FTE

Market Attendants – 2 FTE

Market Attendants – 2 x 0.6 FTE

The Markets Management Team also utilises the support services from other teams within the Council, such as:-

- Property Services
- Legal Services
- Accountancy Division
- Communications and Marketing

3.0 Vision and Strategy

Our vision for Widnes Market, is:

“To maintain Widnes Market at the heart of our town centre as a friendly, well-loved, quality place in which to shop, feel inspired and build lasting memories. To help businesses grow and expand by offering competitive rates for a traditional Market in a modern setting”.

This vision is based on emphasising the different retail offer provided by the market compared with the rest of the retail offer in Widnes, and keeping up to date with retail and experience trends on all social media platforms.

The vision for Widnes Market is also entwined with Halton Borough Council’s vision:-

“Halton will be a thriving and vibrant Borough where people can learn and develop their skills; enjoy a good quality of life with good health; a high quality, modern urban environment; the opportunity for all to fulfil their potential; greater wealth and equality; sustained by a thriving business community; and safer, stronger and more attractive neighbourhoods.”

The long-term strategy for Widnes Market must focus on improving the retail offer/shopping experience of the market, and identifying priority commodities that shoppers cannot get or have difficulty in getting elsewhere. The main focus will be on providing customers with an experience and a memory alongside a great retail offer. Therefore, we want our market to be a thriving local Market offering a mixed commodity of food and an area for experiences and events.

The future success of Widnes Market will be measured by:-

- More people shopping in our markets;
- More traders trading in our markets;
- More people seeing our markets as key assets within the town centres;
- More partners and businesses using the markets for promotions and partnership working.

4.0 Marketing Strategy

As the availability of internet and broadband has increased, online technology has become more readily available and affordable, with the vast majority of residents increasingly technologically capable, with access to a computer or tablet at home and most of all with smart phones, allowing people to check the news and interact on the go.

By harnessing the convenience of this technology, we will be able to improve the market's online and digital brand to new audiences, whilst remaining mindful of existing customers who are still more reliant on traditional marketing methods.

The challenge is to identify what we can do to ensure a strong, positive and sustained image for the market. It will be essential to identify the planning and preparation needed; and more importantly, what it is that we can deliver, what should we facilitate, prompt, trigger etc. and who else should be involved in the planning, delivery and implementation. It will be imperative to engage with all stakeholders to identify all issues and aspirations.

Consumers have adopted new patterns of purchasing during the COVID lockdowns, these have now become part of the new 'normality' for some consumers. Supermarkets will have strengthened their bond with consumers, attracting more frequent visits and more on-line usage.

An active recovery plan through multiple advertising platforms is going to be vital in the ongoing marketing of Widnes Market,

This is important in day-to-day operations but much more so now as we aim to inject enthusiasm into shoppers to both re-attend and re-introduce the market into their normal shopping habits.

7 P's of Marketing Mix

This is the application of the effective marketing method model which can help to review and define key strategy for marketing products and services, which has been applied to Widnes Market.

PRODUCT	Our aim is to actively encourage more diverse products and services to offer the alternative shopping experience that we need to promote to help compete with the local supermarkets and shopping centres
PRICE	Regarding market commodities and services, each should be sold at a price which the target audience deems to be good value-for-money. The market is still seen as a place to 'grab a bargain'. With this in mind, we should enthuse traders towards emphasising this and along with other sales benefits when compared to using competitors
PROMOTION	The market is promoted to the appropriate audience via effective channels, using advertising methods which resonate with that audience. These channels may include (and are not limited to): branding, advertising, PR, corporate identity, a more market-centric social media ethos, promotions, events and special offers
PLACE	This is an observation of the premises and the ease of finding what the customer needs. An overhaul of the market map with a clearer plan to offer simple directions has been implemented with the maps located at the main entrance. The map could also potentially be produced as a handout guide which could also deliver valuable marketing messages and a diary of upcoming events.
PEOPLE	Traders should possess the skills and qualities needed to ensure business success. This is perhaps especially true of customer facing staff, whose communication and behaviour will greatly impact the audience's perception of the overall market. We could well have developed the best market – but if the customer facing people are off-putting to customers, the project will not reach its full commercial potential. For the purposes of the overall impression of the market, we should encourage traders to engage customers positively and helpfully, possibly offering training projects to ensure that helpful customer service is part of the experience of visiting Widnes Market
PROCESSES	Office processes have been adapted to help with the efficient running of the office and the benefits should filter down to both the traders and customers. These processes include (and are not limited to): Streamlining, primarily, of the up-to-date and coordinated sharing of information to ensure the most efficient use of time and resources. The re-design of the website, to improve the user experience, and an overhaul of the social networking integration.
PHYSICAL EVIDENCE	This refers to the physical context and paraphernalia (such as branded carrier bags, leaflets etc.) that come along with a purchase. In order to reinforce the market's brand credibility, this should exhibit a clear and prominent image to help reinforce the market's presence throughout the town. This also assists in creating a consistent and convincing experience for the customer.

Advertising

The strategy in recent years at Widnes Market has been to use a mixed approach to advertising when launching each new campaign. This has worked to a certain extent through radio, television, print and digital marketing, but a consistent reminder of the market's availability and benefits would now seem to be a more aggressive approach when attempting to be a part of the retail 'mix' for shoppers in Widnes.

Local Public Transport

Specifically, local buses. We now advertise with a local bus company which displays a Widnes Market poster on the rear of a bus which highlights the opening days and times of Widnes Market.

Social Networking

The market management team now take a much more 'hands-on' approach when broadcasting the market through the social networking platforms.

Local Radio

Widnes Market has previously used local radio to broadcast advertisements, The idea is that if Widnes Market is prominent through an audio medium, in radio advertising, it acts as a subliminal trigger which is backed up through alternative channels such as local transport advertising and digital marketing.

Social Media

More and more shoppers are turning to the internet to not only shop, but to find out how to shop locally. We must be more pro-active and prominent in this area.

- To improve our chances of success, the approach is as follows:-
- To market the wide range of commodities at Widnes Market, rather than focusing on individual traders
- To create more of a 'buzz' by creating themed weeks on social networking platforms, i.e. 'Vegan Week' where we focus on the great list of vegan goods we have to offer. This could incorporate an incentive, in agreement with the traders, for shoppers to benefit from these 'themed weeks' by means of discounts or vouchers, giving the customer a reason to specifically shop by the theme.
- To utilise Instagram much more by both offering more visual impact of the benefits and commodities at the market and also by creating interactive competitions, sponsored by the market, to incentivise younger users and students to get involved and see the market as a progressive shopping venue that has a relevance to them.
- We also under utilise the testimonial aspects of Widnes Market. The social networking platforms offer a great opportunity for us to show positive reactions from the local community to further enhance the markets profile to a wide audience.

Website

The Widnes Market website has been overhauled to refresh the look, usability and interactive flow of the platform, which has the following information available at the touch of a button:-

- Stall Directory - A comprehensive stall directory which includes trader contact details, web addresses and social networking links, alongside a brief but descriptive introduction of each trader.
- What's On Guide - A 'What's on' section which clearly lists a calendar of upcoming events to be held at Widnes Market.
- Trader Application - Our 'become a trader' section is now fully interactive and simple to use, that allows the user to complete an online application and upload relevant documentation to assist with a much more streamlined process. However, a paper application form is also still available from the market office which can be completed by the prospective trader and handed to a member of the market management team.
- Social Networking Feeds - To promote the social networking aspects of promotions, a feed of our posts through the website would act as a second opportunity for users to see our online publicity output.

Public Relations

The strategy of offering public interest events in the market will continue. They act as an attraction for new visitors, but they have also drawn in visitors that had not previously used the market, that have since become regular customers.

The events need to remain free and entertaining for all the family, helping to promote the community aspects and approach of Widnes Market staff and traders.

We are always looking to introduce incentives to shop at the market whether it be through savings, promotions or discounts. We are currently offering loyalty cards to generate consistent custom that would potentially offer a reason for customers to shop more with us, and less on-line.

5.0 SWOT Analysis

The following SWOT analysis has been carried out to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses at Widnes Market. It has also helped to identify the opportunities and threats that Widnes Market faces.

S	W	O	T
Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
<p>Good Value for Money Accessibility (bus links) Good Amenities Good Product Knowledge Variety and quality of stalls Reputation of the market Friendly Customer loyalty Excellent Customer service Wide customer base High Occupancy levels ‘All under one roof’ concept New management team 4.2-5 star reviews on Google ‘Door always open’ approach to traders and customers. Social media presence out of working hours. Clear and transparent communication with traders. ‘All in it together’ attitude from traders and Management team. Promote and support local talent and business. Focussed on providing experiences and creating friendships and memories for customers. Inclusive and open minded</p>	<p>Reducing footfall (Parking charges, bus strikes, cost of living crisis) Unwillingness of some traders to change Unwillingness of some traders to introduce card payments. Unwillingness of some traders to adapt selling space, visual merchandising or sales skills. ‘Snob’ value – some people will not shop at the market Competition from high street retail. Mixed ownerships i.e. Morrisons’ own the site and use outside space for their purposes Functionality of entrances – not inviting. Lack of clarity regarding role of Council – are we landlords, revenue generators or custodians of a town centre social value asset? Limited ICT connectivity Lack of ability to use the outdoor space in front of TJ Hughes.</p>	<p>Coach trips. Marketing Outside opportunity/stalls/entertainment Make the market relevant to young people. Promotions/offers – people want ‘freebies’ Better road access Link to radio station/charity (partnerships/personalities) Link to Widnes Vikings Improved signage Improved stall infrastructure Visible on all social media platforms. Ability to host Sunday Markets with The Studio’s support. A new WIFI system will be installed.</p>	<p>Internet Shopping Supermarket Offer Changing Customer Shopping habits. Car parking charges introduced in 2022. Public transport strikes. Cost of living increases. Street licence applications issued by HBC Legal Services. Other local events and attractions Other local markets e.g. The Barnyards Lack of Police/PCSO presence</p>

6.0 Business Priorities and Actions

This section identifies the priorities and actions required if we are to achieve Our Vision as set out in section 2 of this Business Plan.

The business priorities are based on:

- Reducing costs and being more efficient with our human and financial resources;
- Improving the customer experience;
- Protecting Income ;
- Creating ways to generate income;
- Consolidating our markets at the heart of our town centre.

There are eight business priority areas:

1. Traders

To be a successful market we need the right traders. Traders need to sell goods which are of the correct quality for the market and be able to present their products in a way which is attractive to the customer. It is important that traders possess qualities such as high level of customer service and sales and retention techniques which will benefit the market, and enable them to operate on a long-term basis. Our unique environment means we can make a member of the public a friend, not just a customer.

Actions

In order to ensure that the right type of traders are occupying the market, prospective new traders will be invited to an interview with the Market Management team to discuss their business plans and to ensure they are fully aware of their responsibilities as a trader at Widnes Market.

2. Right Products

Traders also need to offer products which are competitively priced and what customers want and provide a good service which encourages customers to return to our markets. In a highly competitive retail trading environment, a high standard of customer service is key to ensuring customers return to the market. The public receive high service quality when they shop in other retail environments and have high expectations when they visit the market. 'People buy people before products' If you like the trader, you will buy from them. Customer service is key to customer retention.

Actions

A retail survey which provides a summary of the trader service standards within the market should be undertaken every year to ensure that high standards are maintained. A Trader Information Pack will be created by the market team containing helpful sales and customer service techniques, important dates for future events, current trends and much more. This is designed to keep traders motivated and supported by the market management team, and ensure we focus on retaining more customers each year.

3. Right Location

Successful markets have to be in the right location which is visible, accessible and in a location where people naturally come together. They need to be easy to navigate around for customers to enable them to find their way around. They also need to be located close to other retailers, housing and work places to ensure footfall. Markets also need to be located close to public transport and car parking to enable customers to get to the market. Signage has been updated and installed within the Market to help customers. Signage has improved links between the indoor and outdoor markets.

Actions

In the wider town centre area there are pedestrian signs to the market and the local road network has a number of signs for the market.

A map of the market and stalls is visible at each entrance to the market to ensure our customers find it easy to navigate and therefore visit more stalls they may not have known where there. This map is easy to modify as we increase our capacity and add events to the public and outdoor area. Customer Leaflets are being created to include maps of the Indoor and Outdoor markets, event plans and interesting historical facts about the market and its traders.

4. Right Commodity Mix

A further business priority is the right mix of products on sale. This will enable competition between traders and ensure the market is not saturated by one type of product or service. The right commodity mix is important to ensure that businesses are sustainable over the long-term. We do not have one of any commodity, and the decision to approve or decline a request will also be based on the popularity and need for the product/service being requested.

Actions

The market team consisting of our Technical Support and Property Manager, Market Officer, Trader Liaison Officer and Sales & New Business & Marketing Officer will approve or decline all new trader applications and commodity requests on a weekly basis. This will enable current traders to increase and diversify their products/services quickly and recruit new traders/entrepreneurs to Widnes.

5. Right Environment for Business

Successful markets are those which provide the right environment for business and create new opportunities for new entrepreneurs to set up businesses within the market. They should also be flexible enough to allow businesses to expand and contract within the market.

Actions

The installation of Wi-Fi for traders is a step in the right direction and will help traders to deal online and order stock online. However, the HBC network is very restrictive and has not helped a number of traders. The Wi-Fi is also not currently available for the public to use. This will be installed in 2022/2023.

There are financial incentives in place to help traders expand the number of stalls they have but giving them 50% off the additional stalls for a period of six months. Traders can also receive a 10% discount if they pay their rent in full, annually. We also offer incentives to potential traders that provide commodities not currently sold at Widnes Market.

We have introduced 'Pop up Stalls' for any new businesses to try Market life and give them the space to experiment with new business ideas.

6. Right Public Space

A further quality markets need to have is to the right public space. There needs to be an area where people can linger and stop to communicate with others. Successful markets are those which are well maintained and have flexible space which can house different activities and promotions.

Actions

The market needs to have additional public space which would include seating areas to encourage people to spend time in the market. Such areas should be in different locations within the market and location may be dependent upon where vacant stalls are. Making the locations flexible may be an option over time. In 2022 we have introduced outdoor picnic seating areas to help combat loneliness and encourage customers to linger and shop.

Promotions and events currently take place relatively close to stalls which has resulted in complaints from traders affected. An area could be created in the market where such events and promotions can be carried out. Consultations with traders in advance will now take place to ensure events and promotions are only affecting traders which welcome the increased footfall and gatherings of potential customers near their stalls.

7. Right Business Model

The successful markets are those which are self-sustaining economically. They need to operate with fair rents which are affordable and provide business opportunity. Markets are natural incubators for small businesses which, in turn, create employment. Successful markets will also keep spending within the local area instead of spend within out of town shopping centres.

Actions

The Widnes Market Charging Policy has ensured that current and prospective traders are aware of the charges for stall rents and other services which the Council offers. All businesses can see that they are treated equitably and fairly.

We will display all vacant stalls rent prices including electric and promotional charges visible on our website and within the markets notice boards. This will make it easier for potential traders to make the decision to start their business at Widnes Market and maintain our high occupancy levels. The ability to apply to be a trader is now easier to do online with a new, more detailed application form. We will be able to request a financial reference which will ensure we recruit financially stable traders which will result in more businesses coming to the borough and staying in the borough. This will also result in a market filled with better skills, work ethic and stronger relationships whilst we make effective use of the Council's land assets such as the unused outdoor market every Thursday.

8. Right Promotions and Marketing

A good promotions programme is also essential, including advertising and press releases. Events and demonstrations of products will bring people in to the market. Promotions partners are also essential as they will use the market to educate or sell their products and services. Connecting to the local community particularly via sponsorships and fundraisers is also important and will give the market value and a connection to its customers.

The market should be a focus for the local community which would be enhanced via local sports sponsorship and schools and college related events.

An additional area which promotions need to focus on, relates to the letting out of market stalls. Advertising banners are installed on all current vacant stalls to include help for new businesses. Social media advertising has been introduced to attract commodities which are required in the market and this should continue in the future. Internal departments, for example, Business Development, should be used also to advertise vacant stalls.

The market needs to use promotional events to attract footfall from the local area and beyond. In order to maximise the effectiveness of promotional events, the market needs to know the target audience and ensure spend is used efficiently to attract increased footfall. A survey conducted internally by our Customer Intelligence Unit would enable the market to know more about the customers who use the market, why they chose to visit the market or why they do not use the market.

In November 2020, a survey was completed and below are a few key areas of interest.

178 Responses.

Online: 119 Paper: 59

Female: 118 Male: 51

Postcode: Halton 43% (61)

Have you made a special trip for an event?: No 76% (131) Yes 24% (42)

How do you travel here? Car 55% (94) Bus 25% (43)

How do you rate Widnes Market? Excellent 53% (78)

Overall, how would you rate our promotions/Events? Excellent 45% (18) Good 38% (15)

Another survey will be conducted in 2022, to also ascertain what opening and closing times the public want from Widnes Market.

7.0 Financial Information

This section provides information on income and expenditure and also provides details on occupancy rates, footfall and arrears.

In financial terms Widnes Market is successful as the market generates a modest profit for the Council.

A summary of income and expenditure is outlined below. It should be noted that the details provided take into account annual rental arrears. The markets also make a significant contribution to 'Central Recharges'.

2021/2022			
Income		Expenditure	
Rent	£717,783	Supplies and services	£26,831
Reimbursement for electricity	£38,589	Premises	£90,693
Total	£756,372	Repairs and maintenance	£19,310
		Staff	£225,747
		Security	£38,000
		Recharges	£93,699
		Total	£494,280
Profit : £262,092			

Income Forecast 2022/2023

At this stage it is difficult to anticipate the likely income in 2022/23, however based on the 1st quarter income for 2022/23, if stall occupancy rates remain the same we could forecast a total income of £797,324.

Expenditure Forecast 2022/2023

An assessment of inflation uplift has been provided by the Accountancy Department. It is anticipated that a 2% increase will be applied to markets related costs for 2022/23.

Trader Stall Occupancy Rates

The current rate as at August 2022 is 92%.

Year	Occupancy Rate
2018/19 – quarter 4	84%
2019/20 – quarter 1	87%
2020/21 – quarter 2	91%
2021/22 – quarter 1	94%
2021/22 – quarter 2	97%
2021/22 – quarter 3	97%
2021/22 – quarter 4	95%
2022/23 – quarter 1	92%

Markets Arrears

As at 11th July 2022 the amount of arrears for current indoor traders is £3,848.

There is no current outdoor trader debt.

The amount owed by ex-traders is £32,481. There was a 16% reduction in the ex-trader debt in December 2021 from the previous December 2020 figure. Each year there is a target of the debt to be reduced by 5%, which is currently being met.

2022 will result in all indoor traders paying their rent via direct debit. Any current and future arrears will be monitored closely and actions will be taken to resolve this issue within three months of the arrears starting. Ex-traders debt at Widnes Market should continue to reduce with an annual 5% reduction.

Footfall Figures

Year	Annual Figures	Comments
2017	4,011,118	
2018	3,747,299	Reduction of 6.5% from previous years
2019	3,444,739	Reduction of 8% from previous years
2020	1,939,401	Reduced numbers due to COVID lockdowns March-June and November 2020
2021	2,085,640	Reduced numbers due to COVID lockdowns Jan-April 2021

As can be seen from the figures above, there has been annual reduction in footfall from 2017 to 2018, 2018 to 2019 of 6.5% and 8% respectively, and this can be put down to the customers change in shopping habits, such as on line ordering.

During 2020 and 2021 these figures cannot be used for comparison due to the COVID lockdowns and then the slow return of the customer back into the shops. However, the latter half of 2021 the numbers were picking up slightly and showing signs of improvement.

For 2022 the early months were encouraging as there was slight increases from the previous months, as can be seen from the figures below.

However, car parking meters were installed in April 2022 on the car park opposite Widnes Market by the new owners, with fines being issued to customers from May 2022, and this had a significant impact on the footfall figures.

2022	Monthly figures	Comments
January	186,511	
February	188,729	1% increase from previous month
March	198,994	5% increase from previous month
April	225,119	13% increase from previous month
May	252,623	12% increase from previous month
June	189,786	25% reduction from previous month
July	205,226	8% increase from previous month

8.0 Conclusions

Widnes Market's heritage and reputation has held it in good stead for a number of years

Overall, the Business Plan establishes that Widnes Market is financially viable and generates a profit. However, the Business Plan recognises that our market needs to continue to be commercially and financially viable, whilst providing a valuable service to visitors and the residents of the borough. The role of marketing is going to be vital in re-engaging shoppers and visitors.

However, there are external factors which will also impact the future of Widnes Market, such as the car parking meters which have been installed on the car park opposite Widnes Market. These have been installed by the new owners which is having a significant impact on the numbers of customers visiting the market. Also, currently there are bus strikes which is also preventing the customers from visiting Widnes Market. Both these situations are beyond the control of Halton Borough Council.

Widnes Market occupancy rates of not less than 90% will be the target for 2022-2023.

Our sole aim should be to promote this vital community hub, using all the tools at our disposal. We look forward to celebrating Widnes Market for many years to come.