

REPORT TO: Corporate Policy & Performance Board
DATE: 3rd September 2024
REPORTING OFFICER: Executive Director - Environment & Regeneration
PORTFOLIO: Corporate Services
SUBJECT: Widnes Market Update Report
WARD(S) Borough wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update on Widnes Market, following the implementation of the business plan, which was endorsed by Members in November 2022.

And also, to inform Members that as of the 3rd June 2024 there has been a change in the management structure at Widnes Market.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That:

- i) Members note the change in the management structure at Widnes Market.**
- ii) The report be noted.**

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 In November 2022, the Corporate Policy & Performance Board received a report and presentation on the Widnes Market Business Plan for review, following Executive Boards approval of the business plan at its meeting on 20th October 2022; the plan being subsequently endorsed by Policy & Performance Board Members at the meeting.

3.2 The Business Plan identified the priorities and actions to be undertaken by the Market Management team to ensure the market remained a successful trading environment into the future. The overarching vision for the market being to ensure that it remains a shopping destination at the heart of the town centre, where people want to shop and where there is a wide variety of quality products at competitive prices, and where traders can thrive and grow their businesses.

3.3 The main themes included in the business plan focussed on are summarised as follows: -

1. Improve the online and social media presence for the market in general,

and to help and support traders to improve their online presence.

2. To actively encourage a more diverse and unique range of products and services on offer by attracting new traders to the market
3. Continue to offer free public interest events to help promote the market to the public and to potential new traders alike.
4. To proactively promote the market as a shopping destination utilising a variety of media.
5. To ensure the market remains economically viable as a business model.

3.4 The above themes have all been progressed with improvements evident as follows: -

1. With the importance of online visibility and interaction with visitors, the online presence is growing, Facebook follower numbers have increased by over 15% (to almost 9,400) and Instagram followers increased by just over 60% (to just over 2,300 followers).

As part of a move towards adapting to a more tech-savvy society, the market staff actively encourage traders to start a Facebook business page and currently, over 50% of stallholders have done so; there is ongoing dialogue to encourage this to further increase.

A new free wi-fi has been installed at Widnes market, so visitors and traders can easily access the internet with the minimum of fuss. This also aids traders using wi-fi enabled card payment devices, ensuring a more streamlined card payment process for the customer.

2. The market has a diverse range of commodities on offer to the public from traditional food retailers such as, butchers, fruit and veg, fishmonger, bakery and cake stalls and oriental foods, there are also niche items where you can purchase carpets, curtains and blinds. There are many services on offer to help visitors to repair items, rather than replace, such as phone and laptop repairs, jewellery designers and repairs and shoe repairers.

Recently there has been some new traders commencing offering a wider range of commodities such as Spanish cleaning products, handmade reborn dolls and accessories, a custom framing business which showcases photos and keepsakes, and a fishing tackle stall on the outdoor market.

The food offer has been increased, and now along with the two traditional cafes and noodle bar, we now have a Greek food stall offering gyros and a coffee shop selling specialist Viennese coffee and cake. A new venture has also recently started which sells Italian foods with the option to take away ready-made meals, also selling homemade pizza, cooked on site, by the slice.

The market team have also supported the outdoor food retailer to expand his seating area and bring it under cover to help ensure his

customers can stay dry whilst enjoying the numerous food items on offer, from breakfast items, to burgers, jacket potatoes along with an offering of cream cakes for dessert.

3. Free market events have had a positive impact on visitor numbers. Events such as the Comic Con, the Christmas 2023 attractions programme throughout December and 'Marketfest' the mini music festival held on the outdoor market, all helped to draw in thousands of extra visitors. The 2023 Comic Con event in August 2023 had an overall footfall count of 47,955 visitors, the previous weekend the footfall count was 24,521, which is nearly double the number of visitors; this proves that events at Widnes market successfully attract additional visitors to Widnes and also to the wider town centre.

The newly created market public areas have assisted with the venue becoming a more publicly accessible space for promoting healthy living within the borough. As well as the established Halton health improvement stall (smoking cessation) there are more regular weekly bookings from health and wellbeing (blood pressure groups), man shed (weekly men's mental health group), sensory team (hearing and sight assistance), air ambulance, catalyst museum outreach, cancer support groups and connecting people and communities digital project.

4. Advertising events and the market has been conducted through a several communication mechanisms, including local press advertising (Liverpool Echo, Runcorn and Widnes Weekly News, St Helens Star and The Warrington Guardian).

Digital display screens have been installed in the main entrance foyer which has given us a dynamic platform to promote not only the market facilities but also the wide variety of commodities and services within.

This year has also seen Widnes market become one of the main sponsors of Widnes Vikings, with the market logo now on both the home and away kits, stadium pitch hoarding, market branding on score updates through social media and stadium scoreboard. The other benefit of this agreement with the club is they have been promoting larger market events to the captive audience in pre-match and half-time crowds.

Overall, we have now started to move away from press, radio, and TV advertising due to the cost, reduced readership, listeners, viewers reached, and the increasing lack of engagement with these formats from the general public.

The market team are currently exploring other means of advertising for the upcoming significant occasion, celebrating 150 years of Widnes market and 30 years of Widnes market at Bradley Way in the town centre to facilitate as wide reach as possible.

5. Widnes market continues to be economically viable and brings in much needed funds into the Council. The market has a high trader occupancy rate, which is currently at 89%, (indoor) this is in an economy where many local markets are suffering from reduced trader numbers, and the national average of local market occupancy rates are at 72% (in accordance with the 2023 survey from NABMA).

3.5 Change in Management Structure

Widnes market previously sat within the Economy, Enterprise and Property Department, and was managed by Property Services, with Catherine Haworth having strategic management responsibilities, and John Hughes as Divisional Manager for Operations.

- 3.6 As of the 3rd of June 2024, Widnes Market transferred to the Communities & Greenspace Department, and is now managed directly by the Stadium & Catering Services team. Strategic management responsibility is with Bruce Reardon, as Stadium Service Manager, and Lee Coombes as Head of Service for Stadium & Catering Services.

- 3.7 Widnes market contributes significantly to the economy and town centre, and this move is an opportunity for two separate services within the Council to work more closely together, and where possible pool resources to work on projects at both the Stadium and Widnes market.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 There are no significant policy implications arising from the above

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 There are no financial implications arising from the report.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Improving Health, Promoting Wellbeing and Supporting Greater Independence

The market provides an accessible welcoming space and has a changing places facility, a nursing room and quiet space, a multi-faith prayer room and water filling stations all of which support inclusive and accessible use.

6.2 Building a Strong, Sustainable Local Economy

The market is a key asset in Widnes town centre demonstrated by the age of the provision; it supports footfall to Widnes economy and provides a vibrant asset for residents and visitors.

6.3 Supporting Children, Young People and Families

The market is an open access universal asset. Events and targeted activities support an offer for younger residents.

6.4 Tackling Inequality and Helping Those Who Are Most In Need

The combination of the range of retail, services and support offers across the stall provision contributes to accessibility to produce, activity and services that positively impact health & wellbeing of residents and visitors.

6.5 Working Towards a Greener Future

Market visitors can refill water bottles free of charge. This contributes to reducing carbon footprint and the amount of plastic making its way into oceans and landfill. There is also an electrical vehicle charging point for Traders.

More broadly, as the Council manages the market the service is governed by the Council's climate change action plan; the market lighting has been replaced by LED's and there is currently a project assessing feasibility for solar panels on the roof.

6.6 Valuing and Appreciating Halton and Our Community

The market provides a safe, managed retail space for residents and visitors which contributes to supporting a vibrant and resilient community in Halton.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

7.1 There are no risks identified.

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

8.1 The market is fully accessible and is equipped with a changing places facility and multi-faith prayer space to support accessible, faith and cultural needs.

9.0 CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

9.1 None identified.

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

10.1 None under the meaning of the act.