



High Wycombe Market

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Overview

This paper is provided as an update to the High Wycombe market report presented in September 2020. It is focused on activities undertaken before and after the second lockdown in November. It also sets out the next steps with respect to strategic market management and the development of a Market Strategy for Buckinghamshire.

The advent of a second lockdown and changing tier system placement for Buckinghamshire has caused a challenge for all retail in the town and impacted on the market, bringing a return to a smaller 'essential goods' only offer. The Covid-19 changes have also impacted officer capacity and plans in some areas have been re-programmed.

Update

Reimagining our market place, branding and awareness raising

Quarterbridge advocate the need to curate our market with the broader offer in our town centre and to use the space currently designated for the market in a smarter way. It is noted that the street food section, although not popular with all demographics, has been the key driver that has sustained the market and encouraged footfall. This mirrors the positive experience that street food has achieved in animating markets elsewhere.

Through the autumn we have been working with Saunders to reimagine the physical market space and set the future direction for attracting niche and specialist traders to High Wycombe. This is an activity that takes time to embed and with Covid trading restrictions has been unsurprisingly been a bit stop start.

As part of reimagining the space we have divided the footprint into designated zones that can be branded and promoted separately to target attention and together as a whole:

The Guild: the undercroft of the Guildhall, playing on the term 'Guild' for crafted and artisan 'merchant products'.

The Square: the small area adjacent to the Guildhall in front of The Falcon. This has been used for artisan foods and handmade goods in the run up to Christmas but also has potential as a standalone small events space for buskers or story-telling events as run by the museum.

The Food Court: in front of Little Market House.

The Market: the traditional mixed market and fresh produce area on the High Street.

Speciality Markets

In December HWBIDCo arranged a Sunday specialist vegan market. Despite the weather and Tier 3 restrictions, this was well supported and successful. Feedback was positive and people have asked for this to be run again. In line with Quarterbridge recommendations about specialist markets, and experience elsewhere, we will continue to work with HWBIDCo, Saunders and others to develop a programme of speciality markets as Covid permits.

Setting the ambition for a regular Sunday Market enables this to get in peoples diaries and becomes a standing activity for the town. Again, we are at the start of this journey and it will take time to develop this and embed.

Social media spreading the word

Saunders have taken a more proactive stance on social media with the new Market Manager reinvigorating the posts and messages. The organic reach of the market's Facebook page has grown. Positive messages have also been posted on the High Wycombe page and on Instagram – as new people are recognising the change in traders and offer and are letting others know of the positive changes that they have seen. The newer traders to High Wycombe – including the new local start-ups, are all active on social media and this has raised awareness and brought new footfall into the town and market as a result.

HWBIDCo ran a successful 'shop local' campaign over the festive period with a short video of independent shop keepers from across the town saying thank you and merry Christmas. Once the current Covid restrictions have been lifted we plan to use this medium to produce new collateral to share and introduce our established and new traders (see below) to a wider audience – we have some interesting stories to tell that may encourage other start-ups to give the market a go.

'Visit Wycombe'

HWBIDCo have been working with Wycombe Museum and other partners over the autumn and winter to develop a new 'Visit Wycombe' website. As part of this have developed a town brand and colour palette that will be used to ensure a coordinated look and feel to communications – and bring a clear identity for the town. Examples of this can be seen in the window of the former Burger King site on Frogmoor. The website will launch in the New Year and a key feature of this will be a new 'What's On' listing – where we can add specialist markets and other animations for the market space as arranged.

Creating new businesses

One of the benefits of our market, which is also acknowledged by Quarterbridge, is the low entry cost to trade for people who want to start up a new venture. Since the reopening of the market in July, we have seen five new local people make a start with a market stall: whether as a result of making things during lockdown, losing a job, taking a career change or have a job that is on pause due to Covid restrictions.

We have also been able to attract new art and craft stall holders and home-produced food traders. Alongside new more established traders, this has started to create an 'artisan' feel for part of the market space we are branding as 'The Guild'.

Street scene improvements

From October the streetscape has been improved with the York stone pavers being re-laid and the black top patching removed. This high-quality work has transformed the look and feel of the high street area. The barrier at the entrance to the High Street has also been fixed that will help stop non-essential through traffic on market days. This was noted by Quarterbridge as a key improvement that was needed – not only from a public safety perspective, but also to enhance the ambience and use of space for further seating and entertainment looking forward.

Market Strategy and future delivery options

At the September meeting of this Committee it was recognised that there is potential for a revitalised market offering in High Wycombe: focussing on more stalls, a diversity of offer and extended themed events and activities in the high street space. It was noted that this will not happen overnight and it will take time and a coordinated effort to return the market to a more viable asset and to encourage new traders to give the area a try. The potential that markets play as a seedbed for new business ideas to be trialled and developed was also noted – and this aspect is starting to bear fruit for High Wycombe and has introduced a diversity of offer for the town.

In September we reported that with the move to unitary, the Council has the opportunity to look strategically at the market offer across the whole of Buckinghamshire and consider management arrangements looking forward. There are a range of market delivery options in place that include a concession contract with a private company (High Wycombe), a trader cooperative approach (Amersham and Chesham) and in-house provision (Aylesbury).

The Quarterbridge report also suggests consideration of HWBIDCo as a market operative (although notes capacity and financial challenges with this) and the establishment of a community interest company. The Quarterbridge report will be used as part of the evidence base for the strategic market management element of the new Market Strategy. Work will start in the new financial year.

The concession contract for High Wycombe Market comes to an end in March 2021. Corporate Management Team have taken a decision to extend the concession contract for one year to enable this strategic work above to complete and the best delivery model for the market to be identified. This decision was taken alongside that to phased a reintroduction of pitch fees for traders.

The Local Economic Growth Team will continue to actively work with the market operators and other agencies as required to bring about changes to improve the current market offer as the strategic work is carried out and report back to this Committee as required.