

## HERTFORD CIVIC SOCIETY

18 November 2018

Councillor Gary Jones  
Executive Member for Economic Development

Dear Councillor Jones

### **FUTURE OF MARKETS IN HERTFORD: SHORT SURVEY BY HERTFORD CIVIC SOCIETY**

Our main committee heard about changes planned for Hertford markets, and decided to check whether any unexpected problems might occur. Hertford needs its markets more than ever now that Bircherley Green is in abeyance: they help to bring life to the town on Saturdays in particular. We do of course understand your need to make savings wherever possible. We hope that even our own efforts might be seen as helpful, by providing you with an expert independent assessment of the likely future of these markets.

Two of us, working jointly, carried out a survey of all stalls on Saturday 10 November, both the normal weekly ones and those constituting the farmers market. It was a sunny day, and the market was clearly popular, with considerable queues at the more popular stalls, both at the weekly and farmers markets. Each market included at least one stallholder relatively new to trading in Hertford.

We did indeed discover some unexpected difficulties.

### **RESULTS**

First, the good news, on the main weekly market (8 stalls), on 10 November 2018:

- All eight weekly stallholders said they were expecting to continue.
- There were no major or consistent grumbles, though one stallholder memorably described the weekly market as 'one of Hertford's best kept secrets', in need of better publicity – a point discussed further below.
- One stallholder complained about a lack of consultation about the forthcoming changes but, on the other hand, another said that the market manager 'keeps us informed'.

Secondly, the more complicated news about the farmers market (13 stalls).

- The largest category, seven out of 13 stalls, said they would only continue if they could use their own gazebos. They made this declaration with varying degrees of robustness. Those who sounded absolutely certain that they would cease trading if obliged to use EHC gazebos included one of the most popular stalls in farmers market; like others, this stallholder said she did not have anywhere to store a large EHC gazebo, and that she already had one of her own which she used elsewhere, which she could deploy in Hertford.
- The next largest group, three of the full 13, were quite unaware that new terms and conditions would soon be starting to come into operation. This is also concerning.
- Two stallholders stated unequivocally that they would be continuing.
- One stallholder said that he had reached the natural point of retiring, due to age. This would be his last year, in any event.

## CONCLUSIONS

EHC has recently declared that it is willing to continue to manage Hertford's markets, albeit more at arm's length and on a cheaper basis, implying a lighter touch. We hope that this new type of management can be the success that Hertford needs.

The outlook for the weekly market is broadly positive. It so happened that, on the day of the research interviews, all eight stallholders were 'regular' ones, so issues around occasional participation were not addressed. One week earlier, there was an 'occasional' but longstanding stallholder in the main retail market, who was unaware of the forthcoming changes; he said that he would only want to pay for those times when he is able to come to Hertford. Further thought needs to be given as to a wider range of ways in which occasional or 'starter' traders can register and pay for their pitches, or else in long run even the main weekly retail market will tend to atrophy. One week on from the day of the research, that same trader mentioned above said that he would cease coming to Hertford early in 2019.

Within the farmers market, there is a need for fresh thinking about a few of the finer details, which matter considerably to the traders. Some issues such as rubbish disposal, and even the level of payment, generated relatively few expressions of concern by stallholders. However, being potentially expected to use and store EHC gazebos was a red line or sticking point for just over half the relevant stallholders.

It would be ironic if, in a more arm's length operation, a possible insistence by EHC on stallholders in the farmers market having to use the old EHC gazebos were to lead to that market fragmenting severely (especially as this requirement is scarcely visible in the documentation circulated for the relevant Executive meeting on 23 October). And, as one stallholder commented, the EHC gazebos are no longer new, and might not last many more

years. If, however, EHC is able to be more flexible here, and simply offer the official gazebos to any traders who might want them, under no obligation to deploy them, then that would appreciably enhance the future prospects of the farmers market. If EHC is concerned to ensure a strong brand message at the farmers market, there are other ways in which this could be done, for instance through requiring traders to fly a banner, which could be given to them.

One final set of thoughts, slightly more radical. EHC does not have staff that it can readily deploy in central Hertford on Saturdays. Yet, at the Tourist Information Centre (TIC), there are Town Council staff who are accustomed to taking payments for tickets for concerts and other events (on the basis of a small commission). Why not consider using the TIC to receive payments from occasional stallholders? More ambitiously, TIC staff could be asked, not to control the market or to enforce regulations, but to monitor the markets briefly (or at least the farmers one), and then to report their observations to the relevant EHC officials. Last but not least, TIC and other Town Council staff are in business to publicise the town (for instance through the Go Hertford website), and there might be scope for them to do more to help support the markets, still of course at the request of EHC.

We hope that this research will encourage fresh thought on the part of EHC. Some modest fine tuning could make a big difference to the future of the markets in Hertford.

Copies of this letter go to all Councillors representing Hertford, including Hertford Rural North and South; and also to the relevant members of staff as mentioned in the 23 October documentation, the Head of Operations (Jess Khanom) and the Enforcement Manager (Nick Kirby).

Yours sincerely

Malcolm

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