

**Key Points from discussion with the Leader and Board Member
5 September 2013**

Attendees

Cllr Bob Price, Leader of Oxford City Council
Cllr Colin Cook, Board Member for City Development
Cllr Jim Campbell
Cllr Elise Benjamin
Cllr Jean Fooks
Sarah Claridge

What is your vision of the Covered Market in 5-10 years?

Bob Price

Retail is changing nationwide – independent stores are closing and being replaced by chain store.

Traditional notion of food only offer in market is unrecoverable because of the large supermarket presence in the city centre. The nature of wholesaling means that larger retailers are able to source goods in bulk more cheaply than smaller independents and therefore offer cheaper prices.

The Covered Market needs to concentrate on offering niche goods/services that are unavailable elsewhere in town.

The size of the units are too small and there is limited space for storage and stock. Maybe if we merged some of the stalls they would be more viable.

Need to strike the right balance between food and non-food traders

We need to focus more on making it a tourist site. We need to market it better so that tourists know where it is and make a special trip to see it – ie like the shambles in York – full it with independent, specialist stores.

Colin Cook

We're going to have trouble bucking national retail trends and changes to the retail offer will evolve through customer demand ie second hand book stores are not profitable and will not survive.

No intention of clearing the market and starting again.

The retail sector in Oxford is bright – Oxford was the most popular place to set up retail in 2011. We have one of the lowest retail vacancy rate compared to other similar sized cities.

Market traders need to help themselves, Council receives a lot of negativity and petty remarks from Traders. They are unhappy with the signage despite supporting the concept in the first place.

I go on regular inspections of the market and only hear complaints

Relationship between Council and Traders

Leases create a different relationship to licenses

The overall relationship between the Council and traders has suffered because there is not one person or forum responsible for the market. Delegating the everyday running of the market to officers has meant that traders deal with many officers for different things and so many relationships have had to be formed. A sub-committee of Councillors responsible for overseeing the market could be established which would give the traders a single forum to direct their problems to.

A sub- committee could be responsible for overseeing the long-term capital spending in the market ie maintenance and signage, and the marketing of the market.

A lot of traders have failed because they have had the wrong business plan

Improving the relationship

Changing the rent review process would improve the relationship

Communication between Council and traders need to improved, traders need a forum to approach when they have concerns.

Externalising Management

Could be a possibility – it would all depend on the bid.

Dedicated manager

A possibility – the question is deciding their job description. Do we want a manger who is responsible for everything - ie leases, maintenance and promotion of market, Who is the effectively the 'face' of the Council at the market – or do we want them only to deal with the day to day running of the market (ie maintenance, communication) – with leases and marketing being dealt with by others?

Access through Market St

Renovating the Market St entrance to make it the front of the market is an interesting idea. Some form of traffic control would be needed but there are lots of possibilities.

Council is more than just a landlord – we have a responsibility to enhance the retail sector in Oxford.

Panel's Findings

Future vision of the Covered Market

Covered Market traders must accept that market trends are not going to change. For the majority of shoppers, price and convenience has more influence over shopping habits than quality does. This can be seen through the growth of chain stores and the decline in independents throughout Britain.

In order to prosper, Covered Market traders need to concentrate on offering niche goods and services that are unavailable elsewhere in town. They can't compete with the chain stores on price, but they can offer better quality, unique goods that cannot be bought in shopping malls.

Council has a role to play in encouraging this transformation as we have a responsibility to enhance the retail sector in Oxford.

Improving the relationship between Council and Traders

Traders cannot blame the Council for all of their problems; they must take responsibility for their own performance.

The overall relationship between the Council and traders has suffered because there is not one person or forum responsible for the Covered Market. Delegating the everyday running of the market to officers has meant that traders deal with many officers for different things and so relationships have fragmented. A sub-committee of Councillors responsible for overseeing the Market could be established which would give the traders a single forum to direct their problems to and would give Councillors responsibility for building and maintaining the relationship.

The current rent review process needs to change as it is too adversarial to build a meaningful relationship with the traders.

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