



Request for Lewes Farmers Market to continue to operate in Friars Walk Car Park after the end of September

Report August 2020, Topsy Jewell

Introduction

Lewes Farmers Market has been trading in the Lewes precinct since 1998 set up and run by Common Cause Co-operative, a not for profit community development organisation based in Lewes. We have two markets a month with 36 stalls on our books. Produce sold on stalls must meet our strict criteria including produced in Sussex to high animal welfare and environmental standards. Priority is given to small scale businesses and over the years we have supported many new start-ups. Lewes Farmers Market is a social enterprise. Stall fees cover running costs. If there is any surplus we put it into other Common Cause projects which currently include Lewes House Garden, Lewes Community Allotment and Ringmer Community Orchard (see www.commoncause.org.uk for more details of these projects and our past work).

Covid19 and the new location in Friars Walk Car Park

Lewes Farmers Market paused trading in April and May 2020 due to Covid19. Even though the government allowed food markets to remain open during lockdown we decided that it was not possible to ensure social spacing in the confined space of the precinct and so we closed for the first time in 22 years. In May we were encouraged to consider reopening by District Councillors and Lewes District Council offered the use of Friars Walk Car Park until September 2020. Cabinet Member for Communities and Customers, Councillor Johnny Denis, said, "the market will contribute to a safe and vibrant local economy as we gradually come out of lockdown".

We had 16 stalls at the first market in June, spaced out along a one way route. Visitors were greeted by a steward at the entrance on Railway Lane and told about the one way route and there were signs to remind people of the route and social distancing. A steward at the exit on Court Road spoke to car drivers directing them to a car parking space if available or redirecting them to other car parks in town.

We estimate about 650 people visited the market that day. We had a great response from customers who were delighted that the market was back, one said it "feels like the town has come to life again". Stallholders were also very relieved to be back, one said he was "so glad to be outdoors speaking and selling to customers again and not sitting in front of a computer on the internet". All the stallholders said that they had done better than they had expected given it was the first market back. They also said that the majority of customers were new customers. We attracted good press attention with a piece on BBC TV South East and two articles in the Sussex Express.

Stallholder numbers and visitor numbers have increased at subsequent markets. Nearly 800 people were counted into the third market on the 18th July and we had 23 stalls in August. We have a new layout which allows customers to circulate in a one way circular flow and keeps them away from cars entering and exiting the car park on Court Road.

The car park has 75 spaces in total, we used 45 for the market (with room for 4 more stalls if required) leaving 30 for general parking. There were occasional complaints from people trying to park but the majority were happy to wait and usually a space became available in 5 minutes.

Many customers said how happy they were that we were operating again, phrases such as, secure, confident, safe environment were regularly repeated. People are happy to shop outside and are comfortable with social distancing. The access for disabled customers, wheelchairs and pushchairs is easier too. Stallholder feedback (see attached) demonstrates how well the market is working in the new location and also the importance of the market to these small businesses.

Conclusion

We would like to apply for an extension to run the market in the Friars Walk Car park beyond September. We have had very positive feedback from customers and stallholders and attracted many new customers to the market. The market layout allows for 30 car parking spaces to remain in use and the market is cleared away by 2pm for afternoon parking. The car park provides a safe outdoor shopping venue and if outdoor markets are allowed, the Lewes Farmers Market could continue here even if there is another lockdown. The location of the car park next to the precinct is ideal since it is easy for people passing through the precinct to divert to the market. Other possible venues we have explored are unlikely to be viable because of the locations and distance from the main shopping centre. We have made a significant investment in press coverage, posters, banners and social media, we still, however, have a lot of work to do to let customers, especially our pre-existing ones, know where we are.

If the market can continue and thrive we plan to take on two East Sussex College students on Industrial Placements this autumn and winter to help with marketing, events organisation and customer care. We are also looking into 'Youth Markets' which support young people with business start up ideas to have a market stall.

Feedback from stallholders

"Lewes Farmers Market is our main source of income and as most of our customers are the elderly in the community it would be a real shame if we had to move again. Customers are now getting used to where we are and if we can't go back to the precinct it would be a shame to have to move somewhere else as it is starting to work well there."

Sharon, Country Markets, Newhaven

"I do hope the council agree to renew the contract. Like many small producers I can't sell my products on line and am not licensed yet to sell to shops or cafe's. I rely on the farmers market for an income, without it I would be on benefits." **Jay Country Markets, Ringmer**

"Farmers markets are the best route directly to our customers." **Jane, Sussex Faire, Ardingly**

Lewes Farmers market was the first part of my trade that came back after Covid19 struck. The car park location is a great safe context to be able to hold the market and customers are familiar with the set up and new location now. As we enter Autumn it is peak produce time for local farmers who I buy the majority of my ingredients from - so losing the market at this point in the year will hit the local rural community very hard. **Chloe, Seven Sisters Spices, Lewes**

Without markets we would not survive, our business is dependent on small independent shops & markets.” **Steve, High Weald Dairy, Haywards Heath**

“When the lockdown started I had almost no income, all the festivals I was due to attend suddenly cancelled, I had to rely on mail order. Although this has steadily grown, I am so happy to be back seeing my customers face to face” **Katy, Guns n Posies, Lewes**

“Both Jenny and I are now over 70 and our journey to the Lewes Market is only 12 miles any further would mean such a long day that we would not be able to do. We have been making our cheeses for over 41 years and it is well received in the market. It took a little while to build up trade in the car park, but it is now working well, it would be a dreadful shame to lose the Market”.
Jenny & Lynn, Nut Knowle Farm, Gunn Hill

“We have been serving customers at Lewes FM since it started over 20 years ago, and Farmers’ Markets have been a very important part of our business.” **Marilyn & Robin Heath Farm, Plumpton**

“Just to say that Lewes farmers market is great for us, and I am much enjoying seeing regular faces each month”. **Catriona, Sussex Smallholders, Hamsey**

“Having had a stall at the Farmers' Market for at least the last six or seven years I have built up a steady trade, and a large collection of regular customers. Although I have other outlets, Lewes is by far and away the best one for my handmade items, especially in the run up to Christmas. It is also well-run, warm and welcoming and, I think, a great asset to the town.” **Sheena Lamington Lass Yarns, Lewes**

Lewes Farmers Market is one of my best market and after a slow start on the car park, I think the last market showed that customers now know where we are. **Kim, Pure Chocolate Truffles, Worthing**

“Lewes market is an important market for us, we attend once a month but the sales there represent between 15% and 40% of our monthly turnover. The market day on 15th July was our best trading day other than the 21st December 2019 and demonstrates that the public have found the market at the car park location convenient. A number of people have said that they prefer shopping at markets. We believe that it is important that the local authorities do all that they can to support local businesses – particularly in the current challenging economic climate - and as a business based in East Sussex it is important for us that we continue to have a local market at which to sell wine from the county.” **Mark Sanden Vineyard, Groombridge**