

Report to Romsey Forum 29th June 2020 by Town Centre Manager, Mark Edgerley

The last few months have been tough for everyone and I would like to express my condolences to families of Romsey that have lost loved ones to this awful coronavirus pandemic.

I have been working all the way through the lockdown first at home but fairly quickly returning to my office in the Town Hall so I could monitor first hand what was going on in the Town Centre.

Many in our community are still shielding and others for various valid reasons are still very nervous of being out of their homes which is natural given the bleak news stories we all hear. However, can I ask that when you are out you respect that others may want you to keep your distance, that the easiest way to keep safe is to wash hands regularly and as far as possible limit surfaces you touch when out and about. Above all else smile and acknowledge those you pass, we are all in this together and together we can beat this virus.

In the early days, with only essential shops open, the streets were very quiet with footfall in The Hundred at about 25% of normal April levels, slowly footfall has edged up as more people have gained the confidence to come back into the town. Locally the peak of coronavirus cases seems to have occurred in April and that is reflected in the footfall figures that rose to around 33% and more recently to 50% of similar weeks in previous years.

We now have almost all shops and businesses open that are allowed to open at this time, hair stylists and barbers as well as pubs are working hard to prepare to open on Saturday 4th July. Not all the charity shops are open and regrettably two, Age UK in Love Lane and Marie Curie in Church have been permanently closed, this is a national decision to reduce respective store networks rather than a reflection on efforts of local staff and volunteers. Charity shops have two major issues to address one is storage and quarantining of donations and the other is age profile of majority of their volunteers.

A number of our local pubs and clubs have done sterling work offering takeaways and / or home deliveries indeed The Old House at Home team have announced that their service will remain as an offer even when they can again serve food and drink on their premise. The innovation that many businesses have shown during the crisis is just amazing ensuring they have survived the most difficult period any of them would have ever experience.

Many businesses have taken the opportunity to invest in external decoration and new signage and some have undertaken major internal refits. This demonstrates a real commitment to continue to trade in Romsey.

As we move into the next phase of recovery, or "Bounce back Romsey" as we call it, we have been working closely with colleagues at TVBC to ensure we offer all the help we can to encourage shoppers and visitors back. We now have hanging baskets and the various planters looking splendid thanks to the work of Roger Savage and Team from Choice Plants of Timsbury and the TVBC Grounds Team. Thanks to Ian Richards and volunteers from the Carnival Committee for putting up the bunting, we believe that makes a clear statement that Romsey is open for Summer!!

There have been problems in The Hundred with some conflict between space for pedestrians and vehicles. Queues for shops will be with us for some time and they are occupying the pavements, whilst that still has to be the case The Hundred will be closed to through traffic between The Market Place and Latimer Street. The closure will be an inconvenience to many and we apologise for that but our priority must remain the safety of pedestrians, please be assured that the closure will be removed as soon as possible, indeed under emergency Covid regulations that is a legal requirement. We are grateful to HCC for agreeing to the closure and for the funding TVBC have offered to ensure the work can be quickly implemented. The message is Romsey is open for business and safe to visit.

The Markets have come back a little stronger with new stalls, some are "refuges" from other markets, many will stay we hope as they like the way they are supported by the joint Bradbeers / RTC team, who manage the markets here in Romsey. Some of your favourite stalls will be found on the new piazza area as we wanted to increase space between stalls where we could. We are supporting a Sunday Makers Market every Sunday through July and August; we anticipate about 18 stalls on the Cornmarket and Market Place each week with some of the traders rotating to ensure a good and varied customer offer.

From 4th July we anticipate that cafés will start to use their external tables again and so we will all be able to have a suitably distanced coffee and perhaps more importantly a good old natter.

Finally, after six years as Town Centre Manager and a lockdown birthday that saw me pass my 68th birthday I have decided to retire at the end of July. Having worked hard to revitalise the town after the three periods of major roadworks, to try and do it a fourth time post-Covid is just too daunting. Better for me to step aside now so my successor can pick up the task of building next year's programme of events that will allow everyone from far and wide to know this wonderful town of ours welcomes them back. May I thank all those who have supported me over these six years thank you, for those of you that haven't been supportive, please be kind to my successor whoever they are, my final day as TCM will be Friday July 28th.

June 2020