

The Continuation of Outside Trading in RAG

When I stood for election in May 2019 myself and several other Councillors undertook to listen to our residents. This is why - when the extensive Facebook thread on the planned closure of the Pasty Shed was brought to my attention, I felt it only right and proper that DTC revisited its decision to cease outside trading in Royal Avenue Gardens. That is not to say the Council policy should be dictated by Facebook threads but the number of comments along with several emails on the same subject demonstrated to me the strength of feeling on this matter which I don't think the Council can ignore. I should also add that as Councillors we have to look at the whole picture and consider all pros and cons. We are all accountable to the people we represent and I hope that whatever the outcome of meeting that resident will avail themselves of the fact this meeting is recorded and take the time to listen to our discussion to better understand whatever decision we reach.

Outside trading in RAG was only ever meant to be a temporary measure as a response to COVID pandemic. It meant that local business who has limited space (which would have been further reduced by social distancing) and no outside space had the opportunity to claw back some trade at the same time as offering locals and visitors further outside dining options. The same rationale was applied by SHDC to outside trading on South Embankment. As the pandemic continued into 2021 DTC once again offered local businesses the opportunity to trade in RAG and the public more option to dine safely outside.

Now looking to 2022 it now seems as though once again there will be restrictions on inside socialising and a continuing demand for al fresco dining.

If DTC decides to continue to allow trading on RAG it must go out to tender as it has for the previous two years

Bear in mind that DTC is in the driving seat here we can and should limit the number of pitches (currently 3). In previous years we have used a points matrix to decide which traders win the RAG pitches – i.e., Local business, Limited indoor space, no outdoor space, credit rating. We can stipulate that they cannot trade when the tea hut is in use, we can stipulate they must vacate their pitches during festivals if they do not make a separate agreement with the festival organisers, we can stipulate they trade from bright pink tents with blue polka dots if DTC see's fit! We can also set the pitch rent at a fair but realistic level so that DTC and by extension our residents also benefit from the commercial success of these pitches. Because DTC can dictate the terms, suggestions that business will take over RAG are groundless as the number of pitches are prescribed by the Council. Issues with the tea hut hire and festivals can be resolved in the lease agreements.

The only argument against the continuation the I have seen which possibly hold water are that outside trading in some way detracts from people's enjoyment of RAG. I would argue that I have never seen so many people, residents and visitors alike enjoying our beautiful Gardens I think it has come alive.

There is also the argument that they have stolen trade from other businesses- as I can't name names, I can only say I have asked an admittedly small number of residents why they have taken their custom to the RAG traders and the reason has been both the product and service is much better! That's market forces for you.

On balance with the caveat that we tighten up on some areas and charge a realistic commercial price for the pitches amid the ongoing COVID restrictions my recommendations would be that we extend the current agreements for outside trading in RAG until end March 2022 while simultaneously inviting local traders to tender for three available pitches with a view to the new leases running from 1st April to 31st December 2022. The future of trading in RGH to also be revisited in the Autumn of next year.

Cathy Campos

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