

Columbia Road Market Action Plan

London Borough of Tower Hamlets
Markets Improvement Plan



Overview

The market

Columbia Road is an iconic and successful flower market in Bethnal Green. The market exclusively sells flowers and plants, is open only on Sundays and demand is high. The market is full (of traders) and has a good reputation in London as a destination as well as being globally renowned.

Due to its unusual and exclusive stock, it has developed a strong niche that brings plenty of footfall – sometimes to its detriment when pre-Covid-19 it became very busy creating tensions between the market, the residents and businesses around it.

The stalls are in good condition and toilets are available for visitors that can also be used by traders.

Overall, the majority of the catchment area household income is below the borough average and London median household income, with more than half of households having an income of less than £30,000 however Columbia Road does not rely on its immediate area to attract customers and therefore this has less impact than at other markets, but it can create conflict where the market is the dominant activity in the area on a Sunday attracting large crowds of visitors.

The market has over 5,500 Google reviews and has been awarded 4.5 stars. It has Twitter (12.8k followers) and Facebook accounts with a strong following as well as Instagram with 16.1k followers. None of these platforms are council or market run but established by shops and businesses along the street.

Columbia Road market was closed for a great deal of 2020 and 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic as flowers were not considered to be essential goods (as defined by the UK government). On reopening, changes were made to the layout of the market to encourage better flow and safety. Previously the market had stalls on two sides of the street. Currently stalls are more spaced out and only on one side of the street.

As of July 2021, the market is managed as a controlled event with an entry and exit point and queuing to control numbers. The market's new linear layout imposed by Covid-19 restrictions were met with push back from traders; however, the change has been successful, and customers reported feeling safer and pleased to have more room to shop. A question around preferences for this layout was provided to traders and shoppers as part of the consultation.

With the lack of tourists at the time of the consultation (April to June 2021), it is perhaps unsurprising that 70% of shoppers who responded say they walk to the market. Also

unsurprisingly, 85% of them buy flowers or plants. Food is also an attractor with 56% of shoppers purchasing food whilst there (from cafes rather than market stalls). 20% of shoppers visit for favourite stalls and this is the only market that scores lowest on location as a factor in people shopping there (42%) validating its status as a destination market/ neighbourhood.

Market traders at Columbia Road are the most hopeful of all markets with 81% hopeful or very hopeful about the future.

There is a Traders' Association in place which primarily includes the shops rather than the market. 89% of the businesses responded to say that the footfall from the market is a benefit to their business, some saying without the market, their business wouldn't survive. There is a separate Columbia Road Market Trader Association.

Market traders have received support from Trading Standards and advised on pricing display.

Columbia Road is the highest ranked market where shoppers visit it based on the quality of the commodities and location is the least important factor, this is the opposite to many of the other markets.

Snapshot

Trading days: Sunday 8am to 2pm

Footfall: Average is 10k over the day between 8am-4pm, peaking between 12-2pm. The highest footfall since reopening following Covid-19 closures in 2021 was 14,051 on 9 May with the lowest on 23 May at 7,482.

Commodities: flowers and plants

Customers: Tourists, Londoners, gardening enthusiasts

Reasons for shopping here: The community value of the market (56%) and quality of the goods (65%). 2% visit due to good online reviews and imagery, a factor which only received comments for Brick Lane and Columbia Road Markets.

Pitches: 52 | 100% full

Household income:

14% less than £15,000 | 50% less than £30,000 | 12% higher than £60,000

Challenges

The Tower Hamlets High Streets & Town Centres Strategy 2017 – 2022 identified the market as having no issues and it remains the case that this market is considered to be functioning well. However, challenges include:

Market layout: The previous layout meant that movement was difficult and there was some concern about safety – people channelled down the middle with limited opportunities to stop or to visit permanent businesses on the street. Under the new queuing system there have been access difficulties for customers in reaching the everyday shops within the market area, and for visitors who have a reservation in a hospitality business.

Waste: The market is blamed for creating the on-street waste; however, the food and beverage businesses mainly contribute to this. The costs of waste management are not accurately distributed, with markets covering the costs for disposal of refuse gathering on the street which is not directly from the stalls.

Partnerships: Businesses acknowledge that the market brings footfall to the street but there can be friction between balancing market crowds with access to businesses.

Consultation feedback

In the consultation, traders, shoppers and businesses were offered the opportunity to comment on one or more markets that they shopped at, traded at or had a business nearby. Responses were received from:

- 11 traders (7% of trader responses)
- 144 shoppers (20% of shopper responses)
- 18 businesses (13% of business responses)
- 57% of respondents had visited the market pre and post lockdowns
- Responses: 173

Consultation feedback

Traders would like:

- **Longer trading days** - 45% of traders think that they would have a little or a lot more income if the trading day was longer.
- **Parking, loading and unloading** is challenging, further impacted by the large lorries that need to be used
- Special events were not seen as being useful with 54% saying they would expect to have a lot less income if they took place. This can be attributed to it being a destination market that attracts people on a weekly basis rather than needing to be promoted further

The low trader response rate for this market means that these answers cannot speak for the entire cohort and further consultation would need to be undertaken with all traders before actions are implemented based on this survey.

Residents and businesses would like:

- Residents are happy with the offer at the market with 27% noting that nothing was missing. Where additional goods were mentioned, these were primarily food related, with no consensus on type of provision. A food market has taken place at Columbia Road in the past; however, this was not well received by food businesses on the street. It is also evident from the survey responses that **maintaining the integrity of Columbia Road as a flower market is critical** to all.
- Businesses are happy with the curation, quality and success of the market, though **17% are keen for the covid safety measures (one way system and queuing to get onto the street) to end.**
- **A longer trading day** - 83% of businesses think a longer day would yield more success to their business and 72% think additional trading days would also bring more success to their business.
- 66% are positive about the idea of **special events and evening markets**. So, for the businesses, any additional / extended flower market content would be largely welcomed.
- One or two have small **operational concerns around safety, waste and vehicles** but in comparison to other markets, there are very few negative impacts of the market on the businesses.
- 60% would prefer to **continue with the new layout** whilst 36% don't like it.

Appendix III provides an overview of survey feedback for Columbia Road Market.

Action plan

Actions have been identified and prioritised within the context of the five-year Markets Improvement Plan.

Phase 1	
Marketing	<p>As part of the Moving Markets Online funding, review existing online provision for Columbia Road market / neighbourhood and consider what space might exist for a dedicated Market website / social media account.</p> <p>Capitalise on this market as a destination. There is an opportunity to link Columbia Road to other markets (Petticoat Lane and Brick Lane) encouraging visitors to travel to the other areas of the borough and extend their footfall e.g., Bethnal Green, Roman Road and Brick Lane. Oval Night Market reopened in summer June 2021 (monthly) and is expected to trade on Sundays in the future.</p>
Phase 1-2	

Theme	Action
Marketing (continued)	<p>Building a mailing list of Columbia Road devotees from across London would be a useful tool not only in keeping in touch with them around new sellers or events at this market, but to encourage them to visit other local markets in the borough that may be of interest to them as market fans.</p>
Place and Partnerships	<p>Whilst the one-way system remains in place, work with businesses to agree a simple system of access for those who have reservations.</p> <p>Consult further on a permanent new layout similar to the 2020-21 Covid safe configuration, to find a new way forward that maximises the potential of the street.</p>

Action plan

Theme	Action
Phase 2	
Operations	Review the market account's waste costs for Columbia Road to establish if any costs can be more fairly distributed to street waste or businesses.
Place	Review the flow of the market space after covid regulations have fully lapsed. Consider physical interventions to the space (drop down bollards) to improve safety / crowd control and access to the shops.
Trading hours and days	Consult (especially with traders and residents) on extending trading hours later into the afternoon as this was supported by traders (45%) and businesses (83%), though the numbers of traders responding was low so further research is needed.
Phase 3	
N/A	None. This is LBTH's most successful market, with little capacity for growth beyond current levels. In the long term it simply needs maintaining. Columbia Road should always be considered for leveraging opportunities for other LBTH markets who could benefit from association in marketing.