

# Roman Road Market Action Plan

London Borough of Tower Hamlets  
Markets Improvement Plan



## Overview

### The market

Located in Bow, Roman Road Market has been a part of the community for hundreds of years and is considered to be one of the more traditional east end markets. Some current stalls have been there for generations, with many regular customers.

The area has changed a great deal in the last 10 years, but the market has not changed with it, despite its customer base moving out of the area. This is one of the reasons why the market is identified by the council as being one of the most at-risk markets in the borough.

The market has a reputation for cheap clothes, but this comes with reservations about the quality, and being close to Westfield Stratford it cannot compete with their clothing offer. It is also within a short walk of Victoria Park (with its privately operated Sunday food market), as well as Hackney Wick and the London Olympic Park which offer their own event programmes and markets (and the council's recent trial of a market at White Post Lane in Hackney Wick).

There are extremely active community organisations, such as the Roman Road London community magazine, Roman Road Bow Neighbourhood Forum creating a new Neighbourhood Plan, and the Roman Road Trust. The Forum includes local residents, businesses and market traders, and focuses on influencing planning policy in their area including the high street.

The catchment area is one of the poorer areas in the borough and one of the least populated. It will be important to ensure that market improvements do not price the traditional traders out.

Traders benefit from seeing familiar faces with 82% recognising over half or more of their customers, however 17% claim that there are no benefits from trading at the market. Traders here are the second least optimistic amongst all market traders with 53% unhopeful or very unhopeful about the future.

There is a limited food offer at the market with a baker at the entrance, a trader selling gözleme (Thursday) and 2-3 hot food sellers on a Saturday.

When the market is closed, the street is noticeably quieter despite it containing a mix of multiple and independent retailers and having few empty retail units.

Unsurprisingly, 62% of shoppers buy clothes at the market followed by 24% buying jewellery and 21% beauty products.

Market traders have received support from Trading Standards and advised on misdescribed clothing, quality of clothing and pricing.

## Snapshot

**Trading days:** Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday 8am to 6pm

**Commodities:** Predominantly clothing with household goods, jewellery and toys on a Saturday. Limited number of food traders, mostly on a Saturday.

**Customers:** Locals in the week. Anecdotal reports from traders that former residents with a fondness for east end markets come on Saturdays.

**Reasons for shopping here:** Good value goods (58%) and community value (44%)

**Pitches:** 211 | 58% full

## Household income

17% less than £15,000 | 56% less than £30,000 | 9% higher than £60,000



## Challenges

The Tower Hamlets High Streets & Town Centres Strategy 2017 – 2022 identified the market as having limited customer facilities, issues with antisocial behaviour and graffiti, waste management, cleanliness of the area and a poorly maintained public realm. Some of these issues have been resolved and others remain in addition to:

**Changing demographics:** Roman Road is a street of two parts with the market area remaining relatively unchanged over the years whilst the western end has changed a great deal with an influx of coffee shops, estate agents and high-quality grocery stores. There appears to be little link between the two ends of the street with different customers using each.

**Customers:** Traders are struggling on Roman Road; colloquially, a lot of the custom is from traditional east end residents who have moved out of the area and now travel in by car. For this reason, traders consider parking to be a problem for themselves and customers. Despite this, 81% of shoppers surveyed said they walked to the market with only 19% driving, though this was during the pandemic and extended congestion charge hours.

**Liveable Streets:** In this vein, there is concern from traders about the Liveable Streets plans for Bow. The council is proposing to pedestrianise Roman Road Market and close Old Ford Road at Skew Bridge, with the aim of reducing some of the 33,000 daily motor vehicle journeys through the area. There has been push back locally that this would be a 'death knell' for the market, though as above evidence suggests most current shoppers arrive on foot.

**Covid-recovery:** The market has also been hit hard by Covid restrictions as the majority of traders are 'non-essential'. It is also unlikely to pick up again quickly as the majority of 'out of town' customers may still be cautious of visiting a London market.

## 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:

- 36 traders (21% of trader responses)
- 117 shoppers (16% of shopper responses)
- 35 businesses (26% of business responses)
- Responses: 188

Roman Road had one of the best response rates across all three audiences.

### Traders would like:

- **More special events** which they think would increase their income (44%)
- **Better parking facilities** for traders (and customers) was mentioned by more than 50%
- **Toilets** to be made available to traders (42%)
- 31% would like to see **more variety and new products** sold at the market with fruit and vegetables and general food scoring highest (11%) closely followed by flowers and plants (8%)
- **Less ladies' clothes** with 61% agreeing that there is too many

### Residents and businesses would like:

- 55% of shoppers identified various products that they would like to see sold at the market with 23% of them requesting that **products be higher quality** which is the only real consensus around commodities.
- 18% of shoppers wanted to see **more fruit and vegetable stalls** of high quality with an interest in **fishmongers and butchers** being present. Businesses would also like to see more food stalls.
- **Higher quality** was also cited when it came to the **clothing** on offer

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

## Action plan

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

Theme	Action
Phase 1	
Business support and enterprise	<p>Create a Trader Handbook with details of what standards are expected at Tower Hamlets' markets as regards displays and set-up, to make the market stalls tidier and more appealing to customers. Establish fundamentals for stalls, e.g., clothes traders should have mirrors.</p> <p>Explore using case studies of stalls who are successful across the borough to highlight best practice.</p> <p>Create a training programme for traders using the handbook which can be accessed online and in person. Traditionally training opportunities haven't been well attended by traders, so the format, content, marketing and messaging around this needs to be thoughtful and engaging.</p>
Commodities	<p>Create a commodities policy to position Roman Road market as an interesting alternative to Stratford Westfield. As somewhere to find up and coming designers or sample sale one-offs, from higher quality brands.</p> <p>Add food for lunchtime weekdays that can cater to local workers, mainly in schools and shops.</p>
Marketing	<p>As part of the Moving Markets Online funding create social media channels and a website for the market which should include updates to show that change is coming.</p> <p>Use this initial period to define this market's brand and create a vision. Then as changes come to fruition from these actions, they can be directed appropriately online.</p>
Operations	Identify access to toilets for traders.

Theme	Action
Place	<p>Pedestrianise the road as the council has seen a positive response to the survey so far.</p> <p>Add more seating, for eating and to pause, increasing dwell time and capacity for this market to be a destination.</p>
Programme	<p>For income generation and evolving the market space, work out a new flat fee model to license private markets to take over the space on closed days. Trial a quarterly specialist crafts or flower market to invigorate the space and bring new shoppers.</p>
Phase 2	
Marketing	<p>Once phase 1 actions have been completed, launch a full marketing campaign to establish Roman Road as an east end market for the modern world.</p>
Place	<p>Add signage from Victoria Park towards Roman Road.</p>
Trading hours and days	<p>Review trading days from test trading patterns and events to establish this market on set days. More market days may bring more footfall to the area once other improvements are actioned.</p>
Phase 3	
N/A	<p>If the above actions are implemented, reassess the market to consider its 'at risk' status. This market needs to consistently break even to be viable.</p>

