

SAVE WEST MALLING FARMERS' MARKET

“We call on Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council to lift the four hour parking restriction for traders, so that they can continue to provide a Farmers Market on the fourth Sunday of each month in West Malling.”

Petition opened on 22.9.24

Petition Organisers

Trudy Dean	49, Offham Road, West Malling
Roger Roud	35, Cottenham Close, East Malling
Michelle Tatton	10, Clare Wood Drive, East Malling.

Please find enclosed the 172 paper petitions.

**The change.org petition of 2249 signatures
has been forwarded to Allison Parris and acknowledged.**

This totals 2401 signatures in all.

31ST JANUARY 2025

Dear Martin,

EFFECT OF A FOUR HOUR PARKING LIMIT ON THE VIABILITY OF WEST MALLING FARMERS MARKET.

We spoke before Christmas about the impact of the proposed four hour restriction on parking in West Malling only, on the operation of the Farmers Market and events. I am copying this email to Matt and Helen Grant MP who I understand have discussed this matter.

You indicated that a clearer explanation of the problem, and a demonstration that the issue was raised during consultation, was required to justify revisiting the 4 hour maximum parking restriction which is proposed only in West Malling.

To clarify the issue, together with the Market Operators, Sandra and Brian Woodfall, we are not seeking a waiving of fees, or a reduction of income to TMBC.

We are simply asking for TMBC to lift the four hour maximum parking period in Ryarsh Lane car park, and allow traders to purchase extra hours of parking as they do in

Tonbridge already, and as is proposed in Martin Square at £5.80 for up to 23 hours.

Trudy, Roger and Michelle

Joint Sponsors of the Petition

EFFECT OF A FOUR HOUR PARKING LIMIT ON THE VIABILITY OF WEST MALLING FARMERS MARKET.

This report falls into the following headings:

The Current Position.

The Effect of the TMBC proposed changes.

The Consultation and Responses.

The Petition - digital and on paper.

Alternative Solutions to Enable the Market to Continue.

The Historical Importance of the Market.

1. THE CURRENT POSITION

The position is that the market itself operates monthly between 9.30am and 1.30pm.(ie four hours), but the road closure order operates between 6am. and 3pm. (ie. nine hours)

This longer road closure period is necessary to allow market operators and stall holders to arrive in time to organise safely the following tasks:-

installation of traffic barriers to enforce the road closure,

mark out pitches on the highway,

installation of generators providing refrigeration for fish and meat products and heat for cooking of fast food,

organise entry into the market area for those stallholders who need their vehicles within the closed area for environmental health or safety reasons,

marshalling the unloading from vans which are then parked elsewhere, to make room for additional stalls, which total over 35 in number ,

erecting and stocking covered stalls,

packing up produce and tents after 1.30pm, and

clearing rubbish from the closed area.

Stall holders are already currently parked in the following locations:-

- within the closure order area if required for environmental health or safety reasons, (5 stallholders; hot drinks van, pork fast food, plants, knife sharpening)**
- in Ryarsh Lane Car Park,**
- in free on-street spaces closest to the market closure area if their products are heavy,**
- in vacant spaces in Water Lane and St Leonards Street and**
- in the car park of the West Malling Primary School, Norman Road.**

Stallholders do not use the High Street Car Park as there is a four hour limit already in operation.

2. THE EFFECT OF THE PROPOSALS ON THE MARKET

2.1 The Four hour limit does not allow time to complete all the necessary tasks in setting up and packing up for the four hour market.

Vehicles will not be allowed to leave the car park and return later in the day.

In Tonbridge Farmers' Market, stall holders are allowed to purchase hours of waiting beyond the permitted four hours.

In Martin Square, a charge of £5.80 will be made for all day parking. West Malling stallholders are happy to pay this charge, but uniquely in the Borough, this is not permitted for Stall holders in West Malling.

It is not clear why this should be the case, and appears to be unfair.

2.2 After the proposals are implemented, the only spaces left for the 30 plus vans of stall holders will be;-

2.2.1 the 13 spaces in Water Lane and 20 spaces in the more distant St Leonard's Street (33 in total) which do not have residents' permits on them.

These spaces are already under pressure from residents and users of Manor Park on Sundays, as well as local shops which open on Farmers Market days. The proposed charges will increase this even further.

2.2.2 at the school car park, Norman Road. Here they are in conflict with football and cricket club players, spectators, and walkers accessing the adjoining Cricket Meadow, allotment and Macey's Meadow, for all of whom this is the only surfaced parking area. The total space is in any event not capable of accommodating all stallholders, and is too far from the market for restocking of stalls with heavy produce.

Quite simply, if the restriction to a maximum of four hours of parking is implemented, it will force the market to less than half its existing size. This will not only be a massive blow to producers and customers, but is also likely to be insufficient to support the overhead costs of the road closure and traffic management required.

It is also the case that the Christmas Lights Celebration, and the St George's Day Parade will also cease since the hours of parking required for those events also exceed four hours. Chamber of Commerce plans for a summer event will also not be able to proceed.

3. THE CONSULTATION

3.1 The Consultation documents

You will recall that there were four parking changes which affected West Malling , and the accompanying consultations were held around the same time. They were

- general increases in parking charges where they already existed within the Borough, including High Street Car Park.
- the imposition of charges in new areas of off-street parking, including Ryarsh Lane Car Park,
- the imposition of charges in new areas of on-street parking ie 93 parking bays in High Street and Swan Street.
- the extension of days and hours of all spaces where charging will be applied to include Saturdays, Sundays and Bank Holidays, from 8am to 8pm. This applied to 93 on-street parking spaces in High Street, Swan Street, and Ryarsh Lane Car Park.

The Consultation documents referred to the extension of charges, and the places, days and hours to which they would apply.

However, they did not refer to the effect that the four hour parking limit would have on Farmers' Market stall holders.

None of the questions referred specifically to the Farmers' Market and the EQIA does not mention it.

Therefore, most people would have been aware of this effect of the proposals.

Cllr Roud toured the market stalls in November 2024 and asked if stallholders were aware of the consultation. Only two of 16 he was able to speak to had seen it. This suggests that TMBC did not contact market stallholders, who are one of the major stakeholders affected by the change in hours of charged parking.

Most lived at some distance from the market, and therefore do not visit the TMBC website, or see the consultation advertising in the press or social media.

3.2 Consultation Responses

3.2.1 Written responses;-

Sandra and Brian Woodfall wrote the following reply to TMBC in response to the Consultation;-

"As operators of West Malling Farmers Market running on the fourth Sunday of the month, we already have a road closure order in place which has been granted by KCC Highways which covers the area of the High Street from Swan Street to Water Lane. The road closure is from 6am to 3pm on the fourth Sunday. Could you please confirm that any proposed or introduced parking charges will be suspended during the period covered by the road closure order." On-Street Response - Reference Number 514

A screenshot is available of the entry if required.

To date, Sandra and Brian have not received a reply, or any other communication from TMBC. They are based in Dartford and therefore are not members of West Malling Chamber of Commerce.

3.2.2 A large number of consultation respondents referred to the effect of the imposition of charges on the Farmers' Market.

We counted 39. Screenshots are again available, if required.

3.4 Committee debates

The results of the consultation were reported to several committees.

Despite the serious effect on the Farmers Market, this was not flagged up to members either in the Committee report or the table summarising responses.

Extraordinary Overview and Scrutiny Committee 22nd April 2024

9.42 Cllr David Thornewell said " Fourthly, I do not feel that the effects of the proposals on West Malling Farmers' Market or the Christmas event...have been properly considered."

Cabinet Meeting Of 30th April 2024

1.55.07 Cllr Trudy Dean " I wanted to support particularly those people who commented about the Sunday charges would have a huge effect on community activities, and I do think that is something the Council needs to pay attention to. I am particularly concerned about the future of farmers' markets.....which are often a lifeline for producers as well as communities...But I am also thinking of things like the Christmas Lights , the St George's Day Parade and all those sorts of things which are vital for community groupsand fostering good community spirit." (The parking period required for these events also exceeds the four hours maximum.)

2.01.40 Cllr Garry Bridge spoke about the impact on community events across the Borough eg Christmas Lights, and suggested that enforcement of the parking restrictions could be lifted on Community Events.

Cabinet Meeting of 3rd. September 2024

20.59 to 22.16 Cllr Michelle Tatton said " I believe that you are aware that ten of the West Malling stall holder withdrew in August because of that four hour window which makes it impossible really for them to set up to function through the farmers market and then their clearing away time. So already we are looking at losing a quarter of the stall holders from the market and that is a really significant blow to the town and it has to bring into question the viability of the farmers market going forward".

4. THE PETITION

Irrespective of the process so far, we need to consider the here and now.

Since the Cabinet decision, much media coverage and a petition have put the spotlight on the threat to the continued operation of the market by the four hour maximum hours limit.

The petition was launched on-line and in paper form, circulated around the November and December markets before Christmas, at the November Repair Cafe, and delivered to addresses in West Malling and Offham.

2,124 people signed the on line petition, and 141 people signed the paper petition.

The petition called for the removal of the four hour restriction on parking hours for traders in West Malling to allow the Farmers' Market to continue to operate.

Councillors are cautious about on-line petitions which tend to attract signatures from far flung areas, perhaps without knowledge or experience of the West Malling Farmers Market.

The petition was therefore continued until the combined digital and original signatures of LOCAL respondents exceeded the 1,500 signatures required to trigger a debate in Council.

The full breakdown of on-line respondents is available if required.

The analysis of respondents on 24.11.24 is as follows:-

West Malling.....	578
TMBC addresses excluding West Malling.....	336
Maidstone.....	329
Addresses in nearby Boroughs excluding Maidstone.....	268
Local signatures.....	1,511
Total signatures.....	2,124

A date for the Mayor to receive the Petition is still being sought since December.

5. ALTERNATIVE SUGGESTIONS EXPLORED.

Other suggested alternatives investigated have been:-

5.1 More vehicles could be accommodated within the closed area, but only by reducing the number of stalls to less than half its current size.

This option was trialled recently when heavy winds drastically reduced the number of stall holders who arrived.

5.2 Extending the closed area to fill the permitted closure as far as Water Lane would result in the High Street Car Park being unavailable, creating severe disruption.

5.3 Extending the parking area on the church side only to Water Lane would provide an extra 12 spaces. However, 8 of these spaces are within the residents permit area and were already occupied at 7am. when we visited.

5.4 Supporting the Farmers' Market by removing all charges for stallholders, but this would involve a loss of income to the Borough.

5.5 Issuing a monthly permit to stallholders in Ryarsh Lane Car Park would work, but only at a rate reflecting use on only 12 days in the year. None has been offered to date.

5.6 Removing the four hour limit and allowing stallholders to purchase extra hours of parking, as is available to Tonbridge FM stallholders, and Martin Square at £5.80 for all day parking would be fair and consistent.

6. THE HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE OF WEST MALLING MARKET TRADING.

During the Consultation, it has been pointed out to us that West Mallings market is the oldest in Tonbridge and Mallings, and one of the oldest in Kent. The "Gazetteer of Markets and Fairs in England and Wales up to 1516" compiled in 2000 (updated in 2013) by Dr Samantha Letters is regarded as the most complete record up to 2013 of such markets in England. It was partially funded by English Heritage and the Guildhall Library of the Corporation of London. It records the West Mallings market as being established by Charter in 1103. King Henry 1 conferred the right to hold a weekly market on the Nuns of the Benedictine Abbey.

Moreover it includes a contemporaneous record which specifies that the market should be held in the town. The early town road layout is generally accepted as incorporating a broad town market 'square' designed for that purpose by Bishop Gundulf. A remnant of the original market cross is embedded in the wall of Franks Restaurant. The nuns are still in occupancy in the Abbey.

Markets set up by Charter are normally created by Royal Charter, which we are advised cannot be overturned except by the express authority of the current monarch.

Although no copy of the Charter survives, the Gazetteer records several contemporaneous accounts of sources which agree that in 1312 the Abbess successfully argued that markets had been held in the town from 'time out of mind and without interruption'. The Gazetteer therefore lists the market as being both a Charter, and a 'Prescriptive Market' ie. held by established custom which it says includes the oldest of all markets. Its foundation is predated only by the Cathedral cities, the four Kent Cinque Ports and mint towns ie Canterbury, Rochester, Dover, Faversham, Hythe, Lympne, New Romney, and Sandwich .

The modern Farmers Market was established again in 2000, with the support of TMBC. It is celebrating its 25th birthday this year. It was therefore set up in the traditional market square, even though this requires the operator to meet the extra cost of an expensive road closure and traffic management system for public safety. Stallholders tell us that the unusual site in the old market square gives the market a distinctive character which they enjoy. A third of customers come from West Malling, a third from nearby parishes, and the rest from anywhere including visitors from France and USA.

Essentially, a market town with a market square but no market is a sadder affair!

Sandra and Brian Woodfall have been the Market Operator for 23 years.

They have grown it in size until it is now one of the largest of the 55 Kent Farmers' Markets with over 35 stalls.

It has been entirely independent of any public subsidy for many years.

It continued to operate through Foot and Mouth and Covid, and was a very important social and shopping opportunity for many people who were struggling to maintain normal life.

It has won the award for:

Best UK Farmers Market in 2018 by the Farm Shop and Deli Awards,

Kent Best Farmers Market in 2016 Kent Life Awards, and

Finalist in the Best Farmers Market Farm Retail Association Awards in 2020.

Gold Award in the Food and Drink Market Category of the Taste Of Kent Awards in 2024.