

Cllr Millard: Hello and welcome to episode 4 of Talk Richmond, a podcast hosted by Richmond Council and hosted by me Councillor Jim Millard. Our local businesses are at the heart of our community and the COVID-19 pandemic has presented them with huge and extraordinary challenges. Today we'll be discussing this, as well as the importance of shopping locally, so that our beloved shops, restaurants, cafes, gyms and other retailers in the borough can bounce back and continue to bring people together.

Joining me today is Vicki Anstey the founder of the Barreworks studio in Richmond and UK's leading Barre expert, I'm putting on my leg warmers as we speak, and Emma Robinson, Town Centre manager for Barnes. Hi Emma. Hi Vicki.

Ideally, we would be doing this in the council's luxury recording facilities, which is actually just another room, but it's the least echoey room we found. And they've got some nice microphones, but they're still waiting. Still waiting until Corona is behind us before we can start using those. So, obviously we're moving out of lockdown now to what we're calling the new normal, but my son hates that phrase. He doesn't the new normal. He wants to continue calling it the temporary weirdness, which I think is also a very good name for it. So yeah.

Vicki: Ah, I like that, I like that, I'm with him.

Cllr Millard: First of all I have to admit my knowledge of the workout Barre is pretty non-existent - as anyone who's seen me dance will attest - but I was just wondering, could you tell me a bit about what it involves and how you became the UK's leading Barre expert?

Vicki: Yes, so Barre is kind of a form of modified ballet training. I quite often will draw people's attention to the physique of a male or female ballet dancer and sort of that highlights really what the rigors of their physical training produce in in terms of, you know, physique, balance, posture, etc. And Barre is essentially sort of the strength and conditioning component of ballet. So, it's not really ballet as such, although we do run ballet classes, but Barre specifically is much more about the kind of the strength and conditioning that goes behind a dancer's ability to perform.

Cllr Millard: I can feel my posture improving just listening to you. I'm sure everyone listening is the same they're sitting up a bit better, letting the neck be free and all this stuff.

And Emma, you became Town Centre Manager for Barnes Community Association back in 2012. Is that right?

Emma: I did yes, a very happy eight years of my life.

Cllr Millard: Wow, can you tell us a bit about what your role involves?

Emma: OK, so it's a very, very broad role and that's one of the things I love about it, ranging from talking to local retailers about the challenges they face and seeing what I can do to support them, through to fairly major projects to look at what we can do to make Barnes the destination and drive in visitors - bring footfall in to use our local shops and our local businesses.

We are very fortunate in Barnes to have a significant number of independent businesses. In fact, I think one of the highest number of independent businesses of towns in the country. So, we're in a very fortunate position, and I think that gives us a unique offer and makes the challenges we face quite special, in terms of how we can support those businesses to survive. Make sure that we continue when we have empty sites to bring in more independent businesses that will add to our offer and I think it's probably fair to say we're doing quite a good job of that at the moment.

Cllr Millard: When the government announced the lockdown, what were some of your concerns initially for your business?

Vicki: Well I have in the in the 10 years of operating I would close my business for three days a year, at Christmas and New Year. And so, for 10 years I haven't shut the doors for any more than a day or two days at a time. So that was a huge deal for me, and it was a pretty emotional thing on that Friday evening to have to go and lock the doors with no idea when I be able to reopen them. That was really hard. And, you know, it's a business that I've built up from scratch that I set up during a recession in 2009. So, I guess that initial phase was it was kind of, it was very emotional to begin with, but then kind of quite heavy and just, well, we're all in this kind of crazy situation together. So you know, I remember the first time I went to the supermarket with the legitimate need to actually buy food and toilet roll, and I'd been working so hard to try, you know, move my business operations online. That I kind of hadn't really clocked the reality of what was going on in the outside world and I was shocked when I got there to find, you know, the only fresh fruit I could buy were grapefruits and there was no toilet roll and you couldn't buy more than one bag of pasta and it I mean, that was like a real wake up call. You know, so sort of immersed in the immediate situation of like how I'm going to keep paying my bills and my staff. So yeah, I guess the whole thing has just been, it's

such a cliché, isn't it? But like such a rollercoaster really, just like one day to the next one week to the next..

Cllr Millard: Businesses in Barnes have certainly not had it easy over the past 18 months with Hammersmith Bridge closing to motor traffic and then with COVID-19. So how has Barnes changed over the last 18 months?

Emma: Well the last 18 months have been significantly challenging for Barnes. In April 19 Hammersmith Bridge closed to vehicle traffic and the whole community, businesses and residents went into a state of shock. Our transport routes were stopped, our bus routes stopped, elderly people couldn't get over the bridge to their friends and family, and to hospitals and GP surgeries over there, and life really significantly had to change. Our business community suffered straight away from a significant drop in footfall. Barnes is in a fortunate position in that we're just over Hammersmith Bridge so we're very close to a lot of the West London communities of Notting Hill and South Ken and West Ken - residents from those areas would regularly pop over to Barnes for an evening or for lunch. And all that stopped. And these businesses have had to find ways of surviving by adapting their model and looking at ways of drawing in local residents and changing the services that they provide.

I've been doing what I can to support them, where I can try to help them think about new ways of working. We've launched a home delivery service so people who are isolated or people who are staying at home can actually continue to use local shops without having to go down to the High Street. And obviously the grants that have been provided through the Council from the Chancellor have made a significant difference to businesses over last few months. But there are significant challenges ahead..

Cllr Millard: And I'm fascinated by this Vicki, you were on Channel 4's TV programme SAS Who Dares Wins?

Vicki: that's right, yeah, yeah,

Cllr Millard: That sounds amazing. It's about testing people to their limits, taking them through gruelling mental and physical challenges, basically replicating the SAS selection process.

Vicki: Exactly. Yeah.

Cllr Millard: That's so impressive. Just in the current context, how did that prepare you for managing a business through a pandemic?

Vicki: Wow, well, yeah, I definitely had to draw my resilience, I have to say. That was an amazing experience and actually I got to participate in the first ever series that included women. So, that was a real privilege. And yeah, super proud of the whole process really and where I got to in that process and it was just an extraordinary opportunity to learn I guess you know primarily what I'm capable of physically and mentally. But also, you know, to learn from some of the most incredible individuals with you know decades of SAS service behind them.

You know obviously everyone's been through a really tough time and we continue to go through a tough time, right now, it's certainly not over yet, is it? But yeah, I guess, just that, that notion of taking each day as it comes and taking things one step at a time, and yeah, just kind of digging deep and being gritty about things - making tough decisions as well. So yeah, there's been a lot of lot of things I could draw from that experience for sure.

Cllr Millard: The Council recently completed a business survey with businesses in the borough on the impacts of COVID-19, 90% of respondents said that they've been impacted negatively by the pandemic, which is hardly surprising. We're now in the recovery phase, but the road ahead is still uncertain. What are some of the key challenges facing the businesses that you work with over the next few months?

Emma: I think that major challenge of all businesses is how they can draw in, bring in customers, but keep them safe at the same time. So, they need the footfall generate the income so they can pay their business rates and their rents. But equally they need to make sure that their customers are safe and that's the challenge that we have within the local businesses but also outside the local businesses on the streets. So, we want we want people on our pavements, but equally we want them to be at a safe distance from each other.

I think we see on the ground the reality of the results that the Council have seen in their survey. So, it has been a tough few months and many businesses getting in touch with me saying how am I going to pay my rent? How I'm going to survive over the next few months?

But the evidence in Barnes suggests that they have survived and some of them have actually adapted and are doing quite well now. And we've got an example of cafe on Church Road called And Feast who stayed opened throughout, whilst many of our cafes closed, he stayed open throughout the lockdown period and just adapted it to meet the government guidelines and has done well out of it being in a minority of coffee shops that actually stayed open, inevitably his custom increased and the residents valued the fact that he had gone out of his way to stay open.

Vicki: we pretty much overnight moved to having to create, build our own online platform. And I'm very lucky to have a friend who is, pretty IT adept and so he was able to help with that. And we started recording live classes and streaming them. And yeah, it was a very manual laborious, technically complicated process and, you know, obviously I went into the business of what I do at Barreworks as a fitness instructor and someone with a drive to setting up my own studio. Through that process of obviously become a business owner, although I, you know, rarely actually think of myself that way. And now I'm like an IT guru and a Covid compliance officer as well. It's just, you know, my whole kind of role and career has just like changed overnight and having to get my head around you know IT and technology that it doesn't come naturally to me at all. It's been, you know, there have literally been nights of tearing your hair out...

So now we were kind of we're obviously back in the studio to a certain degree now although, on a restricted basis in terms of how many clients we're able to take in the studio, but also, you know it costs me a lot more to run a class on that basis. And I'm also very reluctant to kind of reopen on the same basis as we did previously, because what if we go into another lockdown? You know, I don't want everyone to suddenly kind of dive straight back into the studio. And then we've got a task on our hands again to try and encourage people to go back online and train, so we're trying to kind of keep that hybrid model going and we're tweaking it and adding things and changing things and listening to our clients to understand what their needs are. But it's a very difficult time of year as well, and I think there's a sort of an assumption that you know well we're back and small businesses are now open for the majority, and so life is returning to some kind of normal. But actually, I think this is the hardest phase if I'm honest, because I think most businesses would say, you know they are operating at a loss as a means to kind of keep making steps forward. And that's certainly true for us. It's tough.

Cllr Millard: I appreciate that and you know, from my experience as well, one of the things about running a small or medium size business is, you've absolutely put your finger on, you

know the one of the things that's a challenge but also a joy is the degree to which you have to sort of learn and master loads of new things sometimes that are thrown at you and that ability and desire to be flexible and resourceful and adapt is so impressive. And I think no one knows what the future holds. How are businesses in Barnes preparing if a potential second lockdown, and no one saying that's going to happen, but if it were to happen?

Emma: Well, I think if it happens again. We have the benefit of hindsight of the learnings that we've had over the last few months and I think everyone will be ready to cope with it much more calmly than we did when it was imposed on us initially and the businesses of all adapted with the PPE, they've got their track and trace systems in place where appropriate, and I would feel quite confident that we would be ready to deal with whatever is thrown at us because it can't really be worse than it has been, or maybe that's not true, maybe it can be a lot worse than it has been. But it's been a tough few months and I think I think we're kind of ready to face what happens next.

Cllr Millard: The Council has launched a Shop Local campaign to encourage residents to spend their money locally and with independent businesses. Shopping locally is all about supporting locally owned businesses that employ local workers and serve local consumers. This is now obviously more important than ever to help our businesses recover from lockdown. What do you think of some of the biggest benefits of shopping locally?

Emma: Well, I mean, we have been obviously we talked about the closure of Hammersmith Bridge and in Barnes we've had a shop local campaign running since the bridge closed pretty much because we really do recognise the significance of it and of making it work and we will be working with the Council on how we can incorporate what we've already done into the Council wide campaign so we can be part of the bigger borough initiative. But it is incredibly important. I mean, as residents, I know what we all value about our local communities is the fact that we can pop out and pick up a newspaper or cup of coffee and have a wander around the shops. Our local businesses really are at the heart of our community and they influence our choice of where we live, they influence our property prices, how where we bring up our children, the lives that our children have in the community, and so they are a fundamental part of our lives. And I think residents realise that if they don't support local businesses then they won't survive and their community will significantly change, and getting that message across is an important one and I think one and all of us Town Centre Managers have this challenge on a daily basis of reminding residents of importance of supporting their local businesses or potentially losing them. And obviously at a time like this it's more important than ever.

Cllr Millard: What you've talked about is really inspiring. Have you got any advice for other small to medium size businesses?

Vicki: I think it does boil down to community. One of the things that we did quite early on was to invest heavily, no finance involved, just lots of emotion in time in our client WhatsApp group, so we've always had a WhatsApp group for any client that wants to be involved, and receive notifications and it's just a forum for people to kind of share how tough the class was or you know anything like that and that became a thriving community, and it was such an amazing thing. Everyday people sending messages of support not just to us, but to each other, helping each other out. You know, one of our clients had to self-isolate fully, self-isolate through the whole of lockdown. A lady who is in her 70s with respiratory problems. And people were offering to take things around to her house for her and leave them at her doorstep. And you know, just became the community, the Barreworks community became a much stronger thing because of lockdown. So, I think it's things like that that don't cost you any money whatsoever. If you can invest in those things. And yeah, and kind of develop those communities are sense of family and belonging then the other things that really matter in the long run.

Cllr Millard: That's great. That's great, really good advice and you know it's so important to us, as a councillor, but also as a resident, I just think we value our local independent businesses so much. It's such an important part of what makes our communities so special and we really want you to survive, we want to support you to get through this, move on to pastures new in the future. Let's look forward to those sunlit uplands.

Vicki: Thank you, it matters a great deal. And you know, as a small business owner, I am aware of it, it is getting through to us as well, which is a lovely thing. We do feel supported, so we're very grateful for that.

Cllr Millard: It's been fascinating to chat to both Vicki and Emma. It's clear that businesses have had to work incredibly hard in recent months to adapt to government guidelines and to be able to open again. Sadly, many of our businesses will be facing an uncertain future – and so we must play our part in supporting local, independent businesses and the great people – like Vicki and Emma – who make them so unique.

In the next episode we'll be discussing going back to school and the measures taken to make sure it's safe.

For further information on the topics discussed check out the show notes below. If you have any questions email us on talk@richmond.gov.uk. Please do subscribe and why not review? 5* always welcome. I'm Jim Millard – thanks for listening!