

'Unjustified council fees are choking businesses'

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AN award-winning street-trader is fed up of paying inflexible fees and is urging the council to cut costs or risk killing local businesses.

Johnny Shepherd, owner of The Pudding Stop, has to pay an annual processing fee of £750 for his static train station trading spot – an amount he claims is not justified.

The businessman believes he and fellow street trader Charlotte Powell of Soko Coffee should not have to pay such a high fee, primarily because they operate on private land at St Albans city train station owned by First Group Ltd.

Johnny said: "Common sense would suggest that a train station car park is not a street and given our proximity to the ticketed gates, 99 per cent of our customers are FCC customers catching a train to work or home."

But St Albans district council said the station car park is an area where any member of the public can gain access without payment and therefore qualifies as a street.

As well as claiming the fee is not relevant to their location, the traders feel it is far too expensive.

Charlotte Powell wrote to St Albans council requesting a breakdown of how the annual fee is spent within the department that issues street trading consent, but they were unable to show this as they "do not hold records in that way".

Johnny, a former contestant on BBC2 show *The Great British Bake Off*, said: "If these individual costs are not known, how is it possible to reach a figure of £750? It is my opinion that these costs are nothing more than a guess."

He added they did not provide an explanation for why the costs need to be revisited each year when there has been no change to the business or trading location.

"I have been trading for two years and have paid a total of £1,500, while Soko Coffee has been trading for four years and has



Johnny Shepherd, owner of The Pudding Stop

paid £3,000.

"That is a total combined administration fee of £4,500 for two businesses with no change in their location, product or service.

He went on that this amount paid is a significant amount of money that could have been invested in their businesses and may have afforded another static van for a different station, adding: "Application processing fees should be less than £100 and reviewed every three to five years."

The council's legal department claimed the fees reflect the necessary work for processing the application and include an assessment of the site.

The street trader was also recently frustrated to discover that to trade during the day in Christopher Place – again on private land – he would have to pay an additional £750.

Despite the fact Johnny will trade from two locations in the city centre and has a shop opening on Verulam Road the council said they could not offer a discount.

A spokesperson said: "We apply our street trading policy fairly to all street traders regardless of their other business con-

cerns or where they live."

On the whole, Johnny maintains the council force unreasonable costs on the majority of the city's street traders.

"Coincidentally a street trader in St Albans town centre pays £6,000 per year to trade for every week of the year.

"In contrast First Group Ltd charge us a third of this price to trade for every week of the year and this fee includes station services such as electricity."

The 28 year old baker said the council should be more proactive in helping businesses and should turn the number of empty shops in Market Place into pop-up shops for budding entrepreneur.

"Inevitably, they have turned into horrible shrines to the council, rather than creating jobs and revenue through shops and innovative social enterprises."

He added: "As a small business that has grown over the last three years from market stall to mobile trader, supplying top food businesses, to opening a premises in St Albans town centre, I feel that St Albans district council have never aided this journey."