

Covid 19 Recovery Revitalisation Fund Mid Term Evaluation Report

Prepared for Belfast City Council

By Eos Community Consulting CIC

June 2022



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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Through its Covid 19 “Our Recovery Strategy”, Belfast City Council recognised that in order to recover from the pandemic, there would need to be a range of sustained and creative interventions which would increase footfall and spend in the city centre and increase connectivity in local neighbourhoods and with the wider city.

The Council received £4.039m capital funding through the Department for Communities Revitalisation programme to support a variety of projects and programmes across the city. These projects which were identified and led by community organisations and local businesses were intended to address health and safety concerns, to encourage people to re-engage with community and city life, and to provide clear and visible changes in the local area.

The funding provided the Council and local Business Improvement Districts and community organisations with the chance to harness people’s renewed interest in spending time outdoors, and in walking and cycling. Most importantly the funding meant that businesses and community organisations could be supported to re-open safely and with confidence, and to adapt how they operated to suit the changed times.

The initiatives supported were many and varied and were located across the city. With the overarching aim of promoting recovery from the pandemic, the projects provided new and/or improved community spaces, innovative solutions for socialising outdoors, attractive streetscapes and much more.

60% survey respondents agreed/strongly agreed that improvements undertaken through the programme would encourage people to live, work and invest in this area¹

90% of participating² businesses reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the improvements to their businesses³.

67% of People⁴ agreed that they were satisfied with the interventions taken by the council to respond to safety issues raised by the Covid-19 pandemic

70% of businesses (75 of 107 respondents⁵) reported turnover returning to at least 70% of pre-Covid 19 levels following council interventions in the area

In May 2022 Belfast City Centre footfall was 15% higher than in May 2019 (prior to the pandemic)

¹ Combined responses from business and public surveys and BCCG monitoring (n=241)

² Businesses which responded to the survey which received a grant from council (n=96)

³ The question asked was “to what extent are you satisfied that the funding enabled businesses to take measures to enhance public confidence as a result of safety issues raised by the pandemic?”

⁴ Based on combined responses of business survey and public survey (n=212)

⁵ Online feedback survey for businesses June 2022

2 PROGRAMME OBJECTIVES⁶

1. To support each district council to develop a costed Covid-19 Recovery Revitalisation Plan by September 2020. **This objective has now been met.**
2. By August 2020, each district council will have established or identified a suitable stakeholder engagement forum to support the delivery of its Covid-19 Revitalisation Plan. **This objective has now been met.**
3. To support each district council to deliver its Covid-19 Recovery Revitalisation Plan by March 2021. **This objective has now been met.**
4. By March 2022, 80% of businesses in scheme areas agree that the improvements to their businesses and other Capital purchase projects would encourage people to live, work, visit and invest in the area (by council). **Objective on target to be met by March 2023 - Currently 48% businesses**
5. By March 2022, 80% of people using the scheme areas agree that the improvements to the area would encourage people to live, work, visit and invest in the area (by council). **Objective on target to be met by March 2023 - Currently 60% people**
6. By March 2022, council schemes funded through this Programme will have positively impacted on efforts to see footfall levels returning to a level which is at least 70% of levels recorded prior to the public health crisis. **This objective has been met – in May 2022 footfall was 15% higher than in May 2019**
7. By March 2022, surveys completed by traders indicate that council schemes funded through this Programme will have positively impacted on efforts to see sales figures returning to a level which is at least 70% of levels recorded prior to the public health crisis. **This objective has now been met.**
8. By March 2022, attitudinal surveys indicate 80% of the public are satisfied with the measures taken in the Scheme areas to respond to safety issues raised by the Covid-19 pandemic. **This objective is on target to be met by March 2023– currently at 67%**
9. By March 2022, attitudinal surveys indicate 70% of the public are satisfied with walking facilities in the Scheme area. **As schemes to improve walking facilities had not been completed this question was not asked for the mid-term evaluation, it will be included in the final evaluation**
10. By March 2022, attitudinal surveys indicate 60% of the public agree that they are satisfied with cycling facilities in the Scheme area. **As schemes to improve cycling facilities had not been completed, this question was not asked for the mid-term evaluation, it will be included in the final evaluation**
11. By March 2022, attitudinal surveys indicate 40% of the public agree that measures taken in the Scheme area would encourage people to change from car use to more environmentally friendly choices such as walking and cycling for journeys of under two miles. **Objective on target to be met by 2023 – currently at 37%**

⁶ Progress towards achievement of these objectives has been measured at a point in time when not all projects are complete and there remains low awareness and limited impact to date.

12. By March 2022, grant fund measures in the Scheme area to demonstrate the benefits of low-emission fuel options. **Not applicable to this action plan**

13. By March 2022 the scheme area will have an increase in land used for active travel (i.e. extended footways, cycle ways, connecting pathways) which connects people with key services and ensures accessibility for all including those with disabilities. **This objective is on target to be met by March 2023** as the final projects to be delivered bed into their areas and full impacts are realised.

3 EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

Eos Community Consulting CIC was commissioned by Belfast City Council to produce a mid-term and final evaluation report on the Covid 19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme.

The programme, which encompasses funding received through the Department for Communities (DfC), Department of Environment, Agriculture and Rural Affairs (DEARA), and Department for Infrastructure (DfI) took an outcomes-based approach to supporting businesses and communities in the city to continue to address or recover from the impacts of the Covid 19 pandemic.

The evaluation methodology was as follows:

- Review and analysis of the grant documentation and end of project monitoring reports for Business/Community Cluster grant recipients
- One to One Interviews with project leads in the Business and Community Cluster grants
- One to One interviews with Council Officers who led delivery of interventions by Council
- One to One interviews with Business Improvement District (BID) Managers
- Analysis of end of project monitoring data received from businesses which received grant aid through the programme
- An online survey open to businesses in the city (110 responses)
- An online public survey promoted via the Council's social media (102 responses)
- Review of Springboard footfall monitoring as baseline information
- Collation of the findings of the above to illustrate how the programme objectives were met and how the interventions contributed towards the outcomes defined for the programme

3.1 REPORT STRUCTURE

This mid-term evaluation report aligns with Central Government Departments' preferred evaluation methodology of Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA). The body of the report is structured around the three core elements of OBA:

- How much did we do?
- How well did we do it?
- Is anybody better off?

For ease of reporting back on the variety of activity supported through the programme, we have categorised activity into the following strands

- Grants for businesses to purchase equipment to help them continue to trade or to trade safely
- Grants for Business and Community clusters for small capital projects
- Grants to the Business Improvement Districts
- Council led physical interventions and streetscape improvements
- Council led initiatives to encourage people safely back into the city
- Council led active travel measures

Each strand is assessed separately in each section of the report for what was delivered, how well it was delivered and the impact achieved.

4 HOW MUCH DID WE DO?

- 3 stakeholder engagement forums established
- 457 businesses⁷ and 32 business/community clusters benefitting from grants
- £1.652m allocated through grants for businesses (£800k business grants, £564k grants to BIDs £288k business community cluster grants)
- £1.91m spent on other interventions by council
- Other interventions by type: Public Information / Marketing/ Animation/ Events/ Additional street cleansing
- 54 Physical Interventions & Streetscape Improvements/ Reimagined Public Spaces
- £2.52m allocated to Physical Interventions & Streetscape Improvements/ Reimagined Public Spaces including £288k of business and community cluster grants
- £699k spent on interventions to support cycling/walking initiatives
- 5 interventions to support cycling initiatives
- 1 intervention to support walking initiatives

4.1 GRANTS FOR BUSINESSES TO PURCHASE EQUIPMENT TO HELP THEM CONTINUE TO TRADE OR TO TRADE SAFELY

Belfast-based businesses, social enterprises and charities were invited to apply for funding for up to 100% of costs for capital items associated with Covid-19 adaptations such as

- changes to internal and external layouts to help with social distancing
- sanitisation stations
- signage, awnings or canopies
- collection and delivery points
- outdoor seating or heating and barriers

£916,206 of funding and 490 grants were awarded to businesses in the city to enable them to trade safely during the pandemic, or re-open safely post lockdown.

36 of those businesses awarded funding chose not to proceed with their grant resulting in total grant aid paid to businesses of £811,716

4.2 GRANTS FOR COMMUNITY/BUSINESS CLUSTERS FOR PHYSICAL INTERVENTIONS AND STREETScape IMPROVEMENTS

The Business Cluster and Community grant scheme was aimed at Belfast based not-for-profit/community groups, business collaborations and partnerships to carry out environmental

⁷ 454 Grant recipients plus 3 Business Improvement Districts

improvement schemes, through capital grants of between £10K-£25K. The focus of the scheme was Belfast's arterial routes, urban villages and local communities and the city centre

£288k of funding and 32 grants were awarded to business/community clusters for small capital projects which could create or enhance local spaces for the use of the community. Local business clusters and BIDs to the opportunity in a variety of ways reclaiming and creating local spaces which benefited their local area and its residents.

- **Ballynafeigh Community Association, South Belfast** created a parklet type space outside their premises.
- **Bank Square Traders, City Centre** benefited from outdoor seating, lighting and floral displays that sparked a bit of life into the square and encouraged the people to visit the space.
- **Beanies Convenience Store, Business Cluster Group, North Belfast**, benefited from signage and lighting that improved access to the premises.
- **Belfast Boat Club, South Belfast** provided an outdoor space with gazebos, benches and seating.
- **Big Belmont Traders, East Belfast** benefited from additional shop front signage and lighting.
- **Cairde Ard Eoin, North Belfast** improved the appearance of a dark unwelcoming outside space through a heritage project that included story boards, seating and lighting.
- **Castle Street Traders, City Centre** benefited from new signage, awnings and lighting which improved the appearance of business in an attempt to increase footfall.
- **Cliftonville Community Regeneration Forum, North Belfast**, created a community garden on an unused interface area improving the appearance of the land and increasing community activity.
- **Colin Trust, West Belfast** provided additional seating, benches and extra bins as this outdoor space became increasingly popular as people as restrictions eased.
- **Donovan Rossa GAC, West Belfast** designed a newly surfaced walking route and outdoor gym equipment at their site to enable people to increase their health and well-being.
- **East Belfast Mission, East Belfast**, provided outdoor seating and canopies for cover to enable them to open and operate from outside when it was safe to do so.
- **Eastside Partnership, East Belfast**. Focused on a heritage-based wayfinding initiative which included murals that encouraged visitor interest and gave the community a sense of civic pride.
- **Fountain Street Plaza, City Centre** created a covered parklet area, to enable traders to open and members of the public to feel safe when using.
- **Greater Village Regeneration Forum, South Belfast** created a sensory community garden with seating from a space that was overgrown and unused.
- **Hannahstown Community Association, West Belfast** benefited from improvements to an outdoor seating area.
- **Lagmore Youth Group, West Belfast** benefited from a marquee on unused land within a Church grounds that enabled them to operate and offer a safe space for young people.
- **Maritime Trust, City Centre**, provided a cinema screen on containers that would encourage visitor activity whilst walking along the Maritime Mile.
- **Mornington Community Centre** completed renovation works to the back of the building to able the community activity to take place.
- **North Belfast Working Men's Club, North Belfast** improved a run-down outdoor space with new surfacing improved disabled access and an outdoor pavilion.
- **Orpen Shopping Centre, South Belfast** benefited from surfacing improvements and signage that provided better access to the premises.
- **Patrick Sarsfields GAC, West Belfast** created a community garden and soft land scaping in an unused area on the site to encourage community activity and environmental activities.
- **Portview Trade Centre, East Belfast** provided outdoor seating and lighting at the new established Banana Block which enable them to open the new establishment.

- **Roar and Explore, Business Cluster Group, West Belfast** benefited from signage, lighting and very colourful seating that enable customers to utilise outside space or socialise with others.
- **Sailortown Regeneration Association, North Belfast**, created a covered parklet space for community events.
- **Saints Youth Club, West Belfast**, designed and created a tranquil and well used space that included, surfacing, seating and wildlife cameras
- **Sans Souci Residents Association, South Belfast**, created a route of greenery that included creative planting from Stranmillis to Malone Road.
- **St James Farm West Belfast** provided seating, benches, a chicken coup and polytunnel to increase activity in the community farm.
- **St Johns Pre School, West Belfast** provided a new outdoor space with play facilities in an under used area within the pre-school grounds.
- **The Linen Quarter BID, City Centre** benefited from a parklet space on Brunswick Street enabling Traders to operate and the public to socialise.
- **Townsend Enterprise Park, West Belfast**, improved the outside of their building with a covered canopy and public realm improvements.
- **Upper Springfield Development Trust, West Belfast improved** a derelict space providing planting and greenery.
- **Workwest, West Belfast** improved a very run-down outdoor space with surfacing, seating and planting.

4.3 GRANTS TO THE BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICTS FOR PHYSICAL INTERVENTIONS AND STREET SCAPE IMPROVEMENTS

The three Business Improvement Districts – Belfast One, Destination CQ BID and Linen Quarter BID - led stakeholder engagement with local businesses to identify and drive a variety of projects in the city centre. With combined funding of £564k the BIDs delivered parklets, and lighting projects and created new or improved outdoor social spaces in the city.

Cathedral Quarter BID

- Pedestrianisation of Union Street including the installation of parklets, awnings and feature lighting
- Artwork and a feature lighting scheme in Exchange Place to improve the vibrancy, connectivity and safety of the entry
- Installation of retractable canopy over pedestrianized area of Warehouse Lane to support outdoor dining and arts/cultural events, as well as enhanced lighting and greening.
- Installation of artwork and feature lighting at entrance of Warehouse Lane to improve the appeal of the area
- CQ Walking Poem: A placemaking/wayfinding scheme applying individual verses of a poem as artistic installations across various locations within the CQ area, encouraging tourists and visitors to complete the poem by exploring the area.
- Feature Lighting
- Belfast gift card promotion
- Seasonal activities and theming

Belfast One

- Lighting scheme in Church Lane to connect Anne Street and High Street
- Feature lighting
- Belfast gift card promotion
- Seasonal activities and theming

Linen Quarter BID

- Linen Quarter Hub which included parklet schemes in Linenhall Street and Bedford Street
- Feature lighting
- Belfast gift card promotion
- Seasonal activities and theming

4.4 COUNCIL LED PHYSICAL INTERVENTIONS AND STREET SCAPE IMPROVEMENTS

⁸**A Bolder Vision** is an ambitious blueprint to explore a shared approach to creating a more attractive, accessible, safe and vibrant city. Developed jointly by Belfast City Council, Department for Communities and Department for Infrastructure, the vision is built on the principles of:

- promoting wellbeing for all
- prioritising walking, cycling and public transport
- creating lively, safe and green streets
- removing barriers to movement between the city centre and surrounding communities

The Recovery Strategy for the city links closely with A Bolder Vision. Through the Recovery and Revitalisation Programme, the Council was able to take forward environmental improvement and revitalisation schemes in Castle Place, the Entries and Adelaide Street. These significant capital projects could be considered to be demonstration projects for **A Bolder Vision** as they illustrate what can be achieved when new and creative thinking is applied to familiar places.

4.5 COUNCIL LED INITIATIVES TO ENCOURAGE PEOPLE SAFELY BACK INTO THE CITY

Marketing and Messaging

Funding of £598k which was directly managed by the Council and included grants of £75k to the 3 BIDs) supported a range of interventions including safety messaging and animation programmes.

- Management of COVID-19 related public information perspective, in the first three months of lockdown.
- Management of COVID-19 related information from an internal communications perspective.
- Development of an internal and external marketing approach in the early days of reopening.

⁸ <https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/boldervision>

- Creation of #staysafebelfast, reopening videography and the stay safe confidence mark which gained great exposure on shop windows and from the media.
- Signage throughout the city centre to encourage social distancing.
- Media relations management of enforcement issues.
- Stakeholder engagement.
- Phased communication and marketing plans to support the reopening of the city.

The Council's communications team delivered several 'mini' campaigns from March 2020

- Stay Safe Belfast – a suite of activities, a reopening video for social, a 'confidence mark' window sticker for businesses to reassure customers they are following Covid 19 guidelines, signage creation across the city centre and suburbs, branding of sanitisers and PR.
- Publicising the helpline for business advice and employment programmes support (testimonial led) (PR and digital led)
- Recovery Revitalisation Grant (PR and digital led)
- Belfast Community Helpline and community hub - phone line and food service for those who were shielding (mail drop – to all homes and campaigns – campaign turned around in 1 week)
- Belfast Believes – A Christmas digital and PR campaign to instil hope and goodwill.

Enhanced Animation

Through £200k of funding for enhanced animation, the Council awarded grants to a number of organisations

- Each Business Improvement District was awarded £25k to enable theming of particular periods around Autumn, Halloween, and Christmas into the New Year.
- 4 large grants to Sailortown, Great Shankill Partnership, Pobal and Greater Village Regeneration Trust supported large neighbourhood Christmas events
- 14 micro grants were awarded for smaller events with funds ranging from £1500 to £3000 for Santa visits, and Christmas lighting-based events.
- Cahoots (NI) was commissioned to develop and deliver ***Christmas at the Grimm Hotel***. This was an immersive walk-through experience for the family or 'bubbles' of friends to enjoy as a Festive treat. The installation was conceived and constructed on a large scale and comprised a number of self-contained performance spaces linked by corridors

4.6 COUNCIL LED SUSTAINABLE AND ACTIVE TRAVEL MEASURES

£510k of funding was focused on measures to encourage and facilitate walking and cycling in the city. With particular emphasis on cycling, the programme delivered, a further £189k focused on connectivity in the city.

- A refresh of the Belfast Bikes (replacement of 400 bikes) and extension of the Belfast Bike network (450 new bikes).
- 10 Covered cycle stands to provide the infrastructure for bike storage across the city

- Delivery of two Active Travel Hubs at Queens University and Cathedral Gardens providing access to bicycles as well as a community resource to encourage the uptake of active travel and support long term modal change
- An e-cargo bike trial which is exploring the potential for e-bike based delivery services (both business to business and business to consumer) in the city centre

5 HOW WELL DID WE DO IT?

- 52.7% of funding was allocated through grants schemes for businesses (19.8% businesses and 13.9% BIDs, 7% business/community clusters)
- 33.8% of funding was allocated to other interventions
- 28% of funding was allocated to Physical Interventions & Streetscape Improvements/ Reimagined Public Spaces projects (7% funding was through business/community cluster grants)
- 88% of businesses reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the improvements to their businesses⁹.
- 67% of People¹⁰ agreed that they were satisfied with the interventions taken by the council to respond to safety issues raised by the Covid-19 pandemic
- 37% of people¹¹ agreed or strongly agreed the interventions taken by the council would encourage active travel

78% respondents to the Belfast Residents Survey indicated that the Council had responded very well or well to the challenges of providing service during the pandemic.

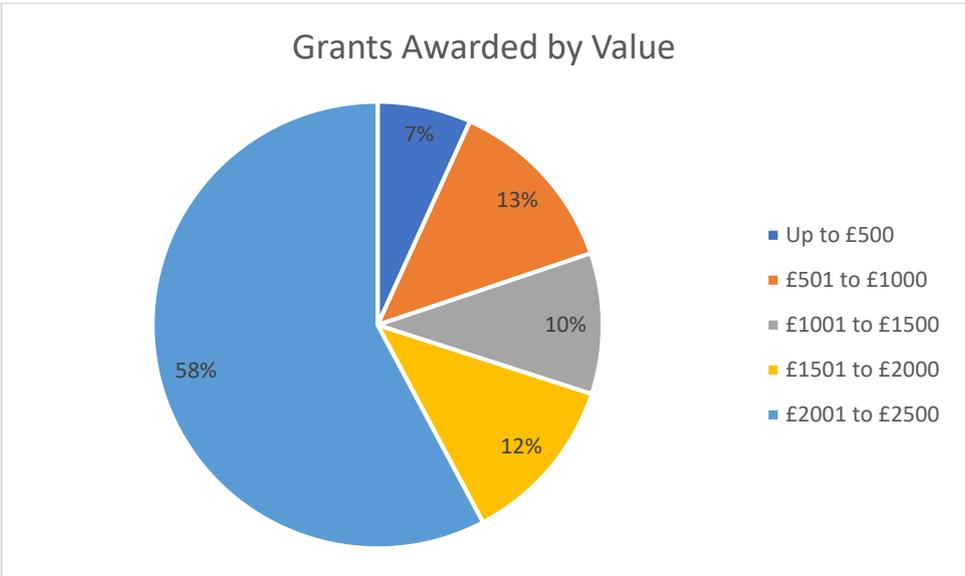
⁹ Survey of Businesses June 2022 the question asked was “to what extent are you satisfied that the funding enabled businesses to take measures to enhance public confidence as a result of safety issues raised by the pandemic?” (n=110)

¹⁰ Based on combined responses of business survey and public survey (n=212)

¹¹ Based on the combined response of business survey, public survey and BCCG monitoring returns (n=240)

5.1 GRANTS FOR BUSINESSES TO PURCHASE EQUIPMENT TO HELP THEM CONTINUE TO TRADE OR TO TRADE SAFELY

Of 900 applications received 490 were awarded funding. The minimum grant award was £500 up to a maximum of £2500, and the profile of the value of the grants awarded is illustrated by the graph below. More than half (58%) of grants awarded were for between £2000 and £2500, and 1 in 5 awards was for less than £1000



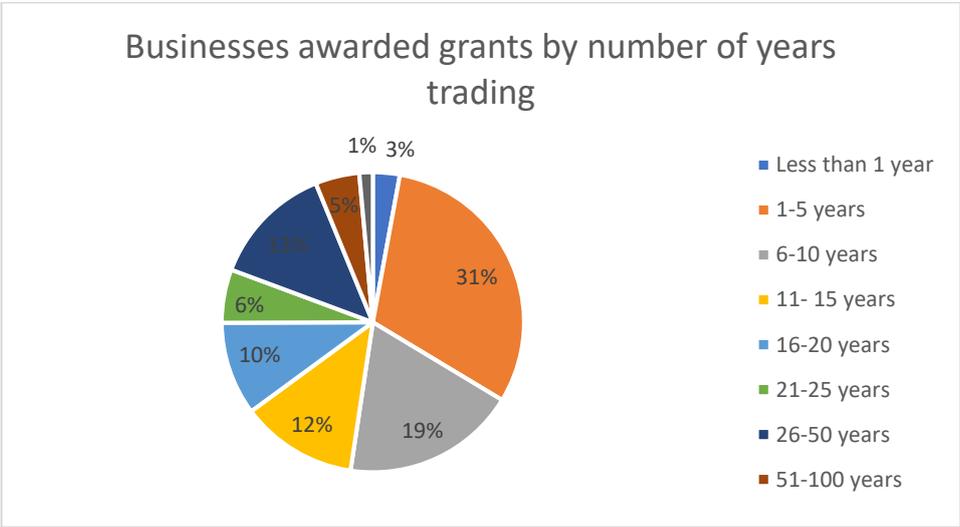
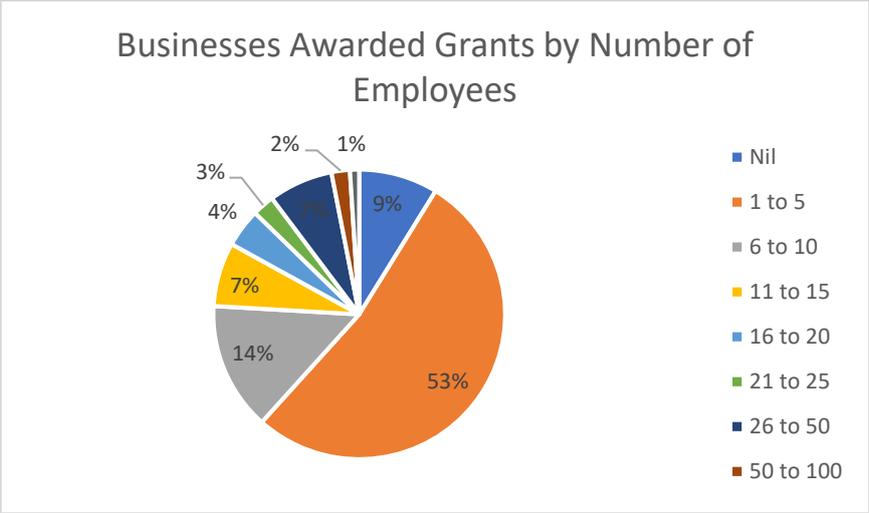
More than half (53%) of businesses which accessed the funding which were micro-enterprises with between 1 and 5 employees.¹² 34% of the businesses awarded grants had been trading for less than 5 years.

Funding was invested in items ranging from hand sanitising stations to perspex screens, and IT equipment to fogging machines, whatever equipment businesses found they needed in order to continue to trade through and beyond the pandemic. As businesses were already under pressure, many would not have had the resources to purchase these items without funding. And without these items they would not have been able to trade safely.

Feedback from businesses in response to the grant scheme was overwhelmingly positive. As part of the monitoring process, grant recipients were asked “What would have happened if the funding was not available?” to which 47% responded that they would not or could not have purchased the equipment and their business would have been affected, and more than 1 in 4 commented that they would have struggled.

110 businesses responded to an online survey in June 2022 of whom 92% had received grant aid through the programme. 88% respondents identified that they were satisfied that the improvements to their business and other interventions addressed safety concerns raised by the Covid 19 pandemic.

¹² 9% of businesses awarded funding stated they had 0 employees. It is not clear from the data whether this is due to sole traders (who technically do not have employees) availing of the scheme or if this value has been entered in error.



The comments below from businesses which received grant aid point to the importance of this investment of funding to ensure the survival of many businesses in the city.

I would not have been in the position to make this purchase. This would have resulted in the business suffering due to customers not wanting to visit and having them feel safe in the environment. Thankfully with the funding this has helped massively

If we had not received the funding we would not have been able to implement some, if not all of the systems we have now been able to put into place to protect both the customers and our staff. Ultimately we would put all of these things into place but would not have been able to do it as quickly or as professionally as we have been able to thanks to the funding.

We would have had to either delay opening or have a restricted service. We had been surviving on furlough and had practically zero income. We already had to have deep cleaning and enhanced cleaning regimes along with PPE and sanitiser costs and we would have been in a position where we were afraid to spend further money when we were facing a long wait for income to restart. Our business would have seriously struggled and been put under great pressure.

If this funding opportunity hadn't been available, our business would have struggled to reopen. The decision to reopen can only be made knowing we have the correct infrastructure in place to keep our staff and public safe. The cost of buying these items would have delayed us in opening, therefore not creating employment for our staff and free lance artists, and also delaying the opportunity for live entertainment happening for the wider public. Items would have been bought, but at a much later date when we would have felt financially secure to invest our money into the items.

Our business would have struggled - the free-standing hand sanitising stations are a very visible precaution that gives everyone confidence that they are entering a clean and hygienic environment. ... We are delighted with the support we have received and the positive outcome the grant has delivered for us at this difficult time.

We would have struggled to purchase the items all at one time therefore the introduction of the changes, measures and procedures put in place would have been delayed and some may not have been introduced at all.

We would not have been able to purchase the items that enable us to provide a safer environment for our activities. It would have limited the services that we would be able to offer. We would have struggled to do all the things we had planned for in terms of community events and outdoor activities, as well as promote online connection too.

Some of the purchases would have been made, but we would not have returned to the footfall levels as quickly and would have had weaknesses in track and trace procedures.

I feel that our customers may not have felt comfortable coming in without this support. If we didn't have this support I fear we may not have spent the money for these items at a time with low cash reserves and uncertainty. [sic]

My business would have struggled -- I would not have purchased the equipment with out this support -- my business would definitely have struggled as a result of not getting this funding

We would have struggled to provide such a high degree of confidence to staff members being on site, we had no budget and would have had difficulty in purchasing the equipment outside of the help.

We would not have made the purchase. We are only making enough to keep the shop afloat.

By accessing this funding it has greatly helped us prepare our premises and business to deal with the new Covid restrictions and compliance that is now needed to deal with members of the public on a face to face basis, while still socially distancing

However, it should be noted that there is some less positive feedback:

As we have more than 3 shops in the Belfast area not all benefited from the funding. A joint council approach would have made it easier for a business with shops located across NI. Each council had different terms and conditions.

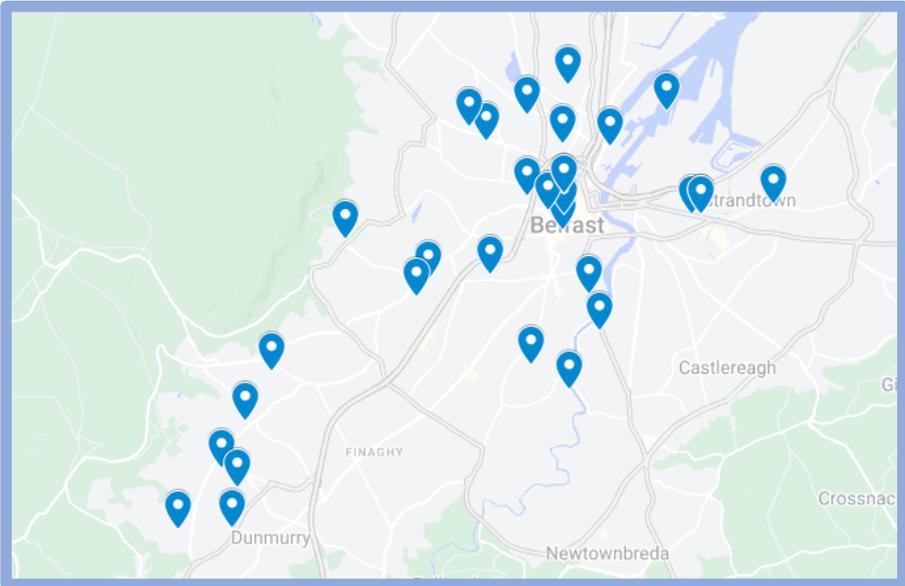
The funding while it helped was not substantial enough to have impact and without staff having to return to their place of work the city have serious challenges

5.2 GRANTS FOR BUSINESS AND COMMUNITY CLUSTERS FOR PHYSICAL INTERVENTIONS AND STREETScape IMPROVEMENTS

The performance of our shops and café has far exceeded expectation following lockdown and we have seen improvements that will help both sides of the businesses to recover. While we knew this grant would increase footfall and spending in store our expectations were far exceeded in regards the success of this increase.

The Council recognised that the city’s arterial routes, urban villages and local communities and the city centre provided an opportunity to deliver environmental improvement schemes that would support business operation and recovery and enable local communities to deliver capital projects that would encourage people to live, work, visit and invest in the local areas.

33 BIDs and Business Cluster Partnerships across the city were awarded funding through the Business and Community Cluster Grant Scheme.



22 of 26 respondents¹³ agreed or strongly agreed that footfall in their area has increased as a result of this project

23 of 25 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that as a result of the project the appearance their area had improved

In end of project monitoring forms, grantees were asked about the success and/or impact of their project:

The Project has been very successful in permitting unused land to now be fully functional and used on a daily basis for exercise and social interaction.

¹³Data based on review of BCCG monitoring data

The creation of an outdoor dining area enabled the club to continue trading through periods when Covid-19 restricted the use of indoor facilities. This was vital in helping the club finances and providing a normal service to our members and the wider community

The purchase of these items has been helping to revitalise our shops and cafe fronts and has encouraged customers to visit once restrictions were gradually lifted. Footfall has increased by at least 70%-80% of levels recorded prior to Covid-19 pandemic. Likewise, sales have returned to 70-80% of sales prior to Covid 19 pandemic. In some instances, in our shops these levels have exceeded and the results of this grant has exceeded expectations.

This programme has brought much needed clearing and tidying up of a few sites within the local community which are used frequently and were an eyesore for quite some time.

The site has been transformed from a derelict, unsafe, unused space into a community parklet which is safe, usable and aesthetically attractive.

Measurable impact

This has allowed us to host a number of events which would not of been possible prior to the works being completed.

This is the first time Ballyhackamore's heritage has ever been celebrated across its streetscape. For example, before this project very few people were aware of Ballyhackamore's rich horticultural heritage.

The project has enabled Lagmore to have its first youth facility built and ran for the benefit of the huge youth population that the area has. The project will see the new facilities open and available to the community 7 days a week.

The physical and environmental improvements have created a new welcoming environment for customers and visitors of the centre. The new seating areas encourage people to sit and relax; and the new stands encourage them to cycle to the centre, which both have a direct impact on improved mental health and well-being.

Lower Malone is a much greener area with a variety of unusual trees and shrubs planted along the road, wildflower seeds planted around trees brought out 20 volunteers to clear and sow. People stop and talk and take walks along the road.

Case Study: Ballynafeigh Parklet

Ballynafeigh Community Development Association is based on the Ormeau Road in South Belfast. Its imposing building opposite Ormeau Park has been at the heart of the community for decades, but when the pandemic struck it, like other community buildings across the city, was forced to close.

As BCDA prepares to re-open its premises to the public, the bespoke parklet in front of the building is a way to extend the community connections which happen inside the building to the outside. It provides not just a place to sit, but also meeting point, a starting point for a walk or a cycle, or a resting place to enjoy a takeaway coffee. Enjoyed by old and young alike it transforms what was just a wide pavement into a community space in the truest sense of the term.

5.3 GRANTS TO THE BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICTS FOR PHYSICAL INTERVENTIONS AND STREET SCAPE IMPROVEMENTS

The three Business Improvement Districts in the city centre – Belfast One, Cathedral Quarter and Linen Quarter – worked in collaboration with the Council and central government departments to deliver a number of projects in the city centre including:

- Connectivity scheme in Church Lane
- Exchange Place revitalisation
- Warehouse Entry revitalisation
- Union Street Pedestrianisation
- Linen Hall Street and Bedford Street Parklets
- Linen Quarter boardwalk
- Brunswick Street Social Space
- Feature lighting in each of the three BID areas

The grant aid provided through the Covid-19 Recovery and Revitalisation Programme enabled the BIDs to engage with their membership, to develop and facilitate stakeholder forums which would shape delivery of the various projects and to oversee implementation of the projects.

Creating a more European style city centre, with alfresco dining, better cycle lanes and more pedestrian access will attract more visitors. So basically, continue to support local businesses in this way in the city. There's great opportunity here to create a thriving, buzzing Belfast.

(comment from member of the public)

Case Study: Brunswick Street Social Space

The new social space (Flaxx) in Brunswick Street, was delivered through funding to the Linen Quarter Business Improvement District. It has transformed a neglected and misused square into a contemporary space where people can meet, partake of some refreshments, and enjoy the entertainment on offer.

This innovative development which includes the pedestrianisation of Brunswick street, the installation of outdoor seating, lighting and a small stage will provide a relaxing environment with on-site hospitality until 11.00pm seven days a week. Located in the heart of a busy commercial district it will give office workers and visitors to the city a vibrant and comfortable space to rest a while.

It is anticipated that spaces like this will bring vibrancy to parts of the city centre where people don't usually spend much time and act as a catalyst for more regeneration in the surrounding areas.

5.4 COUNCIL LED PHYSICAL INTERVENTIONS AND STREET SCAPE IMPROVEMENTS

In response to Covid-19 guidance and the requirement to provide more pavement space to facilitate social distancing, Belfast City Council brought forward a number of Placemaking

schemes to enhance areas across the city which included extending the pavement area along Adelaide Street, the development of the Castle Street hub and the Belfast Entries project.

The interventions which reimaged public spaces enabled Council, stakeholder groups and communities to change how people use the city centre and local neighbourhoods. These projects serve to demonstrate how things can be done differently. As well as addressing immediate concerns resulting from the pandemic, they are also, to an extent, pilots for the delivery of the ambitions of A Bolder Vision.

The works are creating safer, greener, more attractive and more people-friendly streets in the city centre that promote active travel and give pedestrians more pavement space for socially distanced walking, sitting and outdoor dining.

At the time of the mid-term evaluation these works are not yet complete and therefore their effectiveness and impact are difficult to assess at this time. Further examination at the final report stage will provide more information.

Reception of these projects by businesses and by the general public is currently mixed, but as time passes and awareness increases this may change.

I believe the ideas were good but need to go further and, in some cases, executed poorly (member of the public)

5.5 COUNCIL LED INITIATIVES TO ENCOURAGE PEOPLE SAFELY BACK INTO THE CITY

The marketing approach focused on highlighting enabling access and enhancing connectivity, supporting businesses, creating confidence and trust, and creating a safe, attractive and clean environment.

This included the delivery of successful (in terms of reach and engagement) marketing campaigns - Stay up to date with council services - Stay safe Belfast - Bin collections - Cemetery information - Business advice - Recycling information - Helpline for businesses - COVID-19 Belfast Community Helpline and community hub (mail drop - to all homes and various digital campaigns) – Reopening of assets - Employment programmes support (testimonial led) - Keeping the city pretty - COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Grant - Incentives for social enterprises and co-operatives.

Following the campaigns:

- 178 businesses engaged in business support programmes
- 576 businesses engaged in webinars
- 107,407 food parcel deliveries made to vulnerable Belfast residents
- Web searches in July 20 increased by 53% vs July 2019 - visitors finding content relevant - bounce rates and % exits dropped
- www.belfastcity.gov.uk/covid19 page attracted 118,750 visitors
- PR campaign on city recovery generated over 1000 pieces of coverage across online, print and broadcast
- Majority of businesses used the stay safe Belfast window sticker.

The enhanced animation programme facilitated:

14 community Christmas events

128 performances of Christmas at the Grimm Hotel which were attended by 2834 people. In addition the project supported 17 artists and guides, and 8 volunteers.

5.6 COUNCIL LED SUSTAINABLE AND ACTIVE TRAVEL MEASURES

It is considered that there are 3 pillars which underpin the likelihood of increasing active travel and in particular cycling – infrastructure, access to bikes and programming and information. In the main the interventions supported through the Recovery Revitalisation Programme have focused on the second and third of these.

The hubs increase the profile of sustainable transport in their areas, providing a local focus for walking and cycling promotion. New cycle hubs at Queens and Ulster University campuses provide university staff and students, as well as the wider community with a drop in advice and information service, access to bikes through retail and leasing schemes as well as repair services.

The cycle hub at Queens was delivered in partnership with the University and has received an overwhelmingly positive response from both staff and students.

The hub at Cathedral Gardens received additional funding through the Public Health Agency and Ulster University will provide local families with access to affordable bikes alongside programming, training and events to build confidence and overcome barriers preventing people from walking and cycling. In addition, a refresh of the Belfast Bikes and the planned addition of e-bikes provides the infrastructure across the city centre to encourage cycling around the city.

Comments from the public about the active travel measures include:

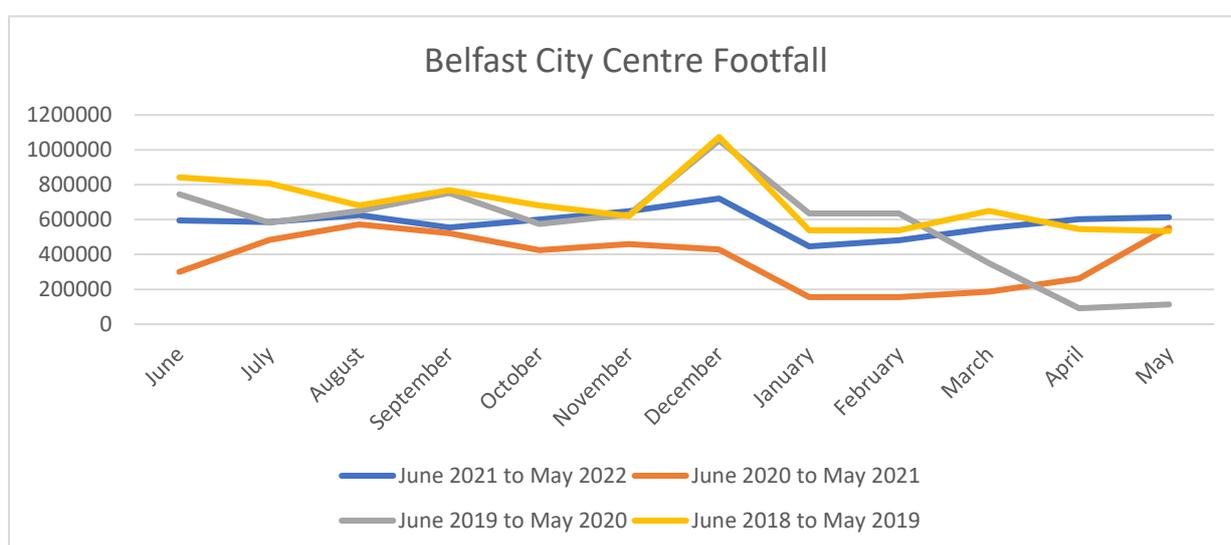
How is success being evaluated? A lot of works seems so random...(Adelaide St structures) . Why make CC internally accessible without having safe, segregated network of cycle lanes so residents can commute to centre. That would have been public money better spent.

I see improvements in the city centre - very welcome. Thank you. The cycling and street improvements are not as visible in West Belfast. Cycling round the 'park centre roundabout' would not encourage me to cycle into the city centre. I would be terrified!

I think the funding in community and social spaces and environmental things such as bike lanes is a fantastic thing and really needed in Belfast. There is much more work to be done but we are heading in the right direction. More trees, bike lanes and pedestrian areas are needed.

6 IS ANYBODY BETTER OFF?

- 48% of businesses (52 of 110 respondents¹⁴) agreed that the improvements to their businesses and other council interventions would encourage people to live, work, visit and invest in the area
- 60% of people¹⁵ agreed that the council's interventions would encourage people to live, work, visit and invest in the area
- 70% of businesses (75 of 107 respondents¹⁶) reported turnover returning to at least 70% of pre-Covid 19 levels following council interventions in the area
- 57% of businesses (55 of 96 respondents) reported footfall levels had returned to at least 70% of pre-Covid 19 levels following council interventions in the area
- 37% respondents¹⁷ agreed or strongly agreed that the measures taken would encourage people to choose to travel on foot or by cycle rather than by car for short journeys



	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May
2021/2022 as % of 2018/2019	70%	73%	92%	72%	88%	104%	67%	83%	89%	85%	111%	115%
2021/2022 as % of 2019/2020	80%	101%	96%	74%	104%	103%	68%	70%	76%	158%	661%	545%

Between 2019 and 2021 there was a 10% increase – from 9% to 19% - in people who use walking as their most frequent method of travel for leisure activities. There was also a 1% increase in people who use cycling.¹⁸

When asked about the likelihood of using different modes of travel into the city centre, 21% said they were more likely to walk and 6% that they were more likely to cycle.¹⁹

¹⁴ Online feedback survey for businesses June 2022 (n=110)

¹⁵ Combined responses from business and public surveys and BCCG monitoring (n=241)

¹⁶ Online feedback survey for businesses June 2022 (n=110)

¹⁷ Combined responses from business and public surveys and BCCG monitoring (n=240)

¹⁸ Belfast Residents Survey 2021

¹⁹ Belfast Residents Survey 2021

6.1 GRANTS FOR BUSINESSES TO PURCHASE EQUIPMENT TO HELP THEM CONTINUE TO TRADE OR TO TRADE SAFELY

I would have lost my business. I have been able to find other freelance work to keep my retail business. Thank you for your help!

The focus of expenditure of the grant aid provided to businesses fell into three broad categories:

- Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) and other measures to enable safe operation. This includes hand sanitiser stations, Perspex screens etc
- Technology to enable businesses to pivot or to facilitate working from home. This included laptops and tablets as well as software and other equipment
- Awnings and outdoor seating to facilitate an increase capacity or to safely (and more comfortably) manage social distancing and queuing

Overall, the feedback from funded businesses indicates that the grant aid was instrumental in their ability to operate safely and with confidence, their ability to sustain employment and in some cases the survival of the business.

The business would have struggled possibly resulting in more of a reduction of employed part time staff (when furlough not applicable). Without these fixtures and covid signs screens we would have made a significantly larger loss than at present.

I would not have made the purchases and I probably would of [sic] closed

We would have had to reduce the services we were able to offer during the lockdown and would not have reasonably been able to facilitate some staff working from home.

My business had to close all doors, this allowed me to reopen and get customers back with proper social distance and equipment. We have now reopened, if we had to close for any longer we would have had to close our doors for good.

As part of the monitoring for these grants, businesses were asked, how has accessing this funding supported their business?

It has helped/will help footfall into my shop as it allows protection from the rain for people window shopping. It also encourages people to wait for entry when we are at capacity due to social distancing rather than leave.

Accessing this funding has allowed us to purchase a Vox Tour Guide Audio System. The purchase of the system allows us to provide a world class experience for our guests and significantly increase the capacity of our walking tours while adhering to social distancing regulations and health and safety best practice. Overall, this will hasten our return to pre-Covid levels of guests on our tours and allow us to provide group tours again, subject to the recovery of the overall tourist industry of course.

The funding has enabled the company to increase employee and consumer confidence by providing a safer environment in which to work/shop and hopefully therefore maintaining footfall and revenue during this pandemic.

We have found that by accessing this grant we have been able to implement changes and new procedures which will help make our store both safer and more inviting to potential customers in light of the Covid 19 pandemic.

This funding has enabled us to purchase vital outdoor furniture and a new awning to make our outdoor seating area more appealing to customers. We have been unable to have customers sit inside our coffee shop for most of the past year due to Covid 19 and we hope that when we are able to re-open customers will have confidence to visit our newly refurbished outdoor area where the risk of the spread of infection is greatly reduced.

The grant has helped to extend our cafe area outside. Due to covid social distancing, we have reduced our seating capacity by 50% indoors to maintain the 2-meter rule. This money has enabled us to put more tables and chairs outside to help increase some lost revenue and also facilitate the service of customers who are more comfortable sitting outdoors during the pandemic.

It should also be noted that the impact of this funding was not just for the businesses themselves but also the individuals who were able to benefit from the continued service

The funding enabled our organisation to get much needed support out to vulnerable families in North Belfast

6.2 GRANTS FOR BUSINESS AND COMMUNITY CLUSTERS FOR PHYSICAL INTERVENTIONS AND STREETScape IMPROVEMENTS

With funding made available through the business and cluster grant we are able to make our farm accessible and safe for all visitors far and wide in a period in our lives when peoples mental health and physical well-being was being stretched to their limits

When considering the question “is anybody better off?” in regards, to the local community projects, it is important to highlight the social value of the projects supported. Aswell as aesthetic improvements, projects contributed to improved health and well-being, addressed social isolation and encouraged local volunteering and participation.

Projects described their impact as:

Everyone talking about the new Saints - Once people start to use it more often and the day-to-day users benefit from using it we will also be in a better position to give a more rounded feedback

Our café has been a real community hub and has tackled social isolation by providing a safe space for individuals in our community to meet safely and without fear of Covid-19 transmission.

This project has given the community something to look forward to and they have been excited to see the finished areas. The local churches were extremely humbled and happy with the work they received and sent cards and letters of thanks. This project has also enabled the local Men's Shed to get involved and they have really enjoyed being a part of this. In addition, we also had community service placements involved in some community work which was also a chance for them to put back something positive into their own community.

The impact of such a facility as improved by this grant cannot be underestimated. The immediate community knows something about the Club's history which has been part of Danube Street since 1893. Encouraged by this support we have developed a new website, published a history and revamped the Great Hall which is now in use for weddings, anniversaries, baptism celebrations and Saturday events and music.

I think the easiest measurement from the community is that park users have increased, outdoor dining as a result of these new benches, picnic tables has also increased. People feel comfortable using the outdoor space as a shared space also.

And specifically, in regard to community participation:

Community participation has been central to our successful project. Throughout the planning stages our community stakeholders were fully involved in the planning and design of all aspects of the project. This has evoked a sense of ownership and our stakeholders have maximised all the potential opportunities for community participation

This project has allowed different groups to come together to get involved in a common aim to improve and make better their community. It allowed people who perhaps wouldn't get the opportunity to come together, to do so and build relationships and community relations.

70 different individual volunteers have been involved including overseas students and 2 recent overseas arrivals, foreign nationals, Simon foyer for 18-22 year olds (both staff and clients), Nexus staff, Spar staff, Harrison's hotel - all have participated in preparing, planning, maintaining. Many other local residents and organisation have joined in litter picks, painting old walls and watering plants.

Case Study: Sans Souci Residents Association

The residents of Sans Souci in South Belfast felt that the Malone Road had lost its appeal as place to walk. Dominated by concrete and commercial premises the local residents felt the area lacked colour and greenery, and from this the Malone Gateway Project was born.

Mobilising volunteers who included residents, university students and the staff of local businesses, the Malone Gateway is a community planting project stretching from Methodist College to the Queens Elms. Supported by local businesses, and implemented by local people, trees, shrubs and plants have been placed at a number of locations along the road.

Not only has the project brought a splash of colour, and improvements in the environment in the area, it has also improved relationships between the businesses in the area and local residents. There is now a shared sense of owning and caring for the local environment to make it a pleasant space for everyone.

6.3 PHYSICAL INTERVENTIONS AND STREET SCAPE IMPROVEMENTS (COUNCIL LED AND BID LED)

The environmental improvements and streetscape improvements implemented in Belfast through this programme contribute to increased footfall and vibrancy. This in turn contributes to the success of local businesses. However, there are additional benefits of investments such as those which have been seen through this programme. The parklets create safe spaces for social connections, the lighting schemes deter those with negative intentions and therefore increase the senses of safety, pedestrianisation of areas of the city and increased cycling add to feeling of welcome in the city.

6.4 COUNCIL LED INITIATIVES TO ENCOURAGE PEOPLE SAFELY BACK INTO THE CITY

It is of note that 46% respondent businesses reported a return to the levels of turnover seen for same period in 2019. In addition, there are businesses which report an increase in footfall and/or turnover

Our footfall is consistently exceeding 2019 levels, however your multiple-choice answers do not give this option. (we are currently seeing an average of approx. 133% of 2019 numbers).

Our turnover is much greater in 2022 than it was in 2019 but there is no option to record this in the survey. The main reason for this is a major redevelopment of the restaurant during lock down.

Q8 and Q10 didn't provide an option to state turnover has increased which has for our business. Overall, we are very pleased with the grant which made a contribution to recent success. Thank you.

6.5 COUNCIL LED SUSTAINABLE AND ACTIVE TRAVEL MEASURES

Awareness of the importance of well-being is probably one of the more far-reaching outcomes of the Covid 19 Pandemic. Throughout lockdown people were encouraged to regularly get outdoors and to walk, run and cycle. For many, having formed these habits, they are keen that they continue. Investing in pedestrian and cycling infrastructure then, has been an important part of the Covid Recovery Strategy.

7 LEARNING FROM THE PROGRAMME

7.1 PARTNERSHIP WORKING

It is often the case that the success of a project or programme depends on the quality of relationships underpinning its delivery. Throughout the programme, there are elements of strong partnership working and of relationships that were developed because of the programme but will be sustained beyond its current iteration. By way of example, representatives of the BIDs identified how they valued the partnership approach taken by the Council and departments throughout the programme; business clusters which applied for funding for specific projects are continuing to work together and planning future initiatives.

7.2 THE VALUE OF WORKING WITH AND THROUGH LOCAL ORGANISATIONS

A particular strength of this programme has been in the implementation of local projects through local organisations. Local businesses and community organisations know their neighbourhoods and areas best and are best placed to identify and address local need. This understanding of the area – which applies equally to the city centre BIDs as to the organisations outside of the city centre – was a way to ensure that there was buy in and ownership of the projects delivered. This buy in should not be underestimated in the context of investment of public funding which is often met with more resistance and scepticism. By contrast, what Belfast City Council has achieved through this programme is a cohort of organisations across the city who both understand and have benefited from the revitalisation investment.

7.3 THE VALUE OF FLEXIBILITY

Grant recipients, and in particular the business and community cluster grants, valued the flexibility shown by the Council in the implementation phase of the programme. Rapidly increasing costs and supply chain delays were just two of the issues which many projects encountered between application stage and implementation. Grantees welcomed the support from the Council and the ability to amend projects where necessary but still deliver the intended outcomes.

7.4 TIMING

There were a number of issues around timing of the programme. The lead time between application and approval/payment was a factor in several of the grants awarded not being taken up. The businesses in question had had to act quickly and make purchases, and as the funding could not be claimed retrospectively, they did not avail of the grant. The lead time between approval and release of initial funds for some projects led to challenges in terms of being able to access materials/items from suppliers.

7.5 PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR INVESTMENT IN TANDEM

In different elements of the programme delivery there is evidence of investment by the Council being a catalyst for other public and private sector investment. This shared commitment to regeneration is a valuable aspect of this programme and one which the Council, and the Departments, should continue to foster and support.

7.6 VALUE OF ENGAGING A DESIGNER EARLY IN THE PROJECT

The inclusion of support from a professional design team was of real benefit to the cluster grant projects. This professional expertise encouraged projects to consider elements they may not have identified themselves and to maximise the use of space, natural light and landscaping in their designs. The designers brought a knowledge and expertise which added value to the projects.

The changes surpassed what we initially thought that we could do. This was due to the input from Chris Upson, whose architectural advice we followed.

Access to the OGU design team was extremely beneficial and their idea of a landscaped mound will enhance the RiverBox experience. We were able to use their concept drawings to engage with the landowner, who are now developing the mound at their own cost.

We benefitted from the services of an architect paid for by BCC. With his expertise we were able to make the very most of the little outside space we had at the nursery. We now have an enclosed playground for the children.

7.7 BENEFITS WHICH GO BEYOND THE PHYSICAL IMPROVEMENTS

The projects supported through this programme, and in particular the business/community cluster projects, had benefits and impacts which go beyond the improvement of a physical space. For many of the projects, volunteer hours added value to the project by undertaking some of the physical labour, for others, the project has created spaces such as community gardens or planted areas which local people now volunteer to maintain. Many projects created outdoor community spaces providing people with somewhere they can confidently and safely meet up with others. In addition to the benefits of being outdoors, emotional health and well-being is known to be improved by connecting with others and by volunteering, elements which underpinned many of the projects supported.

8 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At this interim stage, the impacts of most the projects supported through the Covid 19 Recovery Revitalisation fund have yet to be fully realised. Many of the projects have only been in situ for a few weeks and awareness is slowly growing and a lot of the projects have landed within a very complex social and economic environment defined by wider global issues as well as some very specific local issues, however the majority of feedback reports on the significant positive impact that the programme has had in terms of allowing businesses to reopen safely and to adapt to the changing environment, allowing community groups to invest in wide range of outdoor facilities promoting better use of the outdoors, promoting sustainable and active travel and improving mental health provision. While the statutory and community partners are actively addressing the immediate socialite and cleansing issues of the city the projects delivered within this programme will have a much greater benefit in terms of enabling the city to recover and to deliver on the longer-term ambitions of the city. The final evaluation report will be better placed to define the impact of the capital investments and to identify the difference made in both the city centre and in local communities.

It is clear however that the investment of funding made through the Council is valued both by businesses and by local communities. Organisations which were supported across the different strands of funding reported their gratitude for the opportunity it gave them to survive during the pandemic and to thrive as the city emerged from the crisis. Already, the benefits, including increased volunteering and health and well-being benefits far outweigh simply the physical interventions. In six months' time when the final evaluation report is completed it is anticipated that there will be clear evidence of the positive impact of the programme.

The wider programme attracted an additional £2.3m of investment from the public and private sectors. Significant benefit was unlocked through partnership working, building capacity and a sense of ownership in local communities and businesses enabling a quick roll out of high impact projects. further work is required to introduce further flexibility into the statutory system to enable the delivery of the transformation change that so many of our communities and businesses want to see coming forward at pace.