



<b>Subject:</b>	Supporting Vibrant Business Destinations - update
<b>Date:</b>	6 December 2023
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	John Greer, Director of Economic Development
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Cathy Keenan, Enterprise and Business Growth Manager

**Restricted Reports**

Is this report restricted? Yes  No

Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.

Insert number

1. Information relating to any individual
2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual
3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)
4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter
5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained
6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction
7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime

**If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?**

After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sometime in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Call-in**

Is the decision eligible for Call-in? Yes  No

<b>1.0</b>	<b>Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues</b>
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1.1	<p>The purpose of this report is to provide the Committee with an update on the work to support local commercial districts through the Supporting Vibrant Business Destinations programme. This programme aims to work with business and trader associations to develop and deliver interventions that can drive footfall and create vibrancy in those areas.</p>
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>
2.1	<p>The Committee is asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Note the update and work undertaken to support the delivery of area-based Vibrant Business Destinations.</li> </ul>
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main Report</b>
3.1	<p>At its meeting on 9 November 2022, members agreed a new investment approach to support local business associations to develop and deliver interventions to drive footfall and create vibrancy in those areas.</p>
3.2	<p>The overarching purpose of the pilot initiative was to strengthen the competitiveness of our local business destinations, focusing on actions which aim to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support the development of shared and safely accessible commercial areas</li> <li>• Support the diversification of business destinations outside of the city centre</li> <li>• Bring together key stakeholders to benefit business destinations outside of the city centre</li> <li>• Improve the quality of urban design, distinctiveness, and townscape quality.</li> </ul>
3.3	<p>Members are reminded that the pilot was developed in response to feedback from a range of businesses and traders associations across the city regarding drop off in footfall and a challenging operating environment post-Covid. Through engagement with the Department for Communities (DfC), an opportunity was identified to secure resources through the DfC Revitalisation programme. The concept for the “Vibrant Business Destinations” (VBD) intervention was identified as a pilot programme in keeping with work undertaken by the Ministerial Advisory Group (MAG) to develop a “Living High Street Toolkit”. Belfast City Council successfully secured funding of £475,000 from the Department for Communities (DfC). The council also provided match funding to enable the delivery of advice and support to extend the scope of the scheme. VBD was intended to complement a wider programme of support and activity that had been taking place within the city centre, including the Vacant to Vibrant Support Programme and previous business support interventions through the Covid Revitalisation Programme.</p>

3.4	<p>The pilot initiative aimed to support up to 10 business associations to a maximum of £40,000 each for expenditure on a range of eligible activities. The objectives were to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase engagement and partnership working between statutory partners and local business associations</li> <li>• Support the development of area-based actions plans which address specific local concerns and deliver specific, measurable benefits over the short/medium and long term</li> <li>• Increase footfall and sales as a direct result of marketing and promotional activity; generate new customers or sustaining customer loyalty through increasing sales revenue, increasing the number of new customers or developing repeat business</li> <li>• Enhance the profile of the area with a view to stimulating economic activity</li> <li>• Support the growth and development of businesses engaged in associated activity</li> <li>• Support the sustainability of businesses and local business associations.</li> </ul>
3.5	<p>The initiative operated via a two-stage application process. Basic eligibility criteria included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Groups or established associations must be led by the business community (including social enterprises and cooperatives) to address locally based issues and be committed to becoming a constituted association</li> <li>• Groups or established associations must be made up of retail/hospitality/consumer facing businesses located on road frontage/local high streets</li> <li>• The priority focus is on arterial routes and routes with a minimum number of 15 confirmed businesses located on road frontage</li> <li>• Group membership should be representative of the businesses in the eligible area – both by volume and by business type</li> <li>• Business membership must represent predominantly owner-occupiers and independent traders, however, it can involve representation from community organisations.</li> </ul>
3.6	<p>There were 48 initial Expression of Interest (Eoi) requests covering the following areas: East Belfast: Eastside Partnership, Ballyhackamore, Cregagh and Woodstock Roads, Newtownards Road, Tullycarnett, The Mount, Albert Bridge, Castlereagh Place, Belmont Road, Kings Square and Gilnahirk, Castlereagh Road, Hollywood Arches. South Belfast: Forward South Partnership Board, Lower Ormeau Road, Crescent Arts, Malone Road. West Belfast: West Belfast Partnership Board, Falls, Springbank Industrial Estate, Blackstaff Mill, Andersonstown Road. North Belfast: Cliftonville Circus, Lower Antrim Road, Cavehill Road, Argyle Business Park. Other: City Centre Management, Dundonald.</p>

3.7	<p>Many of the original requests failed to meet the funding criteria or the initial enthusiasm of groups or individuals diminished over time, while others couldn't garner enough local business support to formally apply. From the original 48 requests, ten groups are now currently being supported.</p>
3.8	<p>Following successful completion of an Eol at stage 1, groups were supported to become formally constituted, and to develop area-based action plans. These plans provide an analysis of the locality, the physical environment, existing provision and key challenges and opportunities. They identify priority issues to be addressed to improve the business environment through engagement with existing businesses and stakeholders in the area. In addition, a Design Team was appointed to assist trader groups in the delivery of any capital-based activities. The action plans and designs formed the basis for moving to a stage 2 application. A successful Stage 2 application enabled the group to draw down funding to support their action plan delivery. An overview of support is included in Appendix 1.</p>
3.9	<p>The following groups are currently delivering agreed project activity, having had their action plan approved by an Assessment Panel whose members included Department for Communities (DfC), Department for Infrastructure (DfI) and council officers:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ballyhackamore Business Association</li> <li>2. Cliftonville/Oldpark Business Association</li> <li>3. Kings Square and Cherryvalley Traders</li> <li>4. Cregagh Woodstock Traders</li> <li>5. Cavehill Business Association</li> <li>6. Belmont Road Traders Association</li> <li>7. Lower Ormeau Traders Association</li> </ol>
3.10	<p>Each of these groups have received £32,000 (80%) of their £40,000. The remaining £8,000 (20%) balance is released upon successful delivery and monitoring of their activities.</p>
3.11	<p>In addition to the work of these seven groups, three other groups are actively engaging with the council. They include Holywood Arches, Twin Spires and Lisburn Road Traders. They are working through issues including resolving land ownership, finalising locations for planters and displays and addressing potential traffic impact of proposed measures. In some instances, projects have not progressed as the groups have not been able to take ownership of the plan in a way that will make the investment sustainable or secure local ownership. Council officers continue to liaise with these groups to complete their applications and work towards agreed action plans.</p>

3.12	<p>To date there have been a number of successful activities including development of new markets, installation of planters and plant tubs and additional landscaping work and development of new mural artworks. In addition, areas have begun to develop their marketing, branding and advertising in line with the programme outcomes. As predicted, there is a significant ramp-up in activity in the run-up to Christmas in order to derive maximum return on investment.</p>
3.13	<p>Early evidence from the funded interventions has shown an increase in retail spend, increase in footfall, and an uplift in positive perceptions of neighbourhoods. Trader groups have also developed their networks through additional internal cooperation and exchange of ideas and resources.</p>
3.14	<p>The Enterprise and Business Growth Team continues to coordinate this programme and engage with internal officers and departments to identify wider opportunities and synergies with similar projects across the council. Council officers will continue to engage with DfC to identify any potential future funding opportunities following the conclusion of the pilot.</p>
3.15	<p><b><u>Financial &amp; Resource Implications</u></b></p> <p>The activities outlined within this report are being resourced through the existing Enterprise and Business Growth budget for 2023/24 and funding secured through DfC.</p>
3.16	<p><b><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></b></p> <p>The unit undertook a process of equality screening, to ensure consideration was given to equality and good relation impacts throughout the delivery of this project. All districts are within the Belfast City Council urban area.</p>
4.0	<p><b>Appendices - Documents Attached</b></p>
	<p><b>Appendix 1:</b> Vibrant Business Destinations – eligible areas for support – stage 2 of the programme</p>