



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Development Committee
Subject:	Independent Retail
Date:	11 June 2008
Reporting Officer:	Marie-Thérèse McGivern, Director of Development, ext 3470
Contact Officer:	Shirley McCay, Head of Economic Initiatives, ext 3459 Pièr Morrow, Acting Tourism Development Manager, ext 3585

Relevant Background Information

The Development Committee drives the Evening Economy campaign and works extensively to develop an evening product to drive footfall and spend in the city. The Evening Economy campaign has successfully developed the traditional night time offer and a major development has included enhancing the retail experience by encouraging extended opening hours. The Evening Economy product offer has animated the city via a high profile multi-award winning marketing campaign to deliver tangible services for our citizens and visitors.

Independent retail has been identified as an important sector in Belfast's economy, it is a major employer, and adds to the city competitiveness as a destination to visit, live, study and invest. Retail is integral to the city break experience and what the visitor expects. While top brands and large national/international retail chains are important for the retail mix, a vibrant independent sector must be supported and encouraged. A strong independent sector also generates employment and revenue which goes directly back into the Northern Ireland economy. The clone city concept has been a topic of much research and debate in recent years and it has been universally acknowledged that a thriving independent sector ensures that a city has a competitive edge and has a unique selling proposition.

Examples of previous and current support which BCC has delivered to strengthen the independent retail sector include:

- The Retail Therapy Programme – developed, managed and delivered by Council – offering 60 independent retailers an opportunity to improve their businesses
- Launch and publication of 2 editions of the Belfast Loves Shopping Guide – promoting independent/luxury retail in the city centre which achieved excellent PR coverage
- Engagement with DSD and DRD at ministerial level to implement the right legislative framework to encourage, manage and regulate a vibrant café culture

- Hosting a number of independent retail group meetings and one open evening with main stakeholders to raise issues and explore opportunities, e.g. engaging sector with BVCB and encouraging them to sign up as members to ensure the product offer is marketed to the short break and cruise ship market
- Arterial Routes Programme – carrying out the physical and environmental regeneration of selected arterial routes, including shop frontage refurbishment
- DSD reStore project which is presently being developed and is to be piloted throughout Northern Ireland. The current proposal is that two areas in Belfast will be selected to pilot the project. Castle Street Area has been confirmed as area 1 and area 2 has yet to be confirmed. Council staff are in active dialogue with DSD to influence the development of this programme.
- Investing budget from Brighter Belfast to dress the Castle Street area with flower baskets/towers.

Within the Council research is currently being carried out amongst independent retailers and their representative groups on the key issues affecting their future stability and growth. This will be concluded in July 2008. The findings of this work will help frame a new BCC strategy to support independent retail.

Over the past 18 months to 2 years BCC has been working with a number of independent retail focus groups throughout the city centre and other areas to establish ways in which BCC can contribute and effectively provide a leadership role in helping to support this important sector within the city centre. BCC with the support of BCCM has co-ordinated a series of meetings with trader groups which has led to the creation of action plans identifying key stakeholders to deliver short, medium and long term aims and objectives within the city centre. BCC is now being asked to support activity beyond the city centre and city neighbourhoods.

Key Issues

Recent meetings with the Independent sector have identified a number of issues and concerns which have resulted in the reduction of footfall and spend in each area and have led to a number of independent traders closing down. Within Belfast there are 10-12 traders groups which have made contact with Council. Two of the most recent contacts are outlined below:

1. At the request of traders and the South Belfast Partnership Board Councillor Pat McCarthy instigated a meeting with the Lisburn Road Business Association which was well attended by traders, BCC officers, BCCM and BVCB reps. As well as an update on the work Council have been undertaking, the meeting provided the traders with a platform to outline their concerns and where they needed help and support.
 - a. Lack of PR and marketing support for a unique area especially in the context of Victoria Square and city centre promotion.
 - b. Infrastructure & environmental improvements – traffic flow management, additional street trees; hanging baskets; street furniture; cycle routes; car parking; litter bins; street cleansing and refuse collection, , reduction of footfall, low level of street maintenance, cleansing, security/policing.
 - c. Drumglass Park – a keen interest in the development of a programme of events in the park
 - d. The costs of rates – in particular there were questions regarding what the traders were getting for the high rates
 - e. Safety and security – included consideration of CCTV; PSNI presence; under age drinking and anti-social behaviour in the local park.

2. A meeting was held with traders from the Wellington Place area including Apache and Yoke. Their issues and visions for their part of the city included:
 - a. 30% downfall in turnover since Victoria Square opened.
 - b. Area has a strong independent element and they are keen to market the key selling point as a brand – naming the area as a specific quarter
 - c. Establish markets in the area – specifically Wellington Street which links Wellington Place to Donegall Square West.
 - d. There is a strong trader network with a drive to deliver results which will help develop the area further
 - e. Encourage art and music to be integral to the quarters ethos and brand

Some of these issues are common to other trader groups including: infrastructure & planning: transport, traffic flow, car parking, security, cleansing, marketing and PR – need help, advice and support, rent & rates, management and co-ordination of groups, communications with key organisation and stakeholder, lack of knowledge of roles and responsibilities, the possibility of an update of the 'Belfast Loves Shopping Guide' to include other areas beyond the city centre.

These concerns were elaborated on by one of the key support bodies for the sector, NI Independent Retail Trade Association, in its recent report *Nightmare on Every Street*. NIIRTA has made a formal request to present the key findings of its report to the Development Committee.

As previously noted, a draft Independent Retail Strategy and Action Plan is being prepared which will need multi agency/stakeholder buy-in and commitment to deliver. A draft of the strategy which will be brought to a future Development Committee meeting for consideration and approval. It is difficult to offer specific financial support to particular trader groups at this time without a comprehensive strategy being in place for the entire city. Members are reminded that extensive assistance has been and will continue to be offered to trader groups by way of officer time on problem solving, making contacts and introductions and short term remedial actions which do not involve specific financial support.

Whilst the draft strategy is being prepared, it is suggested that we continue to support the sector and specific trader groups as follows:

1. Continue to work with the various focus groups, organising follow up meetings and engaging with the relevant organisations to deliver actions identified.
2. Explore the updating of a new, more comprehensive *Belfast Loves Shopping* guide.
3. Continue recruitment for Retail Therapy programme second phase (32 businesses already recruited).

Work with DSD and private developers to promote an increased allocation for independent retail in the major new city developments.

Recommendations

1. It is recommended that Members note report and update
2. It is recommended that Members agree to receive a presentation by NIIRTA on their *Nightmare on Every Street* report at a future meeting of Committee.

Key to Abbreviations

BCCM – Belfast City Centre Management
LRBA - Lisburn Road Business Association
BCC – Belfast City Council
NIIRTA – Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association