



## Belfast City Council

<b>Report to:</b>	Development Committee
<b>Subject:</b>	Retail Sector Support Plan 2009/10
<b>Date:</b>	12 August 2009
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### Relevant Background Information

The purpose of this paper is to provide Members with an overview of current Council support for the development of Belfast's independent retail sector and to propose an action plan for the further development of this sector during 2009/10.

Members may be aware from previous meetings of the Development Committee that Belfast City Council is currently proactive in supporting a wide range of initiatives to assist in the development and promotion of the independent retail sector across the City. While there are a number of interventions underway at present, up to date research along with specific recent demands from trader groupings have identified additional potential interventions which would support the further development of the sector.

Members are asked to note that a budget of £120,000 was approved at the May 2009 meeting of Development Committee as part of the Departmental Business Plan to support independent retail in the City.

### Key Achievements/ Outputs to Date

A thriving independent retail sector is important for the vitality and variety of our City, and Council has been instrumental in developing and delivering a number of initiatives to ensure the sector continues to flourish and that Belfast develops into a vibrant and attractive place for residents, workers and visitors.

#### Research

In 2008 Council commissioned research to establish area-specific data regarding the size,

sector and geographical locations of independent retail within Belfast. This research also considered the underpinning strengths and weaknesses of the sector and has since allowed Council to identify a range of targeted interventions that will help fill gaps in provision that have been identified by independent retailers and key stakeholders across the City.

#### Retail Therapy Programme

Council has been proactive in developing the independent retail product in the City and created a bespoke Retail Therapy Programme - a tailored business development initiative which targeted over 60 owners and managers of independent retail outlets throughout Belfast. Each retailer undertook a business needs audit to identify the key issues facing them in their business, and this was followed by the creation of individual improvement plans. The businesses which took part were eligible for small grants from Council to help with the implementation of their improvement plans, therefore providing long term benefits to each participant. The participants on Retail Therapy greatly valued the Programme and provided feedback regarding areas of future support. Requests were made for supplementary one-to-one mentoring and long term consultancy support; additional training and masterclasses; support for trader groupings; cooperative marketing activities for independent retailers and grants for improved signage. These requests for additional support have been considered in the attached Retail Sector Support Plan.

#### Hospitality and Retail Training for Employment (HARTE)

Council designed and developed a bespoke Hospitality and Retail Training for Employment programme in January 2009. This programme will create 200 jobs for the long term unemployed in Belfast in the hospitality and retail industries over a period of three years. Council formulated HARTE and took a lead role in securing funding from the Northern Ireland European Social Fund programme for the period 1 April 2008 to 31 March 2011. The value of this project is £495,000. The first year of HARTE has been very successful with 43 students graduating in May 2009 with an average of four accredited qualifications each. 20 delegates have secured employment to date and interviews are ongoing. The second year is well underway and a target of 90 participants is expected to be exceeded by the end of the calendar year.

#### Retail Masterclasses

Council took the initiative of designing and delivering a series of retail masterclasses for independent shops. To kick-start the programme Geoff Burch, presenter of BBC2's hit show 'All Over The Shop', delivered a Retail Masterclass on behalf of Council at Belfast Waterfront Hall on 22 January, where he gave local retailers advice on making the most of their businesses to weather the current economic climate and provided tips on improving customer service, motivating staff, identifying and maximising marketing opportunities and improving sales. At this event Belfast City Council launched a series of six additional retail masterclass workshops – open to all independent retailers across Belfast and offered free of charge. These classes were delivered during February and March and were attended by approximately 120 independent retailers across the city. Feedback from these sessions has been extremely positive and many whom attended have indicated an eagerness to attend similar Council led events in the future.

#### Evening Economy Initiative

The development of Council's Evening Economy initiative has allowed participants to reap the benefits of the extra footfall in the city centre. We now publish an Evening Economy e-zine which has replaced the More Time Publication and is distributed twice a month through the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau (BVCB). This e-zine contains information on events taking place in the evenings and special offers for shops/restaurants. The e-zine is distributed to 1,300 businesses that distribute it to their staff, increasing readership to approximately 50,000. An evaluation of the e-zine will be conducted in early Autumn which

will help shape the development of a fully comprehensive e-communications strategy.

#### Belfast Shopping Guide

The production of a new 'Belfast Shopping Guide' in partnership with BVCB has also helped to promote speciality, luxury and niche retail brands in a very targeted and effective way.

#### Belfast Shopping Festival

Council delivered the very first Belfast Shopping Festival throughout the month of April 2009 in four locations in Belfast city – Bloomfield Avenue and Belmont Road; Belfast City Centre; Lisburn Road and Ormeau Road and Falls and Shankill Road. This was a major initiative to support the retail sector, and a platform to promote their business and attract new customers. The festival in each area encompassed a mix of events, competitions, promotions, street entertainment and in-store activities. This multi-award winning Council initiative provided free marketing for companies taking part through press and outdoor advertising campaigns. As part of the Belfast Shopping Festival Smithfield Market played host to an Urban Edge Fashion Show which utilised all products available from Smithfield traders.

#### New Market Opportunities

Opportunities have also been given to independent traders to showcase and sell their products and services in open space and Council-managed Parks, and in other prime outlets e.g., the Christmas Continental Market, Crescent Open Space and more recently, Victoria Square. Council took the lead in establishing a Sunday craft market in Victoria Square to support small craft producers access a new market opportunity by making them visible in an area of high footfall.

Both Smithfield and St George's Markets are operating at full capacity and opportunities are also being explored for further licensed market sites/street trading pitches in the Cathedral Quarter. Marketing plans for traders have been established at St. George's and Smithfield which have led to new activities including an alternative fashion show at Smithfield and now frequent demonstrations and entertainment at St. George's.

#### Renewing the Routes

As part of Belfast City Council's ongoing 'Renewing The Routes' programme over 100 small businesses across the city have bright new signage, lighting and frontages. Three phases of shopfront renewals have been completed on the Falls Road, as well as two schemes on the Shankill Road. A further project on the Springfield Road was completed in April, at the same time as one on the lower Crumlin Road, and a similar scheme has just begun at the shops at Ardoyne. By upgrading shop frontages Council is prompting developers to realise the potential of commercial premises that exist throughout the City.

#### Full Summary

These are just a few examples of the ongoing work that Council has taken a lead role in to make Belfast a healthy economic city for independent and speciality retailers. A full summary of all current Council support for the development of the independent retail sector is contained in Appendix 1.

#### New Retail Sector Support Plan 2009/10

The current economic recession presents real challenges for our independents and Council is keen to ensure that traders in the City receive the support required to help them through these difficult times. Having considered the key findings from recent research and feedback from participants on Council led initiatives, a draft action plan for 2009/10 has been prepared for Members' consideration and is contained in Appendix 2. This report indicates the significant support mechanisms already in place for the sector within the Development Department and across the wider Council services.

Proposed actions have been identified within the following themes:

1. Capacity building and skills development
2. Marketing, promotion and branding
3. New product development support
4. Physical environment

Activities proposed under each of these themes along with estimated budgetary implications are listed below however more detailed descriptions of the activities included are contained in Appendix 2.

Theme	Activity	Budget
Capacity building and skills development	Retail Therapy Programme	£50,000
	Hospitality and Retail Training for Employment Programme (HARTE)	*
	Retail Survival Surgeries	*
	Local Sourcing Initiative	Investigate possible sources of funding
Marketing, promotion and branding	Collaborative Marketing Campaigns for Trader Groups	£30,000
	Online Retailing Support	£5,000
	Independent Retailer of the Year Award	*
	Conference for NI Retailers	*
	Promotion and Profiling of Champions in the sector	No costs associated with this activity
	Evening Economy Initiative	Investigate possible sources of funding
	Support for Independent Fashion Design	Resource commitment unknown
New product development support	Opportunities for Independent Retailers through Parks and Open Spaces	£25,000 (already approved by Council)
	Thimble Group	*
	Craft on the Concourse	*
	Market Sites/Street Trading	*
Physical environment	Animation of Core Trading Hub	£10,000
	Graffiti Prevention and Removal	*
	Dressing of Vacant Units	*
	Shop Frontage Improvements	*
	Transport and Car Parking Issues	*
	Festive Lighting	Resource commitment unknown
	Total	£120,000

\* Resources already committed from other sources or no additional resources required.

The aims of such activities and improvements will only be achieved through co-ordinated activity between Council, local partnerships, public bodies and private interests. Partnership

and collaborative working therefore lie at the heart of our Retail Sector Support Plan.

Progress reports will be presented to Members in due course.

### **Resource Implications**

A budget of £120,000 was approved as part of the Departmental Business Plan at the May 2009 meeting of the Development Committee.

### **Recommendations**

Members are asked to note the contents of this report and to approve the proposed Action Plan for 2009/10.

### **Decision Tracking**

No decision tracking applicable as report is for notation only.

### **Key to Abbreviations**

BVCB	Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau
BCCM	Belfast City Centre Management
HARTE	Hospitality and Retailing Training for Employment

### **Documents Attached**

Appendix 1	Current Council support for the development of the Independent Retail Sector in Belfast
Appendix 2	Suggested 2009/10 action plan for the development of the independent retail sector

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## Appendix 1

### Current Council support for the development of the independent retail sector

Belfast City Council currently supports the city's retailers – both directly and indirectly – through a number of channels. These include:

<p><b>Economic Development</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Retail Therapy programme: business development initiative for 63 independent retailers</li> <li>• A wide range of masterclasses for independent retailers</li> <li>• Fashion masterclasses organised as part of Belfast Fashionweek for local independent designers and traders</li> <li>• Support for traders' groups through Neighbourhood Economic Development Programme (NEDP)</li> <li>• HARTE (Hospitality and Retail Training for Employment) – in conjunction with the Tourism Unit</li> <li>• Other business support programmes e.g. Strategy in Business, Sales Growth are open to all business sectors (including retailers)</li> <li>• Development of an initiative to introduce market stalls into Victoria Square on a regular basis</li> <li>• Introducing local creative companies and individuals to new retailing opportunities and alternative trading outlets e.g., Crescent Open Space and Victoria Square</li> </ul>
<p><b>Tourism Development and Events</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Belfast Shopping Festival and key events</li> <li>• Urban Edge Fashion Show at Smithfield Market</li> <li>• Development of Evening Economy Campaign</li> <li>• Development of Evening Economy e-zine</li> <li>• Production of new Belfast Shopping Guide</li> <li>• Culinary tourism e.g. Food and Drink month</li> <li>• Whatabout Guide</li> <li>• Promotion of 'luxury' Belfast</li> </ul>
<p><b>Planning and Transport</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shop frontage improvements programme along key arterial routes</li> <li>• Wider environmental improvement measures e.g. enhanced parking/traffic management schemes on key arterial routes</li> <li>• Support for role of local retail in planning policy initiatives</li> </ul>
<p><b>Development Estates</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Input into DSD draft masterplans for city centre (Northside Urban Village, West Side Regeneration Plan), including retailing issues</li> <li>• Liaison with DSD Re: Retail- led regeneration sequencing policy- Castlecourt extension and Royal Exchange development</li> </ul>
<p><b>Markets</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Smithfield has 28 traders</li> <li>• St George's has 102 traders on Friday; 102 on Saturday</li> <li>• Exploring opportunities for further licensed market sites/ street trading pitches</li> </ul>

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## Appendix 2

### Suggested 2009/10 action plan for the development of the independent retail sector

Building on the current activity indicated above, it is suggested that an action plan for the further development of the independent retail sector in Belfast should focus on the following four themes:

- Capacity building and skills development
- Marketing, promotion and branding
- New product development support
- Physical environment

#### 1. Capacity building and skills development

While independent retailers may consider that their customer service skills set them apart from their larger competitors, feedback from research undertaken on behalf of Belfast City Council portrays a different picture.

Consideration will be given to a structured programme of skills development and capacity building for local traders. This will include general skills issues (customer service, financial planning etc.) as well as wider development issues e.g. strategic business planning. Given the potential threat posed to the local retailer by an increase in online trading, there will be additional investment in initiatives to help traders do business online or promote their services online, while retaining their high street presence.

Staff attraction and retention issues will be addressed through the support for initiatives to improve access to employment opportunities in the sector e.g. through the Hospitality and Retailing Training for Employment (HARTE) initiative.

Research highlights that independent retailers should differentiate themselves to the multiple retailers. A local sourcing initiative for local food and drink producers, artists and craftspeople will be considered with the aim of improving the competitiveness of our local independent retail businesses.

Possible activities including indicative Belfast City Council financial contributions may include:

Activity	Description	BCC Financial Contribution
Retail Therapy	Further development of Council's existing business development initiative for 30 independent retailers. Retailers can avail of a small grant element to make an investment in one particular area of their business.	£50,000
HARTE – Hospitality and Retail Training through Employment	Further development of Council's HARTE initiative which targets long term unemployed people by providing training and job opportunities in Belfast's hospitality and retail sectors.	Resources already committed from other sources

Retail Survival Surgeries	Council will organise a series of short, informal presentations and workshops by retail and trade specialists aimed at raising skills levels of existing retailers and improving the health and vitality of our shops. Themes may include marketing, visual merchandising, selling online, customer service and advertising and promotions.	Resources already committed from other sources
Local Sourcing Initiative	Council will investigate the feasibility of hosting a retail focused “Buy Local – Meet the Buyer” event aimed at encouraging local producers of food and drink, artists and/or crafts people to differentiate themselves to the multiple retailers.	Investigate possible sources of funding

## 2. Marketing, promotion and branding

Traders generally do not have time to commit to the strategic development of their business which can in turn lead to underinvestment in a number of areas, including marketing and promotion. However communication and marketing are key elements in developing an effective sense of place therefore support should be provided to market areas and high streets effectively.

One of the key selling points of independent retail outlets is their unique offering. Consideration will be given to how independent retailers can make potential clients aware of their offering, within a limited budget. This may include internet marketing and the use of websites. Collaborative marketing campaigns will be encouraged for promoting the clusters of independent retail businesses across Belfast with a shop local focus and aimed at improving recognition of the importance of the independent retail sector in the city. Maps or other marketing materials produced will be distributed to tourism related bodies.

It is recognised that many of the traders groups within Greater Belfast are not legally constituted bodies and are therefore unable to avail of funding opportunities as and when they arise. Consideration will therefore be given to encouraging local trader groups to explore the different options available to them in terms of formalising their activity.

Appropriately tailored events can play a vital role in supporting and enhancing identity. Themed markets or other activities can attract customers and loyalty schemes rewarding use of retail, entertainment and cultural facilities also help establish and maintain a distinct local identity. These types of activities will be encouraged by Council.

Excellence within the sector will be encouraged, recognised and awarded. One way in which this will happen is through the encouragement of awards schemes for local retailers. Belfast City Council will organise and deliver the Belfast Business Awards in April 2010 and will encourage applications for the ‘Independent Retailer of the Year’ award. Key note speakers will be invited to speak at annual or bi-annual networking events for the independent retail sector in Belfast. High calibre, key note speakers are what draw the independent retailers to such events, therefore best practice examples from Belfast and beyond will be invited to share their experiences with the sector.

Consideration will also be given to a range of activities to promote the retail offering in Belfast to a national and international audience. This may include existing outlets (e.g. Whatabout, City Matters) as well as one off events to attract additional retailers to the city e.g. MAPIC.

Possible activities including indicative financial Belfast City Council contributions may include:

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>BCC Financial Contribution</b>
Collaborative Marketing Campaigns	Council will offer support to allow local trader groups to develop collaborative marketing campaigns to raise the profile of their retail offerings and increase footfall in their respective areas – on the assumption they are legally constituted bodies. Campaigns may include the introduction of customer loyalty schemes or the design and publication of maps which market a local retail district e.g., Bloomfield Avenue. Support may be required to advise trader groups on how they might become legally constituted representative bodies.	£30,000
Online Retailing Support	Council will encourage independents to assess the online selling opportunities for their business to achieve a greater volume of new customers, while retaining on street presence.	£5,000
Independent Retailer of the Year Award	Council will host the Belfast Business Awards in April 2010 and will encourage participation by those traders with whom we are working as a means of recognising the contributions of independent retailers to the local community and Belfast's retail industry. The event will reward the smaller/owner operated type businesses that succeed in this highly competitive market	Resources already committed from other sources (and approved by Council)
Conference for NI Retailers	Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce in association with Council will host the first ever forum for NI retailers on Thursday 17 <sup>th</sup> September, 2009 in the Stormont Hotel. The theme for the conference is "Responsive Retailing" where a number of high calibre speakers will deliver insight into the critical factors of survival and growth during this extremely challenging economic environment.	Resources already committed from other sources
Promotion and Profiling of Champions in the Independent Retail Sector	Council will develop innovative methods of generating PR for the sector, through the championing of successful participants on Council led initiatives e.g., Retail Therapy, HARTE or Craft on the Concourse. Case studies of participants who have gained a	No costs associated with this activity

	great deal or had positive experience will be channelled regularly to local press and specific publications in each arterial route of Belfast.	
Evening Economy Initiative	Council will further encourage evening economy activity in the city centre to meet the needs of residents and visitors and to regenerate these areas.	Investigate possible sources of funding
Support for Independent Fashion Design	Council will explore the opportunities available for independent fashion designers to have their designs showcased and sold in House of Fraser.	Resource commitment unknown

### 3. New product development support

One of the key challenges for those who produce goods for sale is the difficulty in getting their goods to market. In addition to fixed trading units, consideration will be given to one-off or regular markets offering unique produce and complementing the offering from mainstream retailers.

High quality street trading is a crucial asset to the competitive success of Belfast and will bring colour, vibrancy and an awareness of the cultural offering in designated suitable locations e.g., the Cathedral Quarter.

Possible activities including indicative Belfast City Council financial contributions may include:

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>BCC Financial Contribution</b>
Opportunities for independent retailers through Parks and Open Spaces	Council will use open space and parks within retail districts to host fairs and markets to encourage increased footfall and to market the areas more effectively. Two events to be supported include Botanic Arts Fair and Drumglass Market.	£25,000 (already approved by Council)
Product Development Support for Thimble Group	Working with Thimble, Council will provide business development, sales and marketing and product development support to the fashion, craft and design sector. The project will bring together existing creative businesses working in these fields and new designers from Belfast's colleges and universities with the aim of networking, identifying new market opportunities and providing a sustainable business infrastructure to the sector.	Resources already committed from other sources
Craft Traders Initiative 'Craft on the Concourse'	Council will sponsor an initiative aimed at providing an opportunity for creative businesses to sell and market products to the local market in Belfast. A total of 12 stalls will be on offer every week to independent craft makers over a 4 month period (June 2009 – October 2009 and every Sunday between 1pm – 6pm). The event will take place in Victoria Square. Display stalls and marketing support	Resources already committed from other sources

	will be provided by Victoria Square.	
Market sites / street trading	Council will continue development of St George's and Smithfield markets and the designation of suitable street trading pitches including Cotton Court (Waring Street), Hill Street and Commercial Court.	Resources already committed from other sources

#### 4. Physical Environment

The physical environment is an important aspect of the attractiveness of local shopping and of a community's perception of the shopping area. This includes the quality of shop fronts and signage, excellence in street cleansing and the availability of accessible and secure car parking.

Recent feedback from the Association of Town Centre Management suggests like in many UK cities, graffiti and fly posting is a problem in Belfast City. Graffiti vandalism impacts negatively on the retail offer and can give the impression to retailers, residents and tourists that an area is neglected. Consideration will therefore be given to working with colleagues in Council's Cleansing Department and BCCM to tackle the problem of graffiti in the city centre and beyond.

Vacant units are perhaps one of the most visible impacts of the economic downturn. Shoppers who are unable to ignore increasingly visible vacant units in their local communities are likely to further reinforce falling consumer confidence. Consideration will be given to the refurbishment of shops frontages and the dressing of vacant shop units.

Attracting footfall is essential to retail success therefore parking and transport must be managed together. Insufficient parking provision and poor accessibility greatly undermine the viability of high street shopping. Initiatives to make access to retail easy and customer friendly will be considered.

Good quality lighting, particularly around the Christmas period can enhance perceptions of safety and quality of appearance. Council will liaise with the Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce on increasing footfall and animating the city centre in the period leading up to Christmas. Methods will also be examined to ensure that the arterial routes within the City be made more festive during the 2009 Christmas period.

Possible activities including indicative Belfast City Council financial contributions may include:

Activity	Description	BCC Financial Contribution
Animation of Core Trading Hubs	Council will provide a musical or entertaining ambiance in public places with large volumes of pedestrian traffic and high visibility e.g., tourist spots or outside restaurants, cafes, bars and shopping centres. This initiative may be piloted in Upper Queen Street, Lisburn Road, Belmont Road, Bloomfield Avenue and Andersonstown. Activity may	£10,000

	take the form of simple music performances during the Saturday shopping period.	
Graffiti Prevention and Removal	Council will work with its Cleansing Department and other appropriate bodies on graffiti and fly posting issues in the City centre and beyond.	No additional resources required
Dressing of Vacant Shop Units	Council will work with landlords and BCCM to allow the dressing of vacant units to attract the appropriate retail mix to the area.	No additional resources required
Shop Frontage Improvements	Council will continue the development of shop frontage improvements along key arterial routes.	Resources already committed from other sources
Transport and Car Parking Issues	Council will encourage transport providers to offer initiatives that make access to retail easy and customer friendly.	No additional resources required
Festive Lighting	Council will commence discussions with the Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce to examine methods of ensuring that the arterial routes within the City are made more festive during the 2009 Christmas period.	Resource commitment unknown