



<b>Report to:</b>	Development Committee	
<b>Subject:</b>	Vacant Units	
<b>Date:</b>	26 June 2012	
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	John McGrillen	Director of Development ext 3470.
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Shirley McCay	Head of Economic Initiatives ext 3459.

<b>1</b>	<b>Relevant Background Information</b>
1.1	Members will be aware that Belfast City Council has been taking a leading in role in supporting the growth and sustainability of the Independent retail sector as well as city regeneration through supporting trader groups, public art, supporting the work of DSD, renewing the routes as well as legislation for street trading and developing our markets policy.
1.2	In terms of city regeneration and competitiveness concerns have been raised at the level of vacant commercial and retail units within Belfast City Centre and the arterial routes. Within the primary retail core at March 2012 the level of vacancy was 21.37%. An increase of 1.59% since August 2011.
1.3	Within the City Centre, while new developments such as Victoria Square have been essential to ensure Belfast is a competitive retail destination, the consequence has been a move from the prime retail area of Donegall Place, Royal Avenue.
1.4	This situation is exacerbated by the large number of vacant properties that are let but not occupied such as the old Mango unit on Donegall Place where tenants are still paying rent to the landlord while trying to assign their leases; however the units remain in an untidy state, often without any light and offering no incentive to potential occupiers.
1.5	The negative image and impact of vacant premises needs to be addressed through a cohesive and integrated approach that maximises the opportunities to shape the use of the city and ensure it is competitive, attractive, vibrant across the day and night time economy and attracts investment.
1.6	The purpose of this report is to provide members with an update on the range of activities supported and initiated by Council and agreement to support activity to provide more active street frontages which will help support the existing traders and create vibrant and attractive streets across the city. It is to be noted that an effective partnership approach is essential to deliver the plan.

<b>2</b>	<b>Key Issues</b>
2.1	<p><b>Rates (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2012</b></p> <p>In an attempt to improve the aesthetic quality of the high street the Rates (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2012 permits window displays which will animate shop frontages within the specific parameters detailed previously. Window displays will not constitute occupation of the premises and thus the 50% rate relief will remain for landlords.</p>
2.2	<p>An important new incentive in the Rates (Amendment) Act is the provision to grant 50% relief on long term empty shops where the property is first occupied during the 2012/13 rating year.</p>
2.3	<p>The small business rates relief (SBRR) has been extended to provide 20% rate relief for those properties with an NAV of £10,000 or less. In total, this affects just over 1700 companies in the Belfast City Council area (of whom just over 200 are based in the Shaftesbury Electoral Ward. A guide to the current legislation is attached to this report in Appendix 1.</p>
2.4	<p>A Vacant Unit internal officers group was set up by Belfast City Council and the membership has been extended to a wider group including Department for Social Development, Belfast City Centre Management, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Arts and Business and PLACE. Each organisation represented have been undertaking and leading on a number of initiatives to reduce the amount of vacant units. There is consensus that the vacant units presents an opportunity to implement an Integrated action plan which meets the main objective of permanently letting vacant units and creating a vibrant and animated streetscape that attracts footfall and spend to support the day, evening and night time economy. An overview of activity to date is found in Appendix 2.</p>
2.5	<p>PLACE have approached Council to support an "Urban Summer Design School" from 6 to 10 August 2012 which will be delivered using a vacant unit in Belfast City Centre. PLACE are intending to locate the school in a place of architectural merit and have asked BCC to support this search. It is proposed that this symposium is delivered in conjunction with Council.</p>
2.6	<p>PLACE have also proposed delivery of a symposium on the subject of empty shops which be targeted at key stakeholders including property developers, landlords, DSD and BCC.</p>
2.7	<p>Based on the outcomes of the summer/autumn symposium and the academy it is proposed that Belfast City Council with our partners develop an Integrated Action Plan and political agreement will be sought. The proposed plan would be driven by the organisation best placed to take the lead on its implementation. This action plan will support recent initiatives led by the entrepreneurs in the private sector such as the recently opened 'Home' restaurant, the Dock café and Refound's furniture recycling shops.</p>

<b>3</b>	<b>Resource Implications</b>
3.1	<p>A budget allocation of £2,000 support the delivery of the Vacant Unit Symposium which will support venue hire, refreshments, securing key note speakers.</p>

<b>4</b>	<b>Equality and Good Relations Considerations</b>
4.1	<p>No equality or good relations considerations.</p>

<b>5</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
5.1	Note the delivery of an "Urban Design Summer School" which will be delivered by PLACE into an empty city centre unit and support-in-kind support with regards to helping locate venue.
5.2	Support PLACE to host an autumn symposium on the subject of vacant units.
5.3	Develop and seek agreement of an Action Plan at following the above activities are implemented.

<b>6</b>	<b>Decision Tracking</b>
Update at October 2012 Development Committee meeting.	

<b>7</b>	<b>Key to Abbreviations</b>
BCC	Belfast City Council
BCCM	Belfast City Centre Management
DSD	Department for Social Development
ACNI	Arts Council of Northern Ireland
A&B	Arts & Business

<b>8</b>	<b>Documents Attached</b>
Appendix 1 – Current Legislation	
Appendix 2 – Vacant Units Activity update	