



Subject:	Support for independent retailers and business associations
Date:	11 May 2016
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Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report
1.1	The purpose of this report is to update Members on the support provided by the Council to retail business associations operating outside of the City Centre.
2.0	Recommendations
2.1	<p>The Committee is asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">– Note the work undertaken to date to support the retail sector outside of the city centre through local business associations– Approve the proposed way forward, which is maintaining the current Economic Development funding level for retail support. Supporting business associations who continue to be engaged in the development of plans for their local retail area as well as any new or emerging business associations in areas of the city not currently represented, up to a total of £45,000– Provide support to an industry-led independent retail support programme for 30 small independent retailers. The recommended budget for this work strand is £25,000– Note the continuation of the Retail Forum which has been very successful and continues to strengthen engagement between local business associations and Council. This Forum meets on a quarterly basis and under the Chairmanship of the Chair of the City Growth and Regeneration Committee– Agree that Council support for these organisations should be kept under review, as momentum builds around local area working.

3.0	Main report
3.1	<p><u>Key Issues</u></p> <p>Members will be aware that the Council, principally through the Economic Development Unit (EDU), provides support to new and existing businesses across the city.</p>
3.2	<p>Funding was approved by the City Growth and Regeneration Committee in August 2015. It provided resources for business associations operating outside of the city centre and focused on activities to increase footfall in the local areas. Some funding was set aside to secure the services of a professional PR and marketing company in order to look at economies of scale across the organisations and to advise on individual campaigns and activities.</p>
3.3	<p>While the evaluation of the activity has not yet been completed, some key lessons are emerging:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – A significant proportion of the funding awarded to business associations is spent on events aimed at increasing footfall but it is often difficult for associations to get detailed information responses on economic impact from local traders. In most instances Officers follow-up on this information directly; – The challenge of supporting independent retailers across the city and maintaining the important community service role that they provide requires a longer-term strategic intervention that covers Council services and those provided by other partners. These include capacity development of retailers, refurbishment, addressing vacancy rates, improvement of shop frontages and wider improvements to public realm. Such an approach is beyond the scope of the annual budget currently allocated to support these organisations. In this regard, an opportunity may be presented as the Council makes progress on local area working – Marketing is often fragmented and ad-hoc, led independently by individual associations. The opportunity exists to create a common local retail marketing message across business associations whilst maintaining a local identity – While the evaluation for 15/16 activity has not yet been finalised, it is believed that economies of scale could be better achieved through a more co-ordinated PR and marketing approach – The work plans of business associations are delivered by volunteers and capacity and longevity of roles within associations vary significantly across groups.

3.4	<p>Local neighbourhood-based retail continues to play a vital role within local communities, in both sustaining and creating jobs and also in providing valuable local services which improve community cohesion and wellbeing. In August 2015, the City Growth and Regeneration Committee approved a range of activities to strengthen engagement between local business associations and the Council.</p>
3.5	<p>A summary of support is provided and business association feedback is noted below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Seven business associations have drawn down combined funding of around £34,000 for a range of activities aimed at increasing footfall and sales within their catchment areas. These include Christmas and other seasonal events – A company was commissioned to help the business associations to create more effective marketing campaigns and to develop support plans for their areas. The purpose of this was to instil a more structured approach to marketing. This work is currently being finalised and will help form the basis of activity for the coming year – Business associations have indicated that engagement of the company has built their capacity and skills in the longer term, however trader group commitment to avail of this resource has been varied – Business representatives have had some difficulty in completing PR and marketing plans. Business associations continue to face a number of challenges around their capacity to deliver projects as they rely on the efforts of a small number of traders to deliver projects and run events as well as operating their own businesses – Business associations continue to require ongoing expert assistance with capacity building, communications, marketing and PR support to help them plan events, monitor and evaluate activities. While these events are useful in building local capacity and generating a “feel good” factor in the local area, it is difficult to be precise about the economic benefit that they bring about – Business associations have indicated that it is more manageable to develop plans on a yearly basis as membership income varies year on year – Opportunities exist to look at centralising resources such as PR activities which could be contract managed by the Council, by agreement with the business associations. <p><u>Business Association Funding Support</u></p>
3.6	<p>Taking account of the feedback outlined above, it is proposed that the following approach is adopted for the current financial year:</p>

- Continue to work with the seven business associations actively availing of Council support. These are Antrim Road Business Association, Ballyhackamore Business Association, Finaghy Business Association, Greater Shankill Business and Traders' Forum, Hollywood Arches Business Association, Strandtown Traders' Association and West Belfast Traders' Forum
- Associations will draw down their budgets on the basis of an agreed activity plan. This is likely to include a mixture of locally-organised events as well as marketing support provided through a professional PR company, directly appointed and managed by Belfast City Council.
- Funding of up to £3,000 per association will be available from the Council, with a further £2,000 available if the group can provide evidence of £ for £ match funding (total potential Council funding £5,000)
- The Council will set aside £10,000 to support any new business associations, on the same basis as the existing organisations (above).

Start Up and Business Development Support for Retail

3.7 Members will be aware that Belfast City Council now has statutory responsibility for business start support. The Council is currently funding the Regional Start Initiative (RSI) which offers business start-up support to entrepreneurs across a range of sectors including retail. This underpins the Belfast Agenda by contributing to employability and skills and business growth outputs.

3.8 Whilst generic business start-up and growth support is available to retailers through mainstream provision offered by the Council and its delivery partners, it is recognised there are key skills such as merchandising and e-commerce which are unique to retail businesses and as such there is an opportunity to strengthen generic provision through add-on support.

3.9 The Council is currently a partner in a project called "Healthy High Street". This project is a national campaign operated by Business in the Community (BiTC), in association with a number of private sector partners including Santander, Boots and Marks & Spencer. Belfast is one of the 67 cities engaged in the campaign currently, which is managed locally by Belfast City Centre Management (BCCM). Through this project, the major retailers listed above provide access to a range of skills and expertise which could be of use to local retailers.

3.10	<p>The content of the programme could include master classes led by those private sector partners followed by one to one mentoring to help participants transfer learning into their business. Participating businesses can also benefit from significant profiling and promotional opportunities through this project. Up to 30 independent retailers could be supported through this initiative per annum. It could also help address the vacancy issues in many high streets and local shopping areas by helping local retailers to consolidate their businesses and grow these into more viable operations. The financial implication of this activity is £25,000. This funding is available in the existing Economic Development budget.</p> <p><u>Financial Implications</u></p>
3.11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Provision to fund activity of business associations across the city to increase footfall and promote economic activity in local areas – maximum £45,000 in total – Supporting the Healthy High Street Project industry-led retail support programme to increase the business viability of new-start and existing independent retailers - £25,000. <p><u>Equality and good relations implications</u></p>
3.12	<p>There are no specific equality or good relations implications.</p>
4.0	Appendices – documents attached
	None