



**Belfast City Council:
Vacant to Vibrant
Pilot Capital Grant Scheme**

April 2023

Case Study Information

Date	April 2023
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Organisation	Belfast City Council
Place	Belfast
Version	1

Basic Facts about the place

Description of the place

Belfast is Northern Ireland's capital city and regional economic driver, playing an important role as a centre for commerce, culture, tourism, employment, investment, recreation, entertainment, and learning.

Belfast has a population of 345,400 people. The city's principal catchment extends to a one-hour drivetime from the city and is the major shopping destination within the region, reinforced by the limited comparative retail offer across Northern Ireland and driven by the city's 'destination' status. It has benefitted from significant economic and commercial growth in recent years and now functions as a vibrant commercial hub, serving a multitude of people, including residents, workers, students and visitors.

Retail was previously used as a regeneration tool in Belfast to create an accessible, vibrant centre, offering more choice for shopping, social activity and recreation. Today, the city's retail is multi-layered, offering daily convenience shopping, comparison goods, first to market brands, food and beverage outlets and a host of leisure attractions. In the core city centre, retail is largely sporadic with no clear zoning; partly a result of multiple ownership and organic growth. As the retail offer has matured, retailers sharing a synergy have started to cluster together – a trend that's likely to continue. Conversely, the city centre's two shopping complexes - Victoria Square and CastleCourt – have a clear positioning strategy and serve scaling ends of the market. Supplementing this provision, a strong independent offer has organically developed, particularly centred around the historic and cultural Cathedral Quarter.

Recognising the multi-faceted approach required to address city centre needs, Belfast City Council developed the Future City Centre (FCC) Programme to chart a way forward for diversification of uses, enhanced connectivity, investment and inclusive economic growth, alongside cultural development. The FCC programme currently has six cross cutting pillars aimed at revitalising the city centre and enhancing connectivity with surrounding communities. In the past two years, over £6m has been invested in projects either delivered or in development.

Key opportunities/challenges

Like many other cities, Belfast has not been immune to the challenges facing the High Street in recent years. Further to a Retail Analysis, carried out by Pragma Consulting in 2019 on behalf of Belfast City Council, vacancy control/reduction emerged as a key theme. This has been accelerated by the pandemic, with retail closures resulting in more vacant premises in city centre locations, including on previously resilient streets.

The Vacancy Rate has seen a 2% increase on average within the Primary Retail Core (PRC) every year since 2019, and in 2021 the analysis provided a PRC vacancy rate of c24%, with the rest of the city centre (outside the PRC) currently at 22%.

This vacancy rate (currently 14.5% as of Q4 in 2022) – significantly higher than the rest of the UK provided the impetus for the council's intervention.

High levels of vacancy have had wide ranging negative impacts in Belfast:

- dereliction of historical buildings and buildings of interest
- a drop in footfall and vibrancy in key areas
- an escalation of anti-social behaviour
- negative perceptions of cleanliness and safety
- an estimated loss in £7.85m across the city centre
- missed opportunities to maximise employment and creative space

The challenges facing Belfast city centre are complex. Market penetration is much lower than comparators (37% versus 47% in comparable UK cities), with the legacy and segregated nature of the city streetscape and shopping district making it difficult for Belfast to adapt.

To tackle this, Belfast City Council has invested in interventions addressing localised issues alongside the strategic positioning of accelerating city centre living, with the aim of delivering a resilient, future-proofed city centre. However, this presents challenges, as Belfast's levels of city centre living are significantly lower than elsewhere. From 2015 -2021, only 340 city centre

residential units were completed, reinforcing the need for the right social and community infrastructure.

Various city centre regeneration schemes have also failed to materialise i.e. the former Royal Exchange (now Tribeca Belfast) and the Northside Masterplan / Development Framework, which has resulted in significant dereliction and decline in particular areas. Challenges were further exacerbated by the Primark fire in 2018, which had a detrimental impact on footfall and streetscape in terms of amenity, safety, perceptions and community wellbeing. Belfast and the region are prohibited by lack of support through the High Street Task Force and a lack of access to funds made available 'Future High Streets Fund' (£820m) and the 'Stronger Towns Fund' (£1.6bn). Local Government Reform in 2015 provided some additional powers, but did not go far enough to meet the challenges that exist to achieve the city region's growth ambitions, due to local government structures and remit.

Vision/goals

The wider vacancy programme developed by Belfast City Council aims to reactivate vacant space and diversify the city centre offer to support its long-term viability by creating a vibrant, sustainable city centre that is accessible, connected and meets the demands of its customer base.

Research has shown that the cost of bringing vacant property into use and undertaking necessary improvements alongside fitting out works is a clear barrier to occupiers taking up space. For property owners there is also often a viability issue in undertaking such works when measured against the likely rental return. Research into initiatives deployed by other cities/towns has also shown the importance of striking a balance between direct council intervention and third-party support. While grant programmes delivered elsewhere have varied in purpose and scale, they have formed a central element of efforts to address vacancy.

Based on local evidence and data informed by engagement with local property agents and other city stakeholders, it was considered that a tailored grant programme combined with a potential wrap around business support service would have significant impact. It was proposed that this scheme would support both external and internal improvements to buildings, expansions or repurposing of premises, along with other associated set-up costs, and would support both property owners and occupiers to bring vacant space in the city centre back into use.

In addition to supporting the occupation of vacant premises and diversifying uses, external improvements to properties would help to activate street frontages, improve individual properties and streets, and generally contribute to streetscape quality and wider city centre

vibrancy. Activation of the streetscape could also act as one lever to help address rising issues of anti-social behaviour. There are both direct and indirect economic benefits due to previously vacant space being occupied, including job creation and the diversification of uses creating opportunities to grow skills in a range of sectors.

Description of the project/initiative

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Belfast City Council's City Regeneration and Development team has been developing a programme in response to the rising number of vacant premises across the city centre. This forms part of the council's wider "Future City Centre" Programme, which aims to reimagine and revitalise the city centre to create a healthy, vibrant, and sustainable environment where people want to live, work, visit and invest, and is intrinsically connected to, and supports, surrounding communities.

Due to the growth of online shopping/'click and collect' and the recent pandemic, the priorities of sustainable city centre recovery centre around reactivating vacant space and diversifying the offer to support long term viability alongside measures relating to access, connectivity and the use of external space.

To get a better understanding of the environment and the data, officers reviewed the make-up of vacancies and considered potential interventions alongside a suggested appropriate level of investment. They identified four different categories:

1 **Short term vacant:** Vacancies in the last three years including 'Covid casualties', predominantly within the primary retail core. Purpose/nature of Intervention: mitigating impact of vacant units on adjacent properties/vibrancy of surrounding area and promoting availability of space.

2 **Medium term/development plan:** Vacant properties and gap sites where development is planned or committed. Purpose/nature of Intervention: mitigating impact of development timelines that can result in several years of vacancy and physical deterioration.

3 **Medium term/no known development plan:** Properties that have been vacant for more than three years that show no sign of development or turnover. Mix of commercially available and unknown. Purpose/nature of Intervention: mitigating impact, avoiding further physical decline and facilitating redevelopment.

4 **Long term vacant:** Properties that have been vacant for over ten years, in very poor condition and not commercially available. Purpose/nature of intervention: significant investment required to bring back into use, possibly alongside complementary initiatives to address wider decline.

This has informed the development of a '**toolkit**' approach, comprising several forms of potential interventions, including a mix of council-led or delivered projects (such as targeted acquisition of property) alongside a proposal for grant support to third parties. Research has

been undertaken into initiatives run by other NI councils and local authorities across the UK, while analysing Belfast-specific evidence and data, to develop a bespoke response that seeks to target need and maximise impact.

The **Vacant to Vibrant Pilot Capital Grant Scheme is one council intervention from the Vacancy Toolkit**. In July 2022, Belfast City Council opened a two-year pilot capital grant scheme to incentivise both property owners and potential occupiers (including start-up retail, independents, small and medium sized enterprises (SME's), social enterprise, leisure, hospitality and the cultural and third sectors) to bring vacant spaces in Belfast city centre back into use and support the city centre's revitalisation.

Through this capital grant, property owners, businesses and organisations wishing to renovate or repurpose a vacant space within the city centre boundary can apply. The capital grant scheme funds both external and internal improvements to buildings, expansions or repurposing of vacant spaces, and other associated capital set-up costs required to bring a vacant space back into use for long term occupation. This pilot capital grant will improve individual properties; contribute to higher quality streetscapes and greater city centre vibrancy; help sustain existing jobs and create new employment opportunities; and support city centre regeneration.

To understand the demand for the scheme, as well as the wider challenges and barriers preventing the uptake of vacant space, the council encouraged **businesses/organisations and property owners to submit an Expression of Interest** during February 2022. The **feedback received from this exercise has helped to shape the grant process**.

The council has allocated £1m to the Vacant to Vibrant Scheme to transform vacant spaces to support the following capital costs:

- smaller financial support to pop-up shops and meanwhile test space
- larger grants to encourage uptake of vacant units
- external capital works to façades to improve the look and feel of the High Street
- internal capital works to make a vacant property fit for purpose and support long term occupation
- diversification of property's unoccupied space to help existing businesses survive

AIMS OF THE VACANT TO VIBRANT PILOT CAPITAL GRANT SCHEME

1. Incentivise occupation of vacant spaces for new businesses/organisations to reduce the number of city centre vacancies.
2. Provide support for existing businesses/organisations wishing to repurpose vacant space to expand or diversify their offer to reduce the number of city centre vacancies.

3. Improve the city centre's vibrancy and animation to encourage people to live, work and visit.
4. Increase the number of SME's, start-up retail/ businesses and the cultural and third sectors accessing vacant space in the city centre supporting them to grow, sustain jobs and create new employment opportunities, either directly or indirectly.
5. Support and enhance the existing offer in the city centre.

OBJECTIVES OF THE VACANT TO VIBRANT PILOT CAPITAL GRANT SCHEME

Successful applicants to scheme have been asked to demonstrate how the funding will contribute to the key objectives of the grant, through three or more of the following:

1. Occupy a vacant premises and bring it back into permanent (over two years) or temporary (meanwhile or pop up for minimum of four months) use.
2. Encourage the establishment of businesses/organisations in the city centre and support existing businesses to diversify into unoccupied space.
3. Make external and/or internal improvements to vacant premises to support long term occupation.
4. Enhance the streetscape with high quality external works and activation of ground floor space
5. Contribute to the vibrancy of the city centre and increase footfall in the area.
6. Make the city centre more diverse and attractive with unique/distinct businesses/organisations.
7. Create new and local employment either directly or indirectly.
8. Promote sustainability within their project through, for example, the use of recycled materials, adoption of zero waste principles, use of clean energy etc.

The nature and level of grant (detailed below) should serve as a stimulus, as opposed to a comprehensive funding package, supporting businesses/occupiers and property owners to bridge the apparent viability gap.

Grant 1. Applicants seeking funding for a space with a footprint up to 150 metres² could access a grant of up to £15,000 with 10% match funding from business/occupier/property owner.

Grant 2. Applicants seeking funding for a space with a footprint above 151 metres² could access a grant of up to £25,000 with 10% match funding from business/occupier/ property owner.

Grant 3. Applicants seeking to test space in the city centre for one year or less (minimum four months) can access a grant of up to £2,500 with 10% match funding from business/occupier/owner.

The council has developed eligibility criteria for the scheme to ensure that the scheme targets need and maximises impact, ensuring additionality in proposed schemes and avoiding displacement of existing businesses, e.g. grants are not likely to be awarded to businesses closing an existing unit to open in alternative premises.

Eligibility criteria:

- The property must be a vacant premises or vacant space within a premises that is located within the Belfast city centre boundary
- The business/organisation must be an existing registered business/organisation or social enterprise that has been actively operating for at least three months as of date of submission of application.
- The property must not have been in occupation for a period of 12 months at the time of application (properties that have been occupied by temporary meanwhile use/pop ups are acceptable).
- The proposed occupier must submit the relevant template within the application pack to demonstrate viability. Grants 1 and 2 will require completion of the two-year business plan and financial forecast, while Grant 3 will be required to complete a Business Plan Proposal template and financial forecast for the duration of the proposed lease period.
- Properties at ground floor vacancies are priority, but we may also consider upper floor improvements if the occupier's ground floor activities extend into upper floor uses, where they deliver a meaningful and measurable impact on the street character and vibrancy. Projects proposing to target upper floor units only will not be considered, unless they can clearly demonstrate that the proposal will have a positive impact on the street character and vibrancy of a street or area.
- Able to deliver the scheme within nine months of receiving the Letter of Offer.

The council has developed an assessment process which is completed over two stages for those who successfully meet the eligibility criteria:

Stage 1: Assessment carried out by a panel of relevant Belfast City Council staff, reviewing how the application meets the definition and deliverability of the scheme and the merits of the property and occupation proposal. Applications are scored against criteria including the duration of vacancy, prominence, and streetscape impact. Businesses in areas with above average ground floor vacancy (23%) and those occupying prominent ground floor units within the Primary Retail Core score higher. In terms of diversifying city centre uses in line with overarching objectives, the grant is geared towards local independents, cultural organisations, SMEs, and applicants that seek to provide a unique retail, hospitality, leisure, creative, cultural, or social impact. Applicants can pick up marks for any indication of sustainability within their

business model/occupation of the space and any additional investment they propose to add to support long term success in the space – this can be in the form of additional financial investment or through their social value investment.

Stage 2: Successful applications will then be recommended for Business Plan assessment, undertaken by an independent third party. This is to ensure that the proposed occupation of the space is economically viable, and the applicant has demonstrated an awareness of the financial risks associated with occupying a physical space.

Funding is paid to successful applicants in two instalments: 70% of the grant is offered further to successful submission of all application documentation to the satisfactory standard of the panel. The remaining 30% is paid on receipt a satisfactorily completed monitoring form with all requested evidence/ documentation verifying spend against the Letter of Offer requirement. It was agreed that given current financial pressures for businesses, receiving the majority of the grant up front would be most helpful.

Wrap-around support:

To support long term success of the scheme, successful applicants are offered one-to-one mentoring and workshops to help with business growth and sustainability, across topics such as: business planning, financial planning, marketing and social media, sales development.

Pre-submission, applicants are offered free support to develop or update a business plan, which focuses on the costs to occupy the property proposed through the scheme.

The scheme was widely promoted when it first launched in July 2022, featuring in many major regional newspapers and across social media, although word of mouth has also proved valuable in promoting the scheme. We are currently producing video content showcasing the before and after imagery of projects receiving funding. This will be used to support a wider marketing and communications campaign for the scheme this spring that will feature interviews with applicants encouraging others to apply. In addition, some of our successful applicants have been promoted through local media coverage, showcasing the new spaces created through the scheme.

To support the scheme roll out, we held weekly Vacant to Vibrant Support Surgeries in the city centre from July to early September to provide support to those seeking more information and guidance on how to access the funding for their ideas and projects. The surgeries also provided a useful opportunity for applicants to meet officers working on the scheme face-to-face, helping to build relationships by establishing a point of contact for further queries or advice. In January, we ran an additional programme of surgeries with bookable 30 minutes slots, with the offer to meet in person, over telephone or online, depending on the applicant's preferred method and availability. These proved extremely popular, and we extended the surgery schedules to accommodate demand.

To date, several successful projects have been awarded funding through the scheme such as:

Simply Zen: who have established a first to the NI market large scale commercial space for holistic and spiritual wellbeing. The business comprises of 5 key elements: retail, complimentary therapies, day spa facilities, therapy training academy and wellbeing events. Simply Zen have occupied a historical building with prominence in the city centre, on the corner of Royal Avenue and William Street.

Sloan's Gym: who have used the funding to diversify their offer and activate a vacant space within their premises, creating a unique roof-top gym experience within the city centre. The applicant has created a new physical space for health and well-being classes in currently unused roof space within the property, diversifying the business' offer, generating additional footfall to the business, adding vibrancy to an area of high vacancy, and creating additional employment.

The team involved in the project/initiative

Project/initiative team

Belfast City Council's City Regeneration and Development (CRD) team has led the development and the delivery of this programme of work, further, to identifying a need to address the issue of city centre vacancy. Through this work, they have co-ordinated input from several council teams that have interest in reducing vacancy such as: Planning, Finance, Economic Development, Building Control, Culture and Tourism and Policy.

We established a task and finish group to support work around vacancy data. High quality data is at the core of our Vacancy Programme, as it informs our understanding of trends, area specific issues and changes in the market, as well as aiding the development of tailored responses. Work is ongoing to align multiple existing data sources (e.g. LDP survey information and LPS Valuation lists) in council, and to explore the potential to add value through analytical tools to overlay multiple data sets related to city centre performance.

The CRD team engaged with property agents to identify barriers facing landlords and market, as well as the types of interventions needed to bring forward the occupation of vacant spaces. The team commissioned a Retail and Leisure Performance Strategy; a 'refresh' of the previous 2018 Asset Intelligence Report prepared by Pragma, undertaken to provide an updated overview of the city centre's performance in terms of retail and leisure based occupiers and trends, with clear evidence based recommendations for potential interventions in key areas.

The team is also seeking to appoint a Commercial Agent to work alongside officers, providing an expert advisory resource to support a pilot property 'match-making' service, and to guide and inform the wider vacancies programme, in line with the 'Retail and Leisure Performance Strategy'. Officers regularly receive requests from a range of interests and sectors including SMEs, cultural and arts organisations and others seeking city centre suitable space.

Whilst some vacant property is commercially advertised via agents, there are other premises which are not always publicly advertised, but where property owners may be open to shorter term lets, for example, pending development. The role of the commercial agent will be to work closely with officers to maintain a live database of property interests, and to provide interested parties with a tailored 'matchmaking' service. It is proposed that this be piloted over a period of one year and reviewed prior to any extension. It is intended that this service will assist in bringing forward recommendations from the refreshed 'Retail and Leisure Performance Strategy' e.g., targeting market brands, supporting more independents, diversification of uses etc.

As part of the refresh of The Belfast Agenda (the city's community plan), the delivery of the Vacant to Vibrant Scheme has been identified as a priority action under the Future City Centre theme. It is hoped that through this, further co-design and added value opportunities to address vacancy will come forward, involving a range of stakeholders from voluntary, community sectors, private sector and business improvement districts. We will monitor and evaluate the scheme on completion and one year on to establish if the project reached the projections and anticipated outcomes it set out to achieve.

Impact or outcomes

Short-term outcomes/impact

To date, the scheme has received over 200 requests for application packs. At the time of writing, there are 26 applicants actively engaging with officers to finalise their applications, with an expectation that these will be submitted by summer 2023.

Pre-submission stage: There are currently 15 applications at Pre-Submission stage, representing a capital investment of £265k, over 61 employment opportunities and an estimated payable Rates Value of £1,005,541.92 (subject to LPS assessment) over the course of the lease periods. These are classified as 11 applicants that have secured agreement for their proposed premises and four who are currently negotiating the lease on their premises and developing business cases for submission, which involves securing quotes for capital works and developing financial plans for independent expert assessment.

Under assessment stage: five applications have been approved by the committee, with a further two applications recommended for approval. These seven applications represent a capital grant investment of £138,620.25 resulting in circa 32 employment opportunities and an estimated Rates Value of £375,504.60 (subject to LPS assessment) over the course of the lease periods.

A further 11 applicants are working with officers and are engaging with the property market to identify and secure units prior to progressing with their business cases. These applicants represent an estimated capital grant investment of £170,000, resulting in an estimated 30-40 employment opportunities. The Rates return on this investment will not be quantifiable until the proposed units are confirmed.

Long-term outcomes/achievements

It is hoped that the significant capital injection made as a result of the Vacant to Vibrant fund will have supported the occupation of previously under-utilised space for new businesses/organisations and reduced the number of city centre vacancies. It will also have provided support for existing businesses/organisations wishing to repurpose vacant space to expand or diversify their offer; improved the vibrancy and animation of the city centre to encourage more people to live, work and visit; and supported the growth of SME's, start-up retail/ businesses and cultural/third sectors organisations, both directly and indirectly. It is hoped the scheme will diversify the offer of the High Street, as well as act as the catalyst for further regeneration in the city, making Belfast city centre an attractive proposition for both local and international investment.

The learning from the scheme will increase our knowledge of the different types of intervention required to support the occupation of vacant space, to protect the High Street against market challenges and inform future investment decisions.

Advice for members and the wider placemaking community

Advice/key learning

Highs and lows experienced during the process of developing this initiative

Whilst there has been much interest expressed in the scheme, the cost-of-living crisis in the run up to winter 2022 has had an impact on the confidence of those proposing to take on the costs of a city centre premises, combined with working through the application process at one of the busiest times of the year. The pace of applications coming through initially raised queries from Elected Members, who were coming under increasing pressure to divert funding towards Belfast's most vulnerable citizens during the cost-of-living crisis. Maintaining political support in the face of this has proved challenging and required concerted efforts to protect the committed budget for the scheme. January 2023 has seen a resurgence in interest for the scheme, with businesses and organisations able to focus on their plans for the year.

The highs have included working with ambitious businesses and organisations that want to bring something unique to the High Street and who were delighted that funding was being made available to bring their ideas to life. It has been encouraging to see some of the projects in progress already changing the face of the streetscape, with previously vacant properties and spaces becoming activated, shutters going up and lights going on.

Timeframe involved

Pre-Scheme: The Vacant to Vibrant Scheme is a pilot capital grant scheme that is one council intervention from the Vacancy Toolkit. Prior to presenting the proposal for the scheme to Elected Members, significant work went into providing an overview of the vacancy picture, including collating and analysing data to understand the make-up of vacant city centre units, assessing the types of vacancies and proposing interventions from research that looked at the variety of approaches and models used elsewhere. This included studies on bringing forward meanwhile use and pop-ups, to tackling larger scale dereliction, as well as liaising with other local authorities that had rolled out similar initiatives. Various funding sources were considered before getting buy in from within council to use Covid-capital reserves. This helped to hone the request to Elected Members around a toolkit approach before gaining approval to develop a pilot scheme with the various grant options and outline criteria. The scheme then had to be developed and refined with input from colleagues in other sections and departments to advise on everything from eligibility criteria, legal cover, GDPR compliance and financial processing.

Scheme timeframe: To minimise the risk of failure in this capital investment, and to make the applications as strong as possible, officers invested significant time working with applicants to develop their applications. This provided assurances around the business case prior to

assessment. This work involved a basic eligibility check in terms of assessing the authentication of the applicant and completion of due diligence checks on their proposals, such as ensuring costs complied with public procurement guidelines, evidencing that an agreement in principle had been secured from the property landlord and that a business plan had been developed to demonstrate their understanding of the costs to occupy the space.

It should be acknowledged that providing this level of detail and assurance represents a significant investment in time and effort from the applicants. It can take over three months to gain agreement with landlords and to acquire the relevant quotes from contractors before finalising a fully costed business plan. The assessment process involves a detailed assessment of each applicant's proposal in conjunction with an independent, expert business case analysis prior to officers making recommendations to the City Regeneration and Development Committee to approve funding. Whilst such risk-management analysis is necessary to protect public money, it can be quite overwhelming and off-putting to business owners who are already time-poor.

Timing has proved to be a challenge, as the process from start to finish can take three months and the applicants need to be at an advanced stage of agreement regarding the lease but cannot have yet completed works to make the space fit for use until they have signed the letter of offer. This comes down to the approvals process timescale required for certain levels of grants, perhaps smaller grants would be quicker to process.

Funds required

The scheme provides capital funding to incentivise the uptake of a vacant space, by bridging the viability gap of those initial costs that are off-putting to both the potential tenant and landlord. The council's decision to ringfence £1m to proactively pilot the scheme was both an innovative and bold approach and helped lead the way in tackling the issue of vacant city centre units. It must be noted, however, that the scheme is not a one size fits all answer to the problem and cannot solve all the issues around vacancy on its own. The council recognises that there are many approaches to regenerating areas impacted by vacancy and investment in a variety of solutions is needed to act as a catalyst for revitalisation.

The council has drawn funding from external sources to roll out similar schemes across the city that will complement the Vacant to Vibrant scheme such as the 'Business Cluster and Community Grant', with awards of up to £25,000 for community organisations or a cluster of five or more businesses, as well as the 'Supporting Vibrant Destinations' scheme, which can be availed of by community groups or business clusters based outside of the city centre boundary, with awards of up to £40,000 to make improvements to properties and the surrounding environment in a bid to reenergise the streetscape. The council has also delivered a robust

Covid Revitalisation programme in response to the challenges facing the city in the wake of the pandemic. Whilst investment is required to target specific areas of need, additional funding is required to support other synergies of work to complement and support the longevity of the investment.

Relationships and contributions the initiative required from key stakeholders

The scheme was developed with long term success in mind and, as such, it was recognised that a one-off capital grant would be a better investment, for both the council and the applicant, if there was wrap around support available to help the business survive whilst in the new premises from our Enterprise and Business Growth team.

When the Business Plan element of the application is assessed by our independent external Business Plan advisors, they make recommendations as to the type of business support that would make the most significant impact for each applicant. The Enterprise and Business Growth team's support measures enable businesses and organisations to develop the knowledge and skills to remain sustainable beyond the funded period. This includes access to 1-2-1 mentoring to support business growth and resilience and access to workshops and guidance on topics from visual merchandising, to taking payment, etc. The City Regeneration and Development team and the Enterprise and Business Growth team work in tandem on this as a key element of the Vacant to Vibrant scheme to ensure its long-term success.

In developing the scheme, we looked at those who had launched similar initiatives to address the rise of vacancy in their own areas and the types of interventions that had proven useful in tackling certain types of vacancy, whether in the form of reactive/short term measures or long term/strategic approaches.

We looked to The Local Government Association's 'Dealing with empty shops – a good practice guide for councils and the High Street Task Force Resource Library, for guidance on the types of interventions delivered by other local authorities and the levels of investment required to yield success. We followed up with Joy McGeown in Telford and Wrekin Council, who had delivered several grants-based initiatives in her area that proved a popular incentive for supporting the uptake of vacant space. We also linked in with other local authorities in Northern Ireland that had delivered, or are in the process of delivering, schemes to tackle vacancy such as the Urban Investment Fund by Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council that offered grants to attract retail and hospitality businesses into vacant units to boost the evening economy offer. We also analysed the 'Empty to Occupied' Scheme delivered by Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council which involved grants of up to £80k made to owners of long-term vacant commercial properties to bring them back to use.

The Vacant to Vibrant scheme has benefitted from information sharing across relevant networks within the city, such as the business organisations and bodies that have shared information with their stakeholders. In addition, word of mouth between property owners, developers, businesses, and organisations has proved very useful in promoting the scheme.

If the same initiative were to be implemented again elsewhere, what would you do differently? What would you do the same?

Eligibility considerations:

There was a need to consider unintended consequences when designing a vacancy grant. For example, to avoid incentivising a landlord to evict an existing tenant to benefit from the grant, a property must have been vacant for a minimum period of 12 months to be considered eligible. This eligibility criterion was an important consideration to prevent negative side-effects when making such a grant programme available.

Rent and rates:

The high cost of rent and rates remain some of the main barriers and issues applicants face when considering the costs of occupying a space. Applicants have flagged that rates in particular, continue to be off-putting and seem out of date given the trends present on the High Street in recent years, with the rise of digital retailing and the oversupply of large retail space. These can sometimes be the main barrier to occupying space and our grant does not cover any costs that are not capital (such as funding to cover business rates).

Wider conversations with landlords are required to encourage flexibility when considering requests to occupy space in terms of rent and lease lengths, reflective of the current financial pressures facing businesses. Applicants have flagged that rents and lease lengths have been off putting, with landlords expecting the same conditions as those that could have been commanded when the retail market was stronger. Further work could be done through the likes of business bodies/Chamber of Commerce, to manage the expectations of landlords and highlight the benefits of occupation through flexible terms.

Risk management:

To avoid irresponsibly incentivising the uptake of spaces by those who may be unable to bare the financial burden of occupying space, it has been necessary to involve a degree of red tape and bureaucracy for businesses and organisations to demonstrate their financial soundness and viability.

Innovative opportunities:

We have found that there is a degree of interest from independent businesses to prove the concept in a city centre location/area of high footfall, however many of these lack the capacity required to meet the conditions of our funding. There is potential to look at innovative and creative solutions to support and incubate this type of business through meanwhile space that is managed and programmed by an external operator, who has the capacity. This has the potential to run alongside a grant scheme to help businesses get a feel for how their proposal works in a city centre environment with some financial investment required to cover costs. This would act as an academy, preparing applicants and creating a pipeline of future applications to the scheme. It's understood that this would require a careful selection process and would need to be limited to those who are on track to becoming a financially viable business, as opposed to providing rent free space, which may require a different model.



Contact for case study queries

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Further details

Further details

Link to the Vacant to Vibrant webpage: <https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/vacanttovibrant>