

Written evidence - Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council (PTC0049)

1: Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has created significant challenges for local people and businesses. As a council, we have worked hard to target support to where it has been needed most. Working closely in collaboration with partner organisations, charities, volunteers, businesses and many others we have developed new partnerships and strengthened existing relationships.

We initially focused on four main areas in response to community needs:

1: Food (11,000 food packages) Redeployed council officers delivered food packages, funded by the Department for Communities, to community groups across the whole council area. Local community volunteers then distributed these to those most in need within our community.

2: Financial Hardship (Community and Business Helplines – offering 1:1 support and signposting on where to get help (3,628 calls)

3: Digital Poverty (Provision of free Wi-Fi in town centre plus distribution of 80 devices to those who needed them)

4: Mental Health and Wellbeing (Great Artdoors schemes, home workouts, support to community groups, volunteers planting flowers, work with community planning partners for those requiring intervention.

Our focus has now shifted to recovery and rebuilding our community. We launched our **Local Investment Plan for 21/22 in February 2021** as a direct response to community need. The Local Investment Plan sets out how we will focus on:

- **Supporting health and wellbeing**
- **Tackling Environmental Issues**
- **Empowering our communities**
- **Prioritising economic growth**
- **Sharing our culture**

The council's existing **Corporate Plan** was also reviewed in the context of the impact of COVID-19 and the uncertainty it created. We are now finalising an **Interim Corporate Plan** which re-focuses our priorities for community and economic recovery. We have considered the city centre as a key part of the wider recovery programme.

Lisburn is ideally located as it is in close proximity to Belfast, two airports and the docks. Our businesses also benefit from Lisburn being part of the Belfast to Dublin Economic Corridor.

2: Current Considerations

Members and Council Officers have been considering the longer term impact of both COVID-19 and Brexit on our local economy and communities in a NI context. The region's economy had not completed its recovery from the last recession before Covid-19 struck. In terms of our high street it is widely recognised that Lisburn and Castlereagh is not immune from the long term trend which has seen the face of our high street already change. Consequently we had created a City Centre Masterplan (2019 – 23) and as a result of the pandemic, we have had to re-prioritise as well as accelerate aspects of this plan to support recovery for businesses.

Our Masterplan highlights that the future wellbeing and resilience of the city centre requires more than the input of the council. Our success requires partnership working across all government departments and our business and community sectors as well as attracting new businesses and investors. We are committed to developing these partnerships further and have established a specific forum for our city centre to ensure regular two-way communication

As well as adapting to the challenges, we can see exciting opportunities to re-think what we do for the future. A number of recent innovations have included:

- creation of new parklets
- bike storage units
- acceleration of greenway development in partnership with the Department for Infrastructure
- lighting strategies
- tree planting, outdoor seating and marquees
- incentivisation schemes for new and existing businesses to invest in our city centre
- capacity building programmes for independent retailers to develop online commerce
- investing in full fibre digital infrastructure in collaboration with DCMS
- working with private sector operators to expand the availability of electric vehicle charging points across the council area

More people are now choosing to live and invest in the LCCC area and therefore expectations around the area will change.

3: Challenges

The face of the high street has changed remarkably over the last 20 years. NI is no different with many of the large multi nationals no longer visible in our city centres. In addition banks have retracted from their high street presence as many of their customers move to online banking.

The impact of COVID-19 has significantly reduced the footfall in the city but is now showing really positive signs of recovery although currently we are still down circa 100,000 in terms of footfall per month. The main implications we have seen include:

- impact of restrictions on stability and resilience of small businesses
- impact of online shopping – many businesses very innovative (sector specific issues)
- major impact on the hospitality sector and evening economy
- most town and city centres may have areas of conservation status which can create additional challenges in navigating viable schemes and in times of extreme pressure there is even greater resistance in respect of those areas.

4: Council in Action

4.1: Attracting New Business, Supporting Innovation and Diversification of Existing Business

Building and strengthening our city, supporting a series of smaller, independent retailers and service businesses to set up are key council priorities. We are doing this through:

- administering funding through two key programmes in partnership with the Department for Infrastructure and Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs having reached 256 businesses so far
- supporting the establishment of 11 new businesses in Lisburn City ranging from coffee shops, sports shops, computer services, hair and beauty services (opened from March 2021)
- supporting a further eight businesses to diversify/transform or upgrade
- delivering a focused shop local campaign to support local traders

The Masterplan has created a framework for this investment which has been an important lesson for us in terms of having the mechanisms and contemporary empirical evidence available to allow for a coherent basis for directing funding to deliver for the longer term. Such frameworks we believe have been very effective during this period.

4.2: Enhanced Outdoor City Spaces

We have been working to enhance outdoor city spaces to appeal to a wider audience including:

- creating a covered area in the main square in Lisburn for socialising/eating/relaxing
- installation of a large TV screen, tables and chairs creating an ambient social environment
- refreshing the traditional weekly outdoor market
- opportunities to create new parklets in our towns and villages

The council has also been developing a draft Open Spaces Strategy, the use of which we are eager to promote, and will review this in light of public response during the pandemic. Within walking distance of our city centre are green spaces like Castle Garden and Wallace Park in addition to the Lagan Towpath, which goes from Lisburn to Belfast and Sprucefield providing a safe pathway for walkers and cyclists alike.

4.3: Other Improvements

Additional planned improvements include:

- upgrading our centrally located Irish Linen Centre & Lisburn Museum to bring local heritage and culture to life
- reviewing and improving public amenity provision
- low cost parking initiatives
- further animation of our high street –to include increased opportunities for street art/music to support and nurture a hospitality hub.

We also recognise the focus of the city centre is changing. We are planning for more residential mixed use offerings ranging from social, intermediate and proposed assisted living/concierge service units. This is a trend that is accelerating with seven new residential planning applications for city centre living having been submitted since the start of the pandemic in March 2020.

5: Partnership

As previously mentioned, LCCC values and invests in strong partnerships with its Community Planning Partners and NI Government departments. Local Government is represented both through the NI Local Government Association and SOLACE (a forum for all 11 council Chief Executives) in strategic discussions to influence economic priorities, blue/green infrastructure and community engagement. This has led to many new initiatives, supporting people to adapt their business models, to improve walking and cycling routes and to get involved locally/influence local decisions.

More locally, we've engaged with the Lisburn Chamber of Commerce, who have been particularly active in supporting its members during this period, city deal partners and the Dublin/Belfast Economic Corridor project to position ourselves as a unique, well placed city that's open for business through our strong infrastructure and connectivity networks.

6: Listening

Home working and travel patterns have changed and restrictions have impacted behaviours. Staycations are presenting new opportunities to drive local tourism and we are delighted that Hillsborough is to receive Royal status later this year which we believe will enhance domestic tourism within our area.

People's confidence to spend has been impacted due to the potential financial impact of COVID-19 and city centre footfall was significantly reduced but is improving.

We regularly monitor data and perceptions of Lisburn City Centre and have recently partnered with a number of local neighbouring councils to commission Ulster University to understand what post COVID-19 trends might be emerging as impacted by:

- Transport habits
- Working from home
- Displacement servicing and retail sectors

The survey is live at the moment and the report will be instrumental to inform decision making for life post COVID-19.

7: Priorities

Our priorities for our city centre are:

- To work in partnership with the local Chamber of Commerce to enhance our city centre and promote it as a community space to be enjoyed by everyone. We will host more community events and create spaces to integrate economic growth and showcase community activities. To continue to support businesses impacted by COVID-19 to re-build better than ever
- To differentiate and establish a unique offering in the City of Lisburn based around heritage, open space, an award winning public realm, independent retailers, increasing our hospitality and leisure offering and community participation
- To adapt our new draft Spatial Planning Policy to reflect the COVID-19 impact as it becomes more evident

Other immediate actions include;

- A review of our business support programmes which have been well received in addressing a mixture of COVID-19 and Brexit consequences.
- Establish meanwhile uses for gap sites, though we recognise the challenge in bringing the private sector with us on this journey but it is one we are dedicated to making progress on.
- Reconfigure and consolidate our land holdings and estate to align with the changing city centre needs
- Bring timely regeneration interventions including Smithfield Square which historically would have been our market square
- Release key sites with development briefs aimed at fulfilling our Master Plan Objectives
- Apply our regulatory frameworks judiciously in the context of the recovery programme
- Refresh the Masterplan from the period 2023 and beyond.

We are also fortunate that many of our towns and villages benefit from wonderful green spaces and complimentary leisure facilities. Through our arts teams, we have animated many of these parks during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide socially distanced art performances and fun activities supporting the health and wellbeing of the community we serve.

We continue to invest in the development of our green spaces to provide various outdoor structures and coverings to support our innovative outdoor arts programmes and engage not just residents but visitors to our city.

8: Community Focus

We believe we need to change the type and nature of our community facilities by empowering communities to have a voice and to take ownership of delivering what is needed locally as the key to sustained success.

We launched a new **Local Investment Plan** in February 2021 which set out a £1m investment to support community development, part of which is a **Community Facilities Fund** – where community and voluntary groups can apply for funding to develop local facilities as they know their community needs. We are considering 32 applications and are delighted with the uptake and would like to grow this initiative moving forward.

We are also piloting our **Community Investment Fund** which will potentially provide match funding of up to £250,000 for community organisations who come forward with proposals for the development of capital programmes. A total of £2m funding is available for this initiative with one organisation having been successful so far as part of a pilot in advance of a full roll out exercise across the whole Lisburn Castlereagh area.

Our **Grand Choice Awards** are designed to fund community projects as part of a participatory budgeting initiative bringing citizens right into the heart of decision making process. Residents use their right to vote on the most beneficial project in their areas delivered by groups on the ground and funded by the council. We have just awarded £30,000 to 32 projects in Castlereagh East and Castlereagh South that were voted for by 1,877 residents. These innovative projects will support the development of sports and education programmes, investment in shared spaces and the learning of new skills and knowledge.

9: Five to Ten Years Ahead

In the longer term we foresee real opportunities to revive our city centre through listening to our residents, visitors and business operators so we can adapt the way we think and deliver services.

We are excited by the idea of a shared space that entertains and services locals and visitors also providing local employment right in the heart of the city centre. There are many centres that come alive in the evening with the local community taking charge of their public realm to create festivals and an ambience for everyone to enjoy. Councils must ensure through good planning, asset use and associated legislative powers to ensure that the 'place making' agenda embraces this vision by having the supporting infrastructure in our city centre.

10: Cultural and Creative Industries

The Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council area has a wealth of local talent who work with the council to deliver fantastic arts projects locally. In the city for example with our Christmas programmes, visits to local care homes and education programmes on arts, responsible dog ownership and recycling.

The Cultural and Creative sector is central to reviving cities. We are already planning for a community partnership forum to support increased collaboration. We are also reinventing our museum which is a unique attraction in the heart of Lisburn.

We need to shift our arts and culture offering from central buildings to community arts. This can feature as part of our city centre animation efforts and should not be considered in isolation.

Engagement with key partners is essential so artists themselves have the opportunity to input to event programmes. They engage with a wide range of stakeholders and can bring them into the town centres, through involving local people and projects.

Our museum is working on several initiatives that will bring local history to life and build on its virtual museum that was introduced early on in the pandemic in 2020. They have developed projects like cultural takeaway kits that offer residents the chance to learn at home and a programme for veterans living in the council area.

11: Equality

As a council, we are here to serve the whole community. Through the community planning process, we help identify and tackle deprivation, health inequities and issues of social mobility. We consider the equality impacts of all our major decisions and consult with users and the wider public as appropriate. In developing and working within our city centre each policy position is equality screened and perceived barriers detected.

We have recently consulted on our Equality Action Plan and our Disability Action Plan and we take all suggestions for improvements seriously. In addition, addressing inequalities is embedded in our programming of larger capital projects to improve accessibility and inclusion for those with a disability. One example would be the installation of pathways and seating areas in Hillsborough Forest Park and the inclusion of play equipment for all abilities in the treetop play park we installed in this facility. Lastly, there are a number of consultative networks for us in considering new ideas/proposals and we use these to assess the impact of our ideas.

12: UK Government Support – Our Key Asks of Central Government

12.1: Regeneration Powers

If we are to reach our full potential as a city we need community led solutions. We need our residents to have ownership. Councils in Northern Ireland would benefit greatly from more comprehensive regeneration powers, the ability to raise additional revenue other than through a tax rate base and a statutory duty through land use and transport policies so we are not competing with each other but complimenting neighbouring areas.

We are a small but vibrant region well placed and with support we can make significant economic and social progress.

12.2: Time

When substantial funding is available from central and regional government particularly in relation to capital works as councils we need more lead in time. Developing large projects requires additional resource (both in terms of staff and finance) as well as upfront investment just to get to the stage where a viable bid can be made for funding.

It would be a very positive step forward if regional and central government were to make available preliminary funding to help us move forward from the ideas phase to testing exciting viable concepts worthy of consideration.

Conclusion:

In my role as First Citizen of Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council I am truly grateful for the opportunity to meet with the Committee as a representative particularly from Northern Ireland. To be part of your discussion and to be in a position to provide a written submission has been an important experience for our council as we continue to help shape policy development from our perspective.

I hope we have offered some useful context and added value to your deliberations and would welcome future engagement if that is required. Finally I would wish the Lords Committee and all those charged with decision making every success in assisting in the recovery and revitalisation of city centres so that they can thrive as places for our community to enjoy for years to come

6 September 2021