



Northern Ireland
Executive

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High Street Task Force

Call for Evidence - 2021

High Street Task Force

Call for Evidence 2021

The Vision:

“Sustainable city, town and village centres which are thriving places for people to do business, socialise, shop, be creative and use public services, as well as being great places to live.”



The
Executive Office

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Ministerial Foreword

We have a bold, ambitious vision: “Sustainable city, town and village centres which are thriving places for people to do business, socialise, shop, be creative and use public services, as well as being great places to live.”

High streets and small businesses are the backbone of our economy and we want to see them thrive now and in the future. They are more than simply places to shop: they are a focal point for the community. People care about their local high streets because they are the centres of their community.

We know that our high streets are changing, and the Executive are committed to helping communities adapt. We also know that restoring the vibrancy of our high streets will take a number of phases over a period of years.

The issues that the High Street Task Force has been considering are found all across our towns and cities, but there cannot be a one-size-fits-all solution. Every high street is different. They each have their own character and personality with traits as unique as the village, town or city where they are located, and, they will need bespoke local solutions.

This call for evidence is an important opportunity for people to have their say and will be an essential step in bringing the vision to life and seeing results “at street level”.

We encourage the widest possible engagement and sharing of views and experiences through this call for evidence. Its findings, together with other data, will inform a draft report and recommendations that will be subject to consultation and equality considerations before a final report is presented for agreement by the Executive by spring 2022.

We look forward to your response to this call for evidence and your ongoing engagement.



Junior Minister Gary Middleton MLA



Junior Minister Declan Kearney MLA

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the wide range of individuals who contributed to the development of this Call for Evidence (CfE). This includes, but is not limited to, colleagues from other Departments and representatives from the business sector, local Government, voluntary and community sectors and professional bodies.

We particularly thank the members of the High Street Task Force:

- Business Alliance
- Department for Agriculture, the Environment and Rural Affairs
- Department for Communities
- Department for Infrastructure
- Department for the Economy
- Department of Finance
- Federation of Small Businesses
- Hospitality Ulster
- Mr Chris Suitor (Business Owner)
- NI Council for Voluntary Action
- NI Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions
- NI Local Government Association
- NI Retail Consortium
- Queen's University Belfast
- Retail NI
- Social Enterprise NI
- SOLACE – The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives
- Ulster University
- USDAW – The Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers

Key Dates and Purpose of this Document

Opening: 25 October 2021

Closing: 6 December 2021

This CfE is open from 25 October 2021 until 6 December 2021. We are keen to hear from a wide range of bodies, groups and individuals across society.

This CfE is the first stage in an ongoing public engagement process. The CfE document sets out the current understanding of the evidence available relating to high street issues and we invite comments and views on this.

Its publication is supported by a series of focused engagement events, including public workshop sessions.

Responses to the questions in this CfE will be analysed along with other evidence and information to form the basis of policy options for the Executive. A summary of findings will be published on the Executive Office website following the completion of the CfE.

Note that, due to COVID-19 restrictions, all engagement activities may be conducted using a virtual platform.

How to Respond

All responses should arrive no later than 6 December 2021 and early responses are encouraged.

There are questions in each section of the document. Please respond to as many, or as few, as you wish.

There are four options available for response. The online option is the easiest and preferred option. If you wish to request a hard copy, please contact us by email or post.

1. Online – Accessible at:
<https://consultations.nidirect.gov.uk/dfc-analytical-services-unit/high-streets-call-for-evidence>
2. Email – highstreet@communities-ni.gov.uk
 - a. With “High Street Call for Evidence 2021” as the subject line.
3. Postal – Send responses to:

High Street Call for Evidence 2021
High Street Task Force
Level 4
Department for Communities
9 Lanyon Place
Belfast
BT1 3LP
4. Workshops – Details on where and when the workshops will be held will be made available on the Executive Office website and can be accessed here:
www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/consultations/call-evidence-high-street-task-force

Accessibility

We can provide information in alternative formats on request, where reasonably practicable.

We liaise with representatives of young people and disability and minority ethnic organisations and take account of existing and developing good practice. We will respond to requests for information in alternative formats in a timely manner.

We will use a range of communications channels to enable wide access to information. Some members of the public may not have access to a computer to obtain information from websites. The Department will consider a range of communication methods to ensure wide access to its information. We will respond positively to requests for access to information to meet user needs.

Privacy, Confidentiality and Access to Call for Evidence Responses

The Executive will publish responses on the nidirect website at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/> . If a respondent is an individual acting in a private capacity, they should indicate whether or not they wish their name to be withheld or disclosed when responding.

Where responses from companies and individuals responding in a professional capacity are to be published, the Department will remove contact details only.

Responses to this Call for Evidence may be subject to requests under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) or the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 (EIR). All disclosures will be in line with this legislation. If you feel that information that you provide should be treated as private or confidential, please explain why so that we can take this into consideration.

All personal data will be processed in line with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 2018/UK General Data Protection Regulations (UKGDPR).

For more information, please see our privacy notice Privacy Notice in Annex A.

Introduction

Our high streets are changing. The way in which we work, live, shop, access services, enjoy leisure and travel is continually changing and moving away from the traditional high street experience. This change has been and continues to be exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Retail trends, the prevailing economic mood and the broader business landscape create an uncertain backdrop.

Businesses, sectors, employees and communities have experienced an unprecedented impact which continues to affect our high streets and beyond.

The Executive Office formed the High Street Task Force (HSTF) with a view to identify the challenges and issues that our high streets face, and to oversee the development of solutions and actions that can be taken to support our high streets with the strategic aim to contribute to the development of thriving and sustainable city, town and village centres. Collectively, the HSTF membership includes a range of business representatives from retail; hospitality; local government; academia; the voluntary and community sector; the culture and arts sector; tourism; and trade unions. Together, they represent considerable experience and expertise, along with economic and social acumen.

The vision of the HSTF is: *“Sustainable city, town and village centres which are thriving places for people to do business, socialise, shop, be creative and use public services, as well as being great places to live.”* It is a vision that will require everyone working together and the broadest possible buy-in from those who live and use our high streets. It will need partnership and a focus on delivery, and it will very much be a long-term project. Transformation will not happen overnight and significant work has already been undertaken in getting us to this point.

Right across society, there is a desire for our high streets to succeed. They are more than simply places to shop: they are a focal point for the community and the HSTF membership will use its networks to ensure a balanced approach that reaches across the entire region.

With this, comes the understanding that it cannot be a one-size-fits-all solution. Every high street is different. They each have their own character and personality,

with traits as unique as the village, town or city where they are located, and they will need bespoke local solutions.

We need to seize control of that change and create a new vision of thriving high streets where retail and hospitality, amongst others, can play their part. This vision is about building something new; not about resisting change or reinventing the past. The key lesson from other places is that no single sector can provide all of the solution. We need to see high streets as diverse business ecosystems that meet the needs of communities.

The HSTF appreciates the size and scale of the challenge ahead but does so with an ambition and a desire to succeed.

This Call for Evidence is the first formal stage in the strategy development and your participation is welcomed and encouraged. The responsibility for high streets rests with many and, therefore, the solutions are something that we must design and tackle together.

Making this happen will require substantial institutional, regulatory and policy change. We recognise that the solutions to these deep-rooted challenges require all of us across government to work together in new ways.

The Context

The problems facing our village, town and city centre high streets predate COVID-19, the 2007 economic crisis and internet shopping. The way people shop and the way that communities use their high streets is changing. This changes the nature of what makes a high street successful. High streets are having to evolve and adapt.

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic and the resultant impact on village, town and city centres has reinforced the need for a coordinated strategic response to both the immediate and longer-term recovery priorities for our town and city centres.

On 23 March 2020, UK high streets, town and city centres effectively closed for business. Most retailers, offices, restaurants, bars, coffee shops, cultural and leisure destinations shut their doors, as only essential businesses were allowed to stay open. Technology has meant that whilst many office-based businesses have been disrupted, working from home has been possible and new ways of working have materialised.

The impact on retail and hospitality has been much more widespread and damaging. Many have looked to new business models, offering take away options, online delivery or digital services. Others furloughed their staff to survive financially. In addition, other sectors, which play a key role in the vibrancy of town and city centres, such as arts and cultural venues, tourist attractions and event venues, have been impacted.

We need a fundamental reinvention of our high streets. It will require new levels of partnership between the Executive, councils, business and wider society to it. Since the start of the pandemic, leaders in our town centres have been managing its impact with the certainty that the 'old normal' is not a recipe for the long-term future. As habits change, our retail sector and high streets must change too.

The Task

The HSTF has been established to contribute to:-

- ***developing the strategic approach to delivering the vision and responding to the economic and social challenges facing village, town and city centres;***
- ***building and strengthening the partnerships that will deliver the strategic response; and***
- ***building the capacity needed to achieve the vision.***

The HSTF provides the opportunity to shift the perception of the high street away from the traditional economic model and towards a more complex one that addresses social, environmental and economic sustainability.

The HSTF has looked at problems, challenges, and concerns. It has questioned what good practice is; has developed key principles that can be used across any size of high street and has set out outcomes that it wants to see achieved, including sustainable regeneration. It has examined the outputs needed to deliver those outcomes and considered what best practice looks like locally, nationally and internationally.

It has also asked: “What is a high street? What are the key constituents? Who is the client/user? Can we see a clear trajectory? How does density and scale affect the solution, and, looking to the future, what are the key forces acting on the street?”

This is a rare opportunity to set in tow a model of good capacity practice for the next Programme for Government, for example; with locality-based budgets, cross-departmentally and across government tiers, and drawing on existing work such as Rural Catalyst Pilots, Urban Village Renewal and scoping adaptations tailored for and by each settlement.

The Vision

The vision of the High Street Task Force is:

“Sustainable city, town and village centres which are thriving places for people to do business, socialise, shop, be creative and use public services, as well as being great places to live.”

A Shared Responsibility

The challenges currently faced by village, town and city centres cannot be addressed by one government Department working in isolation. They require action not just by central government Departments but partnership working that also includes councils, non-governmental bodies and the business community.

No matter how good the government policy is, it needs to be implemented properly, and that will only happen if all key stakeholders are ‘bought in’ – politicians, communities, developers, business and others.

A Call for Action

The achievement of the HSTF vision will require sustained effort over time; reflected in legislation, policy and strategy, as well as front-line delivery. It will need a collaborative approach, with villages, towns, cities and councils competing for funding. Policies will be required to operate in the same space, multiple funding streams will need a more joined-up approach, and a local focus on delivery will be required. Further to this, we will need to capitalise on uniqueness, build on strengths and recognise that not one size fits all.

What Does a Good High Street Look Like?

There is a need to define what good practice looks like. However, this cannot be a proscriptive definition but rather should be a set of guiding principles.

A good high street is likely to have many or all of the following characteristics:

- Accessible and connected;
- Easier to get to and move around in;
- Welcoming and safe;
- Has unique characteristics and culture;
- Collaborative, responsible and ongoing;
- Enjoyable;
- Has a diversity of uses and activities;
- Is a nicer place to be;
- Has a better mix of uses so that more people will want to go there, spend time, live and do business there;
- Has found a way of managing them well.

What are the key issues?

- Recovery from Coronavirus and beyond;
- Developing a new strategic approach;
- Climate change – adaptation and mitigation;
- Planning principles;
- Vacancies;
- Housing;
- Public Transport (including active travel);
- Rates;
- Tourism;
- Digital High Streets;
- Rural settlements;
- People, localism and well-being.

Themes and Questions

The 14 themes listed in this Call for Evidence provide an overview of the issues that our high streets currently face. The key considerations and issues have been listed in bullet form to show the initial thoughts gathered so far and set the scene for further ideas to be gathered through the Call for Evidence.

The questions for each theme are then listed and mirror those provided in the online version.

Theme 1: Partnerships

The HSTF will seek to encourage partnerships with public, private and third sector partners, locally, regionally and nationally. This could require the consideration of:

- Government, local authorities, the wider public sector, businesses and communities must put the health of village, town and city centres at the heart of decision making and deliver the best local outcomes, align policies and target available resources to prioritise town centre sites, encouraging vibrancy, equality and diversity.
- Champions are needed to lead the way forward and to involve those who live and work in our town centres in the decision making.
- More coordination and joined-up working, partnership and reorganisation of the key statutory functions is needed to bring about effective change more quickly.
- Correct powers, appropriately devolved, need to be in place to deliver interventions.
- A recognition that this a long-term approach.
- Our councils have a key role in the localism agenda and the Executive need to consider the devolution of regeneration and other powers to them so that they can play a fuller role in the recovery process.
- We need interim solutions.
- We need to determine what has worked well and has not worked.

Theme 1: Questions

1. What are the key issues for partnerships?
2. What powers should local partnerships have to make them more effective?
3. What changes to legislation, policies, processes or procedures could transform partnerships on the high street?

Theme 2: Follow Best Practice

The HSTF approach to developing best practice is to assess good practice from other places and adapt this so that 'best practice' becomes a unique 'right practice' for our local high streets. This could require the consideration of:

- Looking at best practice locally, nationally and internationally.
- The importance of community planning, in which public sector organisations work in partnership with the private sector, local communities and the community and voluntary sector to identify and solve local problems, improve services and implement a shared vision for promoting the well-being of an area.

Theme 2: Questions

4. What is best practice for the management of the high street?
5. What expert help is needed to develop best practice?
6. What changes are needed to legislation, procedures and processes to improve best practice and transform community planning on the high street?

Theme 3: Investment

The high street needs ways of dealing with investment that will support innovation, help renewal and create thriving high streets. Investment is not only needed for buildings and digital infrastructure, but also for developing people and communities. This could require the consideration of:

- More specific funding streams and schemes are required to promote and encourage residential living
- Funding streams and workforces should be aligned.
- Specific funding schemes to promote and encourage wider provision of community services.
- A better understanding and clarity on the availability of funding streams.
- Place-based budgeting.
- The residential Urban Development Grant scheme should be revived.
- More focused funding for village, town and city centre promotions.
- Incentives to deal with long-term vacancies.
- Clarity on priority investment area(s) is needed.

Theme 3: Questions

7. What are the key issues for investment?
8. Is information on funding easy to find?
9. Which of the following funds would support the development of the high street? Pick as many or as few as you wish.
 - a. High Street Transformation
 - b. Residential Living
 - c. Urban Development Grant
 - d. Other (Please comment below)

Theme 4: Planning

In addressing planning for the high street, our challenge will be to contribute to the delivery of a fair and inclusive planning system for people, communities and businesses. This could require a review of the planning system, its impact on the high street and the consideration of:

- Village, town and city centre masterplans.
- Promoting a “Town Centre First” principle to encourage the public sector to continue to invest in town centres and help communities thrive.
- More flexible planning policies are required to enable repurposing.
- Strong diversification of town centres is needed to include, but not limited to: housing, community uses, leisure, offices and outdoor spaces.
- Actions are needed to address vacancy and dereliction on the High Street.
- A five-year moratorium on major out-of-town retail applications should be considered.
- A stricter “town centre first” approach, more Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and a joined-up approach to regeneration.
- An approach to increase population living and working in our high street.

Theme 4: Questions

10. Are you aware of village, town and city centre masterplans?

11. What are the key planning issues?

12. Would you support a temporary ban on out-of-town retail developments?

- a. Yes
- b. No

If yes, for how long?

13. What changes to legislation, policies, processes or procedures could transform high street planning for the better?

Theme 5: Public Realm

The Public Realm is defined as the space around, between and within buildings that are publicly accessible, including streets, squares, parks and open spaces. These are the everyday spaces that we move through and socialise within and the places where we live, work and play. This could require the consideration of:

- Creating better ways of delivering Public Realm that are cleaner and greener.
- Public Realm “smart” towns with green spaces that are decluttered, eco-friendly, sustainable and better connected.
- Promoting high-quality design to ensure that our town centres provide sustainable, attractive, accessible and safe environments.
- Town centres should be clean, vibrant and attractive if visitors are to be encouraged to visit and stay.

Theme 5: Questions

14. What are your views on the high street environment?
15. What could be done to change the perception of the Public Realm?
16. What improvements are needed in your high street?
17. What is a priority for Public Realm projects in the high street?
18. What would make town-centre living more attractive?

Theme 6: Fiscal - Including Rates

Fiscal policy is how government taxation and spending policies are used to influence economic conditions. This affects demands on employment, inflation, goods and services, and economic growth. This could require the consideration of:

- Reform the tax system to ensure that sufficient revenue to pay for public services whilst ensuring that the tax burden is fair.
- A fundamental reform and review of commercial and business rates in village, town and city centres. (NI Reval 2023)
- A targeted approach to rates for small businesses.
- Our high streets have the highest vacancy rates in the UK. We need to develop a policy response to address vacancies and rates.

Theme 6: Questions

19. What tax and rating reforms are needed to help stimulate the high street economy?
20. What actions should be taken to reduce vacancy rates on the high street?
21. Do you believe that legislation is required to change fiscal policy?

Theme 7: Capacity

Capacity refers to the built, social, spatial, and infrastructural strengths and opportunities to transform to produce significant and measurable change. This could require the consideration of:

- A capacity mapping and pilots exercise similar to that undertaken by the HSTF in England should be developed for our region, utilising Ministerial Advisory Group data and knowledge, and resourced and contemporised by HSTF funds. This should be council area coordinated and community led.
- Greater High Street inclusion for Community Wealth Building Pilots, community planning, with greater formal and allocated cross-departmental investment in each. Community Wealth Building Pilots are an investment model to enable local communities to increase co-operative asset ownership, anchor jobs and resources locally, and ensure local community economic stability and democratic control.
- Develop HSTF capacity by investment in hubs by location, and, if desired at community level.

Theme 7: Questions

22. What is the priority for capacity mapping and pilot exercises?

23. What capacity skills need to be developed?

24. What should be created to support the development of high street capacity?

- a. Community funds
- b. Locality budgets
- c. Sector schemes
- d. Expert advice
- e. Workshops
- f. Collaborative approach
- g. Other (Please comment below)

Theme 8: Energy, Climate Change and Sustainability

Our environment is our most important asset and is crucial to each and every one of us. It is one of the main reasons that people from other countries and regions visit, bringing money into the local economy. It affects our economy, our health and well-being, and it facilitates social interaction. Building, through construction, renovation and repurposing, also plays a key role in emissions reduction. This could require the consideration of:

- The carbon impact of interventions during design, to reduce the carbon footprint and increase sustainable development.
- Carbon reduction measures in existing and future infrastructures in our high streets should be dynamically addressed.
- Blue-green infrastructures, which are strategically planned networks of natural and semi-natural areas to enhance the biodiversity designed and managed to support a wide range of ecosystem services, could assist with the greening of our urban environments, facilitate better water management and support safer, cleaner, sustainable spaces. This will allow interconnectivity, provide recreation spaces and help communities to connect and to thrive economically and socially.
- Examine incentives for repurposing existing buildings to address embodied energy, increase energy efficiency and use of renewable energy.

Theme 8: Questions

25. What actions should be adopted to provide greener urban environments?
26. What incentives should there be for repurposing buildings? (Tick as many or as few as you wish)
- a. Environmental grants
 - b. Loans
 - c. Reduced rates
 - d. Other (if you pick "Other" please expand on your answer)
27. Should existing buildings, including our heritage assets, play an enhanced role in transforming the High Street?
- a. Yes
 - b. No

Theme 9: Housing and Other Infrastructure

Good quality, affordable and sustainable housing is central to reducing housing stress, homelessness and improving housing solutions for the most vulnerable. This could require the consideration of:

- Policies and strategies to address quality, quantity and availability of housing to encourage people to live in and around high streets.
- We should ensure that these are not just transient communities but that they are attractive to families.
- We should consider space standards, access to services and the living over the shops scheme.

Theme 9: Questions

28. What strategies are needed to encourage people to live in and around the high street?

29. What key services should be available for high street residents?

- a. Health
- b. Housing
- c. Education
- d. Leisure
- e. Other (if you pick "Other" please expand on your answer)

30. How do we engage communities more effectively?

31. How will housing developments improve areas of deprivation in high streets, rural villages, town and city centres?

Theme 10: Getting To and From the High Street

Getting to and within villages, towns and cities is at the heart of urban regeneration and positively impacts local and regional economies. It unlocks development potential and as a result, many places and communities have seen increased regeneration, investment and employment. This could require the consideration of:

- Ensure that our town centres are well served with public transport provision and supporting infrastructure.
- Promote policies to encourage walking, cycling and the accessibility and quality of environment. This could link to the 15-minute neighbourhood concept.
- Maintain and improve accessibility to, and within, village, town and city centres.
- Parking, including issues such as charging, free or time-limited parking, especially in the levelling-up context.
- Reduce the appeal of commuter and out-of-town parking.
- Incentivise employers to promote the use of public transport.

Theme 10: Questions

32. How do you get to your high street? (Tick all that apply)

- a. Walk
- b. Car
- c. Bus
- d. Train
- e. Cycle
- f. Taxi
- g. Other (if you pick "Other" please expand on your answer)

33. What would make your journey to and from your high street easier?

34. What changes to legislation, policies, processes or procedures would encourage walking and cycling?

35. What are your views on high street parking?

Theme 11: Tourism

Tourism is a major contributor to the economic well-being of our villages, towns and cities. Its development could include:

- A review of policy and regulations including support for hotels.
- Recognising the importance of sustainable town centres to meet the expectations of the tourist of the future. This will mean being able to provide a critical mass of services for accommodation, hospitality outlets and a thriving night-time economy.
- Develop the unique and visitor attractiveness of our high streets and remodel their marketing to reflect that.

Theme 11: Questions

36. How do we engage with communities to promote tourism?
37. What changes to legislation, policies, processes or procedures should be made to develop tourism on the high street?
38. Are you aware of an innovative tourism project that could help your high street?

Theme 12: Digital High Streets

Online shopping has impacted our high streets. As well as the opportunities, consideration of the concerns and issues could include:

- Complementing existing business models to allow additional flexibility and resilience to react and survive during what are still uncertain times. Going online will also open up opportunities to reach new markets and new consumer demand.
- In addition to online innovation and diversification, the high street needs to be offering something different that cannot be delivered or experienced online.
- We need data-driven insights into the social media conversations that matter with ways to understand the audience and how to make better connections to reach them, such as their preferences.
- Promoting local products, services and trades.
- Considering the potential for strategies such as data and IT training.

Theme 12: Questions

39. What aspects of a digital high street are important?

40. What digital innovations would help your high street?

41. What more needs to be done to improve digital skills?

Theme 13: Rural Settlements

Rural development is vital not just for individuals in rural areas but also for economic growth. Rural development will help improve productivity and stability in social and economic development. It enhances the quality of life and financial well-being of individuals, specifically those living in rural areas, but it also has major impacts on those in urban environments. This could require the consideration of:

- Providing support for rural settlements, including consideration of the social, environmental and economic role of settlements in a new era of connected working.
- Maximising the opportunities of the Department for the Economy-led Project Stratum that will bring high-speed broadband and connectivity to rural settlements.
- Invest in and provide a tailored and seamless approach.
- Village high street development

Theme 13: Questions

42. What changes to legislation, process and procedures are needed for village developments?
43. How could funding for rural settlements be made easier?
44. What innovative initiatives would improve village economies?

Theme 14: People, Localism and Well-being

Places need to be compelling, to encourage communities to support economies, products and services that promote and improve the health and well-being of residents and the wider community. People need to feel connected, and community networks can support these links. This could include:

- The High Streets Task Force in England describes this regeneration framework as four Rs: repositioning, reinventing, rebranding and restructuring. These 'four Rs' require a new vision, a changed offer to consumers, better stakeholder communication and changing the governance of our high streets.
- Part of the solution to this challenge lies in fully developing and implementing the concept of 'localism' to repurpose our village, town and city centres as unique hubs at the heart of our community.
- Localism is not just about supporting independent retailers; it is also about empowering people and communities to reshape and repurpose their local villages, towns and city centres and reinvigorate the leadership model.
- Considering the impact of the Living Wage on equality and on people wanting to work on the high street.

Theme 14: Questions

45. Are you aware of any initiatives that would improve localism in your community?
46. What is the most important aspect for creating well-being in the community?

Annex A

Privacy Notice

High Street Task Force (HSTF)

Data Controller Name: Department for Communities

Address: Causeway Exchange, 1 -7 Bedford Street, Belfast BT2 7EG

Email: DPO@communities-ni.gov.uk

Why are you processing my personal information?

The High Street Call for Evidence, launched on 25th October 2021, seeks evidence, data and views on High Street issues. The lawful basis for processing data provided to the Department during this consultation is in the UK GDPR at Article 6(1)(e) and Article 9(2)(g)). The personal data collected in this consultation exercise will be used for analysis and reporting of consultation responses.

Which categories of personal data are you processing?

The personal data we are expecting to receive and handle will consist of your name, address, email address, and any additional personal data you provide in your responses. If you are responding as a commercial/business entity, then some elements of your contact details may not be personal data.

Where do you get my personal data from?

If we hold your personal data in relation to this Call for Evidence, then you will have sent it to us when you submitted your consultation response.

Do you share my personal data with anyone else?

During the Call for Evidence analysis, responses will be analysed and responses may be published on the Department for Communities website.

Do you transfer my personal data to other countries?

No.

How long to do you keep my personal data?

The data you provide in your response will be retained on the Department's Record Management system for seven years in line with the Department's Retention and Disposal Schedule.

What rights do I have?

- You have the right to obtain confirmation that your data is being processed and access to your personal data.
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Comhairle Ceantair
Lár Uladh
Mid Ulster
District Council

**Mid Ulster District Council's Response to
High Street Task Force Call for Evidence**

6 December 2021

Mid Ulster District Council recognises that town centres are key economic drivers in our District and there is evidently a clear need to reboot and support the economy to make them agile in the future. The scale of the crisis facing the retail sector is grave and creative policy thinking and future planning of town centres will be an essential part of the ongoing recovery from Covid 19 and the future. It is vital that town and city centres are reclaimed to their rightful position and role as places that serve their communities, visitors, businesses and key stakeholders. Businesses and our town centres are yet to realise the full impact of the Covid-19 crisis and the need to accelerate action and investment is critical.

Current partnership working between Councils and Government Departments is not strong enough. There is an urgent need for a co-ordinated, joined up financial package that is committed to Councils in NI for a 4 year term to enable the strategic transformation of our High Streets. Joined up Governance is critical whereby Government Departments should be working together, alongside Councils, to develop multi-annual action plans to support our key towns with a financial investment package for 4 years. Piecemeal funding is no longer acceptable for the long-term vitality of our High Streets.

In conjunction to such a measure it is imperative that regeneration powers are devolved to local Councils. Councils currently possess local economic development and planning powers, but our development remit is severely restricted as we do not yet possess "place making powers" to progress a range of transformative initiatives to tackle the seismic issues that impact our towns. This is further compounded by the fact that Councils do not have direct access to strategic financial stimulus packages which are available in other parts of the UK as detailed below. Any financial package must be tailored to suit each town, as a 'one size fits all', is not appropriate.

There is a need to take cognisance of the good practice and funding opportunities that are available especially in the UK. Funding programmes such as the Future High Street Funds and Reopening High Streets Safely Fund are critical to revitalise, rejuvenate our local High Streets, and provide business support packages to stimulate the local economy.



It is therefore welcome that the High Street Task Force has initiated the process of supporting and rejuvenating the High Streets of Northern Ireland and we eagerly await to see the out-workings of this key body.

Theme 1: Partnerships

It is important to identify what defines a partnership. A Partnership needs to offer incentives, authority and funding to make them inclusive and effective. Partnership working has become more difficult since COVID as there are increased demands on people's time. It is important that additional mechanisms are not created but that existing ones are used including the involvement of Town Centre Forums and Regeneration Partnerships, Chambers of Commerce, Community Planning and Public Realm Partnerships.

Communication is also a key ingredient for successful partnership working. Much greater communication between Councils and Government Depts is needed. Silo working still occurs and a more effective joined up approach is required, including cross border engagement. Partnerships must be re-established and enhanced at a local level for the benefit of the High Street. e.g. DFI/Utility providers working with local Councils and traders to avoid disruption to the consumer.

The current High Street Task Force is very Belfast-centred, and needs to extend its reach to have strong rural representation from areas such as Mid Ulster. Another key factor to consider is inclusiveness in relation to those with a disability, which accounts for 21% of our community, young people and older people. It is also important that proper resources be put in place to allow Council led partnerships to access and progress investment opportunities.

Theme 2: Best Practice

Local solutions must be determined at a local level.

Hence urgent decisions are necessary to devolve and transfer regeneration powers to Councils, with the adequate resources alongside to unlock the potential of our town centres, drawing upon a variety of best practice examples from other areas. Key factors are enabling Councils legislatively with place-making powers along with the strategic alignment and transfer of Government's regeneration budgets to Councils to support our urban development efforts. It is critical that Councils possess these regeneration powers, to work in conjunction with our local Town Centre Forums, to access funding to progress urgent initiatives to support our High Streets, given the tumultuous period we have witnessed, having withdrawn from the EU and the accelerated decline of the High Street since the onset of the pandemic.



There are many examples of good practice in Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland and Great Britain. One key example in the Republic of Ireland is 'Tidy Towns initiative'. There needs to be an enabler to ensure that key stakeholders are involved with an adequate funding and personnel capacity.

Theme 3: Investment

Looking beyond the short-term and towards 'transforming' our towns and high streets to make them befitting for the 21st Century shopper, will require a significant funding package by Government, similar to the investment provided in England for example, through the Future High Streets Fund and Reopening the High Street Safely Fund.

Only funding of this magnitude will make a difference in our towns and will help us move away from tinkering with minor schemes that provide a "sticking plaster approach" towards town centre development, when in fact properties need a major refit or in some cases raised to the ground and rebuilt as modern retail premises. Such sizable interventions would help breathe new life into our high streets by reconfiguring and re-imagining our town centre assets to make them attractive and fit for purpose today.

We can only do so, if Government provides a multi-million pound funding package to help us achieve this much desired aspiration for our towns in Mid Ulster, just like what was afforded to England.

The key to investment is a co-ordinated approach with the requisite funding streams collaborating together to present a full and effective package of funding over a 4 year period, to ensure effective and efficient delivery on the ground. Piecemeal funding pots and short timeframes are no longer viable and do not lend themselves to providing strategic impact.

The return of the Urban Development Grants, Living Over the Shops schemes and Empty to Occupied Schemes are also useful initiatives that could be introduced as interim measures to encourage urban reinvigoration, however, these do not discount the need for much more seismic stimulus funding to transform our towns which are available in other parts of the UK.

Business Incubation Units are an integral element to the high street and this model has been a proven success. It is important that once new businesses are established in starter units, they are encouraged and supported to move into town centre premises when fully established to allow for business growth.



Neighbourhood investment and services should be developed in accordance with local economic and community planning and development and growth planning priorities of Councils and funding and human resources transferred to achieve this.

Theme 4: Planning

It is important that the existing legislation be enhanced. The “Town Centre First” approach must be strengthened and implemented. Out of town shopping centres may play a positive role, but only if they are planned and managed accordingly, with rates accounted for equitably in line with our high street retailers.

Towns/Villages need master planning/place shaping/health checks on a regular basis to ensure that priorities are reassessed and addressed as required. A one-size fits all approach does not work and a more tailored solution is needed to align with the unique needs for each town.

Theme 5: Public Realm

Mid Ulster District Council supports the need to invest in our Public Realm but reinforces the need and aspiration for Council to have regeneration powers and financial resources to ensure the local need is accounted for.

There is often strong resistance to change, which is evitable as a result of Public Realm Schemes (pedestrian zones, parking, traffic management/bypasses etc.); however, the long term outlook needs to be clearly defined. Under Public Realm, car parks and key linkages need to form an integral part of delivery to ensure safe spaces within our High Street. Gateways to our towns/villages should be inviting.

Government Departments (DfC, DAERA and DFI) needs to work more closely with Councils to develop the public realm within our towns and villages. Mid Ulster Council welcomes the introduction of some recent revitalization schemes being funded by the three Government Departments above, however, Council has had no input towards their design but act only as a delivery body. Council would contend that they can provide added value to the design of such schemes, had we been afforded the opportunity to input, ahead of schemes being launched.

It would be Mid Ulster Council's view that greater joined up working needs to occur to develop public realm spaces within our main towns. Currently DfC provide funding to urban areas, classified as settlement populations of 5000+. There is currently no statutory responsibility for any Government Department to support physical



regeneration to settlements below 5000 population. In recent years, DAERA have provided some funding for village regeneration through the Rural Development Programme, however, this is also coming to an end in March 2022 and as a result, a significant funding gap will occur to develop our key village settlements across Mid Ulster. Whilst we are aware of the existence of the Covid Settlement Scheme funded by DFI, DAERA and DfC, this funding whilst appreciated, will not fill the vacuum of financial support needed to undertake public realm works in villages whose population is less than 5000.

In Mid Ulster, we have 3 large towns and 2 smaller towns. Four of the towns receive funding from DfC and have benefited from public realm works. The remaining town, Maghera, has a population just bordering 5,000 inhabitants, but DfC will not provide funding to undertake a much needed public realm scheme in the town, due to the population figures not meeting their 5,000 population threshold. It is essential that DfC offer flexibility to Councils in this position, and permit expenditure to advance public realm works in towns, whose size borders their 5,000 resident threshold. Funding for a public realm scheme in Maghera is of utmost strategic importance as the town is situated on the A29 main arterial route, it acts as a key gateway into Mid Ulster and has on average 9000 vehicles travelling through it every day.

Theme 6: Fiscal – Including Rates

Rates are a controversial subject matter and have been pinpointed as one of the major factors that have caused businesses 'to go under' and stifled new retail start-ups in our town centres. Businesses trading in town centres are at a market disadvantage to out of town developments (such as enterprise parks) because they are paying much higher rates.

Rates are presently the only taxation power of the NI Executive and there are two elements to the rates bill paid by domestic and non-domestic sectors in Northern Ireland; the district rate set by District Councils and the Regional Rate, which is determined by the Executive. It is important that the HSTF consider data from the Covid-19 rates holiday to ascertain the impact that it has had on new business start-ups and potentially the slowdown in shop closure rates. The rates holiday has been positive to retailers in the current pandemic and there is an understanding that this may not be extended. It is clear however, that our High Street businesses cannot afford to go back to 100% rates due to the continuing low consumer confidence and decrease in footfall levels as this pandemic continues- a gradual re-establishment of rates should be considered i.e. 50%, 75%, 100% over a three-year period. Rates relief, based on a level of square footage, must also be considered in any intervention.



It is important that the Rates Review conducted under Máirtín Ó Muilleoir is revisited and key actions considered. Property tax must be equitable to ensure survival, alongside the incorporation of online sales tax to large companies.

Continuation of rate reliefs is important, for example Small Business Rates Relief. Business Start-ups should have a rates incentive implemented for up to 5 years to allow them to establish themselves. Intervention for retail industry is required in line with other sectors such as Agriculture.

Legislation change is also required in respect of the number of licences issued to premises within the High Street. This is currently restricting growth of the Hospitality sector within the Town centres.

Theme 7: Capacity

Capacity needs to be a foundation block for all aspects of our High Streets. People need to be equipped and financially resourced to build capacity and encourage partnership working in order to realise the vision for our High Streets.

Empty units need to be repurposed to meet the business need and an extensive package of incentives introduced to achieve this goal. It is about creating flexible spaces that can be utilised for a number of purposes, not solely business. Leasing terms should be addressed to entice businesses back to our High Streets. Undoubtedly greater public/private partnership working is needed to make this happen.

The Ministerial Advisory Group have developed a Capacity Mapping Toolkit, which needs to be incorporated into the HSTF.

Theme 8: Energy, Climate Change and Sustainability

There is existing and previous work that can be utilised such as Sustainable NI, together with post COP 26 directives at City, Village and Town level.

It would be helpful if a programme of incentives is developed (ie, grants programme) to assist with the practicalities to assist with energy, climate change and sustainability. The sustainability surrounding our heritage assets are restrictive. Buildings underutilised and vacant in our High Streets could be vested for other purposes, such as Government use, and disseminating greater levels of public sector jobs across NI.

Prices for cleaner energy are increasing drastically e.g. gas. Consideration should be given to the reintroduction of the Solar Panel Incentive Scheme, which was a success.



It is important to note that there is a need for bespoke local solutions and the need to soften Town Centre environments to make it aesthetically pleasing.

Active Travel should be given due consideration and prioritisation within local and regional action plans, to ensure schemes are developed and delivered to contribute to a sustainable environment. Greenways must be prioritised and further investment is required to build safe and green routes for people to use going to and from work and for exercise.

Theme 9: Housing and Other Infrastructure

It has become clear over the past number of years that people need to be encouraged to live in town centres. Changes need to occur to incentivize town center living (such as Living Over the Shops), inclusion of more green spaces, more opportunities to socialize and better facilities for people including cafes and shops staying open later to keep the towns alive after 5pm. Our High Streets need to be a place where people feel relaxed and safe to go in the evening - schemes such as 'Purple Flag' strive to achieve this.

Radical action needs to be taken for social housing developments to tackle deprivation in high streets, rural villages, town and city centres alongside the appropriate infrastructure.

Opportunities for existing public buildings to become "one stop shops" as a catalyst for services and information, will attempt to bring life back into town centres.

Theme 10: Getting To and From the High Street

Mid Ulster has a large reliance on cars as the main means of transport. There are a variety of reasons for this reliance, for example, the population is rural and public transport is not easily accessible to everyone, there is no train service and there are very few dedicated cycle lanes in town centres. A joined up approach for cycle planning is required in local areas: - it cannot be seen as a short add on to another project. Dungannon's circular walking and cycling path is a typical exemplar project. Creating routes such as this require joint partnership between shops, new building projects, new businesses etc, so that they are strategically planned to create such pathways, connecting up the entire town with the high street and its neighborhoods.

Parking regulations need a radical review. Businesses view that the space outside their shop is solely for the customer. The whole question of transport cannot be considered in isolation, it must be led by an environmentally friendly policy and localised to suit each rural, urban and suburban place. More public routes will bring some but not all the answers.



Theme 11: Tourism

Tourism and town centres should be closely linked particularly in a rural area like Mid Ulster. The tourist attractions in the area need to link with each other and connect with the town centres. An example of this is Seamus Heaney HomePlace and the recently launched Seamus Heaney Open Ground, which is a series of sites that have been developed for visitors that inspired Seamus Heaney's Poetry. One of the sites developed was a link to the Bus Station in Magherafelt, which Seamus Heaney wrote about in his poem Route 110 a piece of public art and interpretation has been installed to tell this story.

Local Heritage is key to Tourism in Mid Ulster but the regulations make it difficult to develop the sites as they are so restrictive.

Local assets need to be promoted with proper branding and widespread advertising. Interventions need to be bespoke for the area with unique solutions tailored for local problems.

Outdoor attractions are very popular and there are many examples of these throughout the Mid Ulster District. The recently opened Splash Waterpark in a former quarry is an example of a private sector initiative that can have spinoff for the local towns and villages as people will travel to it and then spend time in the area.

Tourism holiday-at-home scheme is a good incentive for the local tourism sector and schemes such as this should be supported in the future.

Theme 12: Digital High Streets

The Covid 19 Pandemic has highlighted how it is possible to work remotely and many companies are adopting this as a policy going forward. There is an opportunity to create "Office hubs" in local towns to allow people to work remotely. This may also offer the opportunity to repurpose derelict buildings within town centres.

To encourage digital high streets it is critical to have proper connectivity in town centres.

There needs to be support for businesses to use technology as in many cases there is a skills gap that needs to be addressed. There could be opportunities to upskill local people through connections with local colleges. For example in Dungannon digital marketing students were connected with less tech savvy businesses to support them develop new social media sites. It is important that our towns embrace the potential afforded by the 'digital high street' as online shopping continues to grow. In our town centres some retailers understand the value and importance of embracing new



technologies and proving an online offering, however, many do not share the views and the lack of understanding and awareness of the benefits it can provide as a tool.

The parking app – Just Park is a great concept but there are times there is no connectivity to allow people to use it, which causes frustration.

DfE should investigate the opportunity for local independent traders to collaborate on an online platform on an NI wide basis.

Theme 13: Rural Settlements

Any support for local areas must be tailored to specifically suit the needs of the area – a one-size fits all approach does not work, it must be based on need. Like the High Streets, rural areas need support to retain footfall. Rural areas have a strong community focus and community initiatives must be supported for rural communities to thrive.

There needs to be joined up thinking between the government departments. DAERA DFI, DfC have already started this process during COVID and it has worked well. This model needs further development and local government should be added as a willing partner at the design phase, as opposed to being used as just a delivery body. No high street should have any more or less potential or access to opportunities – all are important regardless of size or rurality. The HTSF provides a unique opportunity for transformation.

An integrated approach via each of the eleven councils after a "rural funding scoping exercise". In short, bring it together under one authority and localise the spend.

Further discussion on investment in public realm in villages is included under Theme 5.

Theme 14: People, Localism and Well-being

This past 20 months has shown how important it is for local people to connect with their local town, Localism is at the core of any regeneration project going forward. Consumers have been restricted to remaining local and have utilised outdoor areas such as the local markets for their shopping. It will be vital to connect not only with businesses in the town centre but crucially with the people and communities who use the town centre. Towns will need to focus on keeping the local theme, connecting and creating spaces where local people want to live, work and play.



Additional Comments

The Shop Local Voucher Scheme has been very successful for the High Street. There is a suggestion that it should have been limited to independent local traders and open to younger people to encourage them into the town centres.

The hospitality sector has been particularly hard hit by Covid 19 and is struggling to survive. The implementation of the Covid passport is putting even more pressure on the hospitality sector. More support, advice and guidance is needed for this sector.

Review of membership of the HSTF sub-groups - rural membership is required.

Council would request consideration of a 'Future High Streets Fund' in Northern Ireland (similar to England) to provide funding for Councils to rejuvenate and transform city and town centres through a range of social, economic and physical initiatives including marketing and promotion, events, digital training, improving access and transforming empty units.

Mid Ulster District Council looks forward to further engagement as the High Street Task Force moves forward to the next stages of the process.

Conclusion

As we approach 2022, Mid Ulster District Council, would like to duly note that 2022 will be an extremely fragile environment for our towns, with the ongoing Covid 19 pandemic and the reduction in financial support programmes.

There is an **urgent need** to ensure initiatives such as the Future High Street fund are made available to local authorities in NI, as soon as possible, just like what is available in other parts of the UK.

Our High Streets are an integral element of our local economy - they need to be viable to ensure an economic multiplier effect to our rural catchment area. Currently, NI towns are perceived by retail operators as being unattractive locations from which to trade and this is largely due to the Rates issue. Further Government support is required to help traders withstand this economic tsunami and we would encourage Government to continue their incentives such as the rates relief schemes, as discussed within the paper.

Regeneration, community and loyalty all go hand in hand to create unique, bespoke and viable High Streets. The High Street Taskforce provides an opportunity for a meaningful transformation to occur - let's not waste it!



Comhairle Ceantair
Lár Uladh
Mid Ulster
District Council

NB: This paper has been prepared by Mid Ulster District Council in conjunction with 5 Town Centre Forums, wider discussions with town traders and input from Council's elected representatives.

Adrian McCreesh
Chief Executive



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Commonities

Appendix 2a

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By email:

Adrian.McCreesh@midulstercouncil.org

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e-mail: Gerard.Murray@communities-ni.gov.uk

Our ref:

Date: 11 December 2021

Dear Adrian

COVID RECOVERY SMALL SETTLEMENTS REGENERATION PROGRAMME

I am writing to provide advance notice that on Monday 13th December 2021, a joint press release from Ministers Hargey, Poots and Mallon will announce the launch of the £21m COVID Recovery Small Settlements Regeneration Programme. I have attached the text of the press release for your information. **Please note that this is embargoed until midnight on Monday 13th December 2021.**

Building on the success of last year's COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme, officials from all three Departments have been working with your council colleagues to ensure that the Programme is as flexible as possible to enable councils to deliver projects which are tailored to meet locally identified need.

Each Council has been asked to develop a draft Small Settlements Regeneration Plan for review by a Strategic Group of Directors from DfC, DAERA and DfI, to ensure deliverability and strategic fit with the programme. **I have asked councils to return their draft Plans to DfC by noon on 21st December.** After the plans have been reviewed and agreed, letters of offer will be issued to councils and once these have been signed and returned to DfC, the full allocation of capital and revenue funding will be released in the current financial year.

The allocation for your council is in line with the indicative figures that have been provided previously, but are set out in the attached Guidance Notes for the programme. Please note that if your draft Regeneration Plan is not submitted to the Department by the deadline, your letter of offer will be delayed.

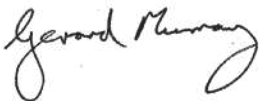
I expect, given the limited time councils will have to develop their Regeneration Plans, and, in some cases, take them through council processes, that further refinement will be required as the plans are being delivered. Your officers should liaise with their DfC regeneration lead official to secure agreement to any changes proposed as the plans are delivered. We will continue to be as flexible as possible in this regard.

Please note that there is also a strong possibility that the capital allocations could be increased. I have therefore advised council officers to work up some reserve projects so that you are able to take advantage of this opportunity should it arise. You may wish to consider having sufficient flexibility to increase your council's 10% contribution in line with this.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank your teams for the excellent work so far on this Programme. Securing approval for the business case took longer than we had hoped meaning that the timelines are challenging. I am very grateful for council colleagues' input and support thus far.

The Guidance Notes for the Programme are attached for your information. Please feel free to contact me directly if you have any queries or require any additional support from me or my team.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gerard Murray', with a stylized, cursive script.

GERARD MURRAY

Cc Fiona McKeown
Eamon Gallogly
Sharon McGowan



DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES COVID-19 RECOVERY SMALL SETTLEMENTS REGENERATION PROGRAMME

COVID-19 RECOVERY SMALL SETTLEMENTS REGENERATION PLAN

Please complete this template and return to ryan.o'neill@communities-ni.gov.uk no later than noon on 21 DECEMBER 2021

The form should be completed electronically

Please note that information provided may be made available to other departments, agencies or funding bodies for the purposes of preventing or detecting fraud.

The completed template may also be subject to requests for disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act.

1. CONTACT DETAILS

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Council Address Burn Road
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Post Code BT80 8DT



2. DELIVERY OF YOUR COVID RECOVERY SMALL SETTLEMENTS REGENERATION PLAN

Please identify the individual projects within your regeneration plan, together with information on the nature of the funding (capital or revenue) and how it will be delivered (grant scheme/direct procurement/framework etc). Information on your proposed approach to procurement should also be included, together with proposals for the retention or disposal of assets procured under the fund.

You should also indicate how the plan meets the 7 objectives of the fund as set out in Annex A to this document, and also how it will contribute to the delivery of Outcome 10 of the Programme for Government ("We have created a place where people want to live and work, to visit and invest.").

The projects detailed in this Plan have emanated directly from the communities they are intended to benefit. They have been informed by extensive local engagement across the District during the Village Planning process and public consultation exercises carried out during the preparation of our strategies for local economic development, outdoor recreation and tourism.

The projects included below will be designed to meet local needs and achieve maximum impact when delivered. We will utilise Council owned property where possible to ensure delivery within timescale and continue to work in partnership with Forest Service NI to further develop our forests as a source of outdoor recreation – as expressly desired by the community.

The projects listed below are proposed for delivery in 22/23.

In tandem with delivery of 22/23 listed projects, there will be significant time and resource invested by Council to develop further projects to a state of readiness in preparation for delivery in 23/24 (see potential options at Appendix 1). Further commitment from DfC/DAERA and DfI will be needed to provide funding for 23/24 therefore we will continue discussions with all three Departments in this regard.

Individual Projects

(All require **capital funding** delivered via public procurement.

Which objective(s) are met (1-7), and how?

(refer to Annex A attached for Objectives)

Castlecaufield Recreation Area: Upgrade to current pavilion, this would include a new extension to increase the sports hall usage numbers, upgrade to the existing kitchen & possible increase of kitchen size. Modernize the football changing block, which may require an extension. Develop a Trim Trail with low level lighting (710 metres), possible integration newly completed community river walk (options along river which may require land purchase or transfer/ public footpath on to Council site. This will encapsulate the children's teddy bear picnic walk and also look at developing a bio-diversity area on the grounds. The carpark will also need re-configured to increase car parking spaces and improvements to site lighting. Develop the grass area (old 2nd pitch e.g. additional car parking / pocket park (Council Property)

Objectives 1,2,3,4,5 are met through the following outcomes:

- Greater community and recreational activity in rural villages/communities
- Increased activities focused on children and young people
- Aesthetics of the village area improved

In relation to objective 5 – positive impact on sales, best endeavours will be made to test this objective however the focus of the project is on village infrastructure for local community use may not translate into any improvement in sales for local businesses.



<p>Castledawson (Riverside): develop a Trim Trail around the perimeter of existing pitch, low level lighting, a pocket park area, designated natural area, and remedial works to carpark. Possible extension of current allotment provision to include meeting place/shed. Integration into new site with the current play park leaving a grass space area for locals to enjoy.(Council Property)</p>	<p>Objectives 1,2,3,4,5 are met through the following outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater community and recreational activity in rural villages/communities • Increased activities focused on children and young people • Aesthetics of the village area improved
<p>Manor Park, Moneymore - assess and remedy any flooding issues on the main Manor Park site, provide signage integrating Manor Park (provision of pedestrian crossing/ main road) for safe access to play park and trim trail at Recreation area (liaise with DfI re possibilities in this regard). Resurface path network, create accessible picnic area, sluice & weir works to assist with river flow and prevent silting, redevelop maze, install bird beak fencing alongside river, low level lighting will ensure that the site can be safely used in dark evening, carpark lighting.</p>	<p>Objectives 1,2,3,4,5 are met through the following outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater community and recreational activity in rural villages/communities • Increased activities focused on children and young people • Aesthetics of the village area improved • Safer access to local amenities
<p>Coalisland Canal - Upgrade to creating a tarred 6.5km mile walking/cycle path from Reenaderry Road to Coalisland. Plan to improve 2 x road crossing, widening and resurfacing of path and associated furniture</p>	<p>Objectives 1,2,3,5,6 and 7 are met through the following outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One new walking/cycle path will be created creating to encourage a more active and healthy lifestyle • Improved safety in rural areas. • Greater community and recreational activity in rural villages/communities • Safer access to local amenities
<p>Fivemiletown Rugby Club, to assist the new multi-sport development project in the area</p>	<p>Objectives 1,2,3,4,5 are met through the following outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater community and recreational activity in rural villages/communities • Increased activities focused on children and young people • Aesthetics of the village area improved • Safer access to local amenities
<p>Clogher: – Ballymagowan Road and Station Road. Creating a cycling and walking path from Ballymagowan Road to Station Road to create a 2km circular cycling & walking route for the Clogher residents.</p>	<p>Objectives 1,2,3,4,5,6 and 7 are met through the following outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One new walking/cycle path will be created to encourage a more active and healthy lifestyle • Improved safety in rural areas. • Greater community and recreational activity in rural villages/communities



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safer access to local amenities
<p>Bellaghy: Creation of a new walking and cycling path linking the GAC on Drumanee Road to Long Point Wood thereby increasing the opportunities for outdoor recreation.</p>	<p>Objectives 1,2,3,4,5,6 and 7 are met through the following outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One new walking/cycle path will be created creating to encourage a more active and healthy lifestyle • Improved safety in rural areas. • Greater community and recreational activity in rural villages/communities • Safer access to local amenities
<p>Drumcairne Forest: Develop the forest as a local multi recreational hub, a site developed primarily for the local community, to include a range of outdoor recreation and environmental products, accompanied by appropriate visitor servicing.</p>	<p>Objectives 1,2,3, 4 are met through the following outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater community and recreational activity for surrounding villages/communities • Increased activities focused on children and young people • Sustainable use of existing natural assets for encouraging more active and healthy lifestyles
<p>Altmore Forest: Develop the forest as a local multi recreational hub, a site developed primarily for the local community, to include a range of outdoor recreation and environmental products, accompanied by appropriate visitor servicing.</p>	<p>Objectives 1,2,3,4 are met through the following outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater community and recreational activity for surrounding villages/communities • Increased activities focused on children and young people • Sustainable use of existing natural assets for encouraging more active and healthy lifestyles
<p>Clady: Extend existing play to create a public pocket park. Provide additional parking.</p>	<p>Objectives 1,2,3,4,5 are met through the following outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater community and recreational activity in rural villages/communities • Increased activities focused on children and young people • Aesthetics of the village area improved
<p>Kildress Community Breathing Space - A flat, slope-free lighted loop walkway, outdoor open air community activity spaces, fit-for-purpose public realm.</p>	<p>Objectives 1,2,3,4,5 are met through the following outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater community and recreational activity in rural villages/communities



- Increased activities focused on children and young people
- Aesthetics of the village area improved

APPROACH TO PROCUREMENT

Procurement will be carried out in line with Councils procurement policy with contracts tendered via e-tendersni.

Due to delivery timescales it is considered that the use of a grant aid programme is not the best option for the implementation of this Plan. Council will utilise the services of an ICT to ensure the procurement process commences as soon as possible following receipt of a letter of offer to maximise time for contract delivery.

Council will liaise as required with CPD during the procurement phase.

CONTRIBUTION TO DELIVERY OF PFG OBJECTIVE 10 –

(“We have created a place where people want to live and work, to visit and invest.”)

All of the projects listed in this Plan will help deliver Objective 10 the Programme for Government under the Priority Themes of:

Sports, Arts and Culture:

Providing access to sports, arts and culture and encouraging and facilitating opportunities for people to get involved. Promoting built heritage, eco-tourism and outdoor recreation. Providing spaces and facilities for sports, arts and culture events and activities to take place. (Department for Communities, Department for Infrastructure, Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

Planning:

Creating and shaping high quality, sustainable, places for people to live, work and spend leisure time. Furthering sustainable development and supporting positive place making and effective stewardship. (Department for Infrastructure, Department for Communities, Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)



3. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Please provide details of any stakeholder engagement that has been carried out (or is planned) for this plan. Include details of any working groups or similar fora that have been established or will be established to oversee delivery of your plan.

Stakeholder engagement in identifying need for the projects listed above has been carried out through:

➤ **The Village Planning Framework** – this encapsulated three distinct phases

Phase 1- Survey and Analysis

- Undertake a detailed socio-economic analysis of the area to include population, age structure, health, education and economic activity and physical assets;

Phase 2- Research and key ideas

- Hold pre-consultation meetings with key members of the community to make connections and understand how each village works.
- Host consultation meeting for the wider public, to provide maps, photographs and presentations to enhance the consultation and to ensure ideas are gathered.
- Questionnaire to gain a further response from the public.
- Analysis of ideas and separate them into groups and priorities.

Phase 3- Village Design and Development

- Highlight key ideas and look at ways to implement these putting in place a robust and realistic integrated village action plan identifying what needs to be done, why it is an issue, how it will be tackled, who will be involved and timescale.
- Validate Plan with those involved.

➤ **Public consultation exercises carried out during the preparation of Council development Strategies including:**

- Mid Ulster Economic Development Plan 2015-2020 “Our Plan for Growth” which identified the enabling of town and village Regeneration as one of four key Themes and,
- Mid Ulster Outdoor Recreation Strategy – which identified strong local community support for the development of recreational opportunities within forests due to the benefits this can bring to surrounding villages as a result of improved local access.
- Mid Ulster Council Pitches Strategy Development
- Mid Ulster Council Public Parks and Plan Five Year Strategy
- Masterplans for forest Development including Drumcairn, Altmore/Cappagh and Dunmoyle.



Stakeholder engagement will continue throughout the design development phase for the projects included in this Regeneration Plan. This allows opportunity for bottom up input on design concepts as they emerge and creates a sense of local buy in needed to meet public expectations.

4.NEED FOR INVESTMENT

Please describe briefly each proposed project and explain why it is needed. Provide details of other bodies/groups supporting the need for each project and what evidence or metrics are available to demonstrate the need? (E.g. Business Surveys, Chamber of Trade/Commerce request, Shopper/Visitor surveys, Village Plans, research etc.) In particular, please list any baseline data the council has that would be relevant to the objectives of the Programme.

EVIDENCE OF NEED

Village Planning Process

As stated in Section 3, the Village Planning process has provided the framework from which the projects listed have emerged. The case for change in each instance falls under the broad headings of:

- The opportunity to build vibrant and competitive villages;
- The opportunity to improve local recreational opportunities especially for young people;
- The opportunity to improve the natural and build heritage within rural villages and outlying areas;
- The opportunity for residents of the District to live longer, healthier and more active lifestyles.

Community Plan for Mid Ulster

The headings above resonate with the priority themes identified within the Community Plan for Mid Ulster and reflect the findings of the extensive consultation exercise carried out during its preparation.

The projects within this Regeneration Plan will therefore contribute to achieving the Community Plans Vision for Mid Ulster as ... *a welcoming place where our people are content, healthy and safe; educated and skilled; where our economy is thriving; our environment and heritage are sustained; and where our public services excel.*

Council Corporate Plan

Addressing rurality is a Corporate commitment for this Council. Close to 70% of Mid Ulster's population live in a rural setting, a fact which has strongly influenced the Council's approach to service delivery, investment and long-term planning. The importance of addressing the needs of a rural region, whether socially or economically, is undiminished and remains one of the Council's corporate commitments.

Theme 5 of the Corporate Plan is about our communities and places a deliberate focus on accessibility of opportunities to help residents lead more active lifestyles. Here the priorities are on opening up opportunities for outdoor recreation tailored to community need which will be facilitated through the delivery of this Plan.



Mid Ulster Outdoor Recreation Strategy

Linked to the Corporate Plan priorities for encouraging and facilitating active lifestyles, the Mid Ulster Outdoor Recreation Strategy identified forest development as one of the strongest propositions for building the outdoor recreation offer across the district. Utilising local forests for recreation has emerged time and time again within Village Plans which is evidence of local support for pursuing this course of action. This has helped to justify the inclusion of two forest based projects in this Regeneration Plan at Altmore and Drumcaine. In addition there is a strong value for money argument to be made for developing local assets which can be utilised by a number of surrounding villages which helps to maximise the impact of these interventions and the population served.

Project level deficiencies

For each project, local level deficiencies have been identified within existing arrangements and the scope of each proposed project will be developed to address these deficiencies.

A brief description of each project is provided below:

Castlecaufield Recreation Area:

Upgrade to current pavilion, this would include a new extension to increase the sports hall usage numbers, upgrade to the existing kitchen & possible increase of kitchen size. Modernize the football changing block, which may require an extension. Develop a Trim Trail with low level lighting (710 metres), possible integration newly completed community river walk (options along river which may require land purchase or transfer/ public footpath on to Council site. This will encapsulate the children's teddy bear picnic walk and also look at developing a bio-diversity area on the grounds. The carpark will also need re-configured to increase car parking spaces and improvements to site lighting. Develop the grass area (old 2nd pitch e.g. additional car parking / pocket park (Council Property)

Castledawson (Riverside):

Develop a Trim Trail around the perimeter of existing pitch, low level lighting, a pocket park area, designated natural area, and remedial works to carpark. Possible extension of current allotment provision to include meeting place/shed. Integration into new site with the current play park leaving a grass space area for locals to enjoy.(Council Property)

Manor Park, Moneymore :

Assess and remedy any flooding issues on the main Manor Park site, provide signage integrating Manor Park (provision of pedestrian crossing/ main road) for safe access to play park and trim trail at Recreation area (liaise with DfI re possibilities in this regard). Resurface path network, create accessible picnic area, sluice & weir works to assist with river flow and prevent silting, redevelop maze, install bird beak fencing alongside river, low level lighting will ensure that the site can be safely used in dark evening, carpark lighting.

Coalisland Canal:

Upgrade to creating a tarred 6.5km mile walking/cycle path from Reenaderry Road to Coalisland. Plan to improve 2 x road crossing, widening and resurfacing of path and associated furniture;

Fivemiletown Rugby Club:

To assist the new multi-sport development project in the area;

Clogher:



Ballymagowan Road and Station Road. Creating a cycling and walking path from Ballymagowan Road to Station Road to create a 2km circular cycling & walking route for the Clogher residents.

Bellaghy:

Creation of a new walking and cycling path linking the GAC on Drumanee Road to Long Point Wood thereby increasing the opportunities for outdoor recreation. Green Space: develop a trim trail/ low level lighting/ activity area, link the two local developments to a "green space area" & improve the knock about area (Council owned). Planters throughout village.

Drumcaine Forest: Develop the forest as a local multi recreational hub, a site developed primarily for the local community, to include a range of outdoor recreation and environmental products, accompanied by appropriate visitor servicing.

Altmore Forest: Develop the forest as a local multi recreational hub, a site developed primarily for the local community, to include a range of outdoor recreation and environmental products, accompanied by appropriate visitor servicing.

Clady:

Extend existing play to create a public pocket park. Provide additional parking

Kildress Community Breathing Space:

A flat, slope-free lighted loop walkway, outdoor open air community activity spaces, fit-for-purpose public realm.

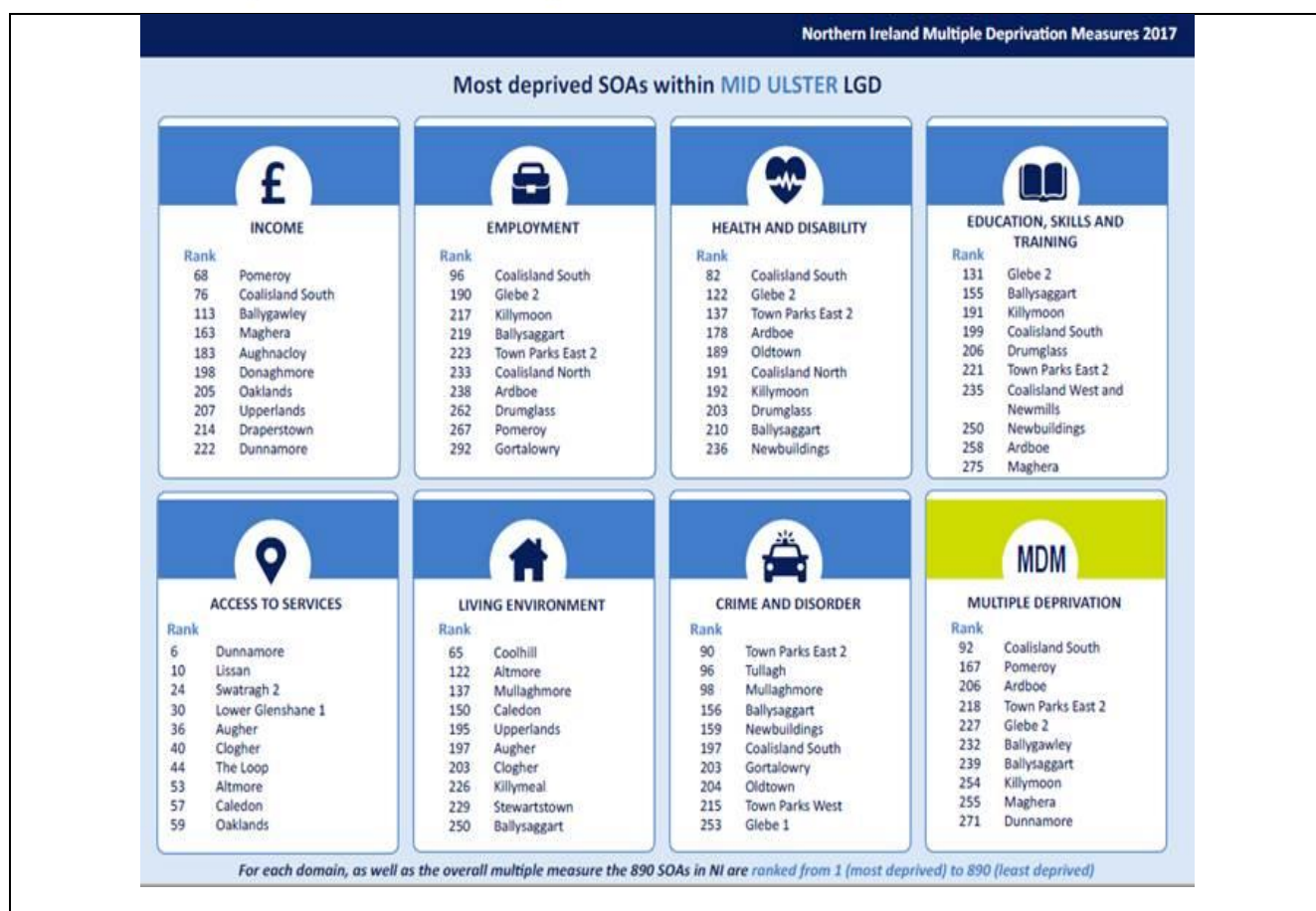
BASELINE DATA**Rural Population**

- 82 rural village settlements are listed in NISRA settlement population statistics for Mid Ulster with a usually resident population of over 37,000 (this reflects the population within the settlement limits only and not open countryside)
- 70% or approx. 100,000 of the Districts total population live in rural areas (areas outside of the main towns of Dungannon, Magherafelt, Cookstown and Coalisland)
- Mid Ulster has a vibrant rural area consisting of active communities, a strong entrepreneurial spirit which contributes to the overall employment base and rural villages with considerable character and heritage importance. This vibrant rural area needs to be supported and sustained if it is to remain as a vitally important part of our district.

Deprivation

At a district level, statistically MUDC has areas of deprivation. At an SOA level, two areas - Coalisland South (rank 92) and Pomeroy (rank 167) - are classified within the most deprived areas within NI. This does not mean deprivation is limited to those areas, or all of those areas are deprived. MUDC has a number of SOAs among the most deprived 25% - 30% in NI.

Access to services deprivation is particularly prevalent in Mid Ulster which reaffirms the case for investment in rural services and facilities. A summary of the top 10 wards by deprivation indicator is show below.



5. COSTS

Please provide details of the work to be carried out for each project in your plan. Estimates are acceptable at this stage.

Item	Funding Source (DfC/DAERA, DfI, Council)	Cost
Castlecaufield Recreation Area	DAERA / DFC	£610,000
Castledawson (Riverside	DAERA / DFC	£200,000
Manor Park, Moneymore	DfC/DAERA	£225,000
Coalisland Canal	DFI	£550,000
Fivemiletown Rugby Club	DfC/DAERA	£50,000
Clogher	DFI	£130,000
Bellaghy	DFI	£130,000
Drumcairne Forest	DfC/DAERA	£280,000
Altmore Forest	DfC/DAERA	£280,000
Clady	DfC / DAERA	£100,000
Kildress Community Breathing Space	DfC / DAERA	£75,000
	Capital	£2,630,000



ICT professional fees (via resource allocation to be capitalised)		£180,000

6. PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND MONITORING

Please indicate how the proposed projects will be monitored during and after implementation. It is important to note that an Outcome Based Accountability Framework will be used to evaluate this Programme during and post-delivery to capture how much was done, how well was it done, and the difference it made.

MONITORING ARRANGEMENTS

Monitoring arrangements will be based on the outcomes based accountability score card included within the guidance notes. The indicator and method of measurement to be used are included below.

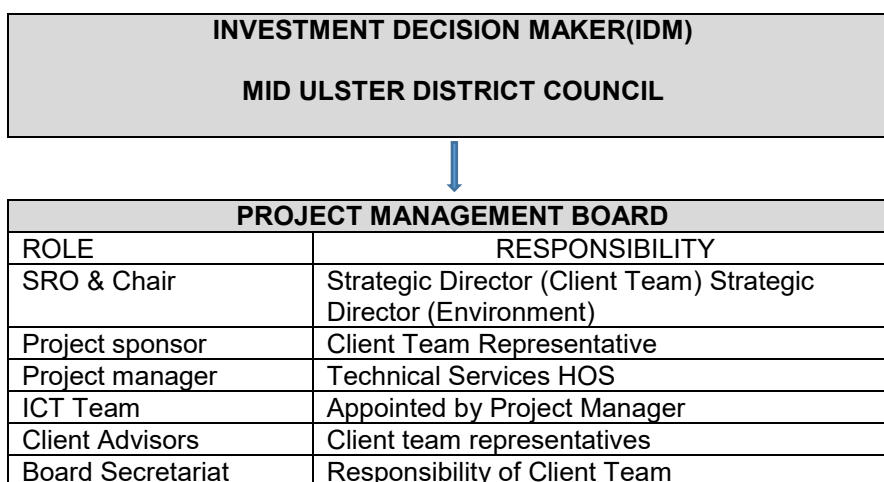
Outcome	Indicator / method of measurement to be used
% of costed Small Settlements Regeneration Plans (SSRP) developed by councils within agreed timescales.	Submitted Regeneration Plan
% of projects completed on time	Works completion certs for each project
% of projects that increased use of land for active travel which connects people with key services and ensures accessibility for all including those with disabilities – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> extended footways cycle ways. connecting pathways. 	Extended footways / cycle ways/ connecting pathways measured within completed projects
% of residents in smaller settlements where projects have been delivered agree that the improvements to the area would encourage people to live, work, visit and invest in the area.	Outcome of a resident's survey carried out in settlements where projects are located.
% of people using smaller settlements where projects have been delivered for work, tourism or leisure, agree that the improvements to the area would encourage people to live, work, visit and invest in the area.	Outcome of a resident's survey carried out in settlements where projects are located.
Number & % of businesses within the scheme areas who reported schemes funded through this Programme have positively impacted on sales figures	Outcome of a business survey carried out in settlements where projects are located.



NOTE: In relation to objective 5 – positive impact on sales, best endeavours will be made to test this objective however the focus of the project is on village infrastructure for local community use and may not translate into any improvement in sales for local businesses.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS

Project management arrangements will follow Councils Capital Procedural Guide. The project management structure is shown below:



The project management board will meet at regular intervals (usually monthly) throughout the duration of delivery period. Update reports from these meetings will be used to inform the funders on progress at individual project level.



7. CONTRIBUTIONS FROM COUNCIL AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

Please identify any contribution that council or other stakeholders are making towards this regeneration plan.

As required, Council will be contributing a minimum of 10% match funding towards the agreed allocation contained within a letter of offer.

Costs included within this Plan are indicative. As a contingency for price increases following procurement, Council is prepared to increase match funding to 20% in order to ensure full delivery of the Plan.



8. STATEMENT AND DECLARATION

Please use the space below to add any additional information in support of your regeneration plan.

This projects included in this Regeneration Plan are those anticipated for delivery by March 2023. A degree of flexibility will be required in the event of changes in circumstances which may impact on the delivery of a particular project. Clear lines of communication will remain in place to inform DfC of such changes as they emerge.

Declaration

I hereby declare that the information contained in this form is accurate and that all persons party to this project understand their responsibilities regarding the Department's monitoring and evaluation processes.

I agree that this information may be made available to other funders including other Government Departments and Agencies and accept that this information may be published by the Department for Communities.

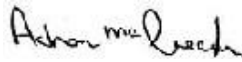
I confirm that any funding requested will be spent in accordance with the Council's procedures for capital expenditure, and will not duplicate any funding provided by other funders. In the event that **MID ULSTER DISTRICT COUNCIL** obtains further funding at a later date I will immediately inform the Department.

I understand I must inform the Department immediately if there are any changes to the information supplied in this form.

I understand that if the information contained in this form is proven to be intentionally false or misleading I or **MID ULSTER DISTRICT COUNCIL** may be prosecuted under the Fraud Act 2006.



I understand that the Department can at any time ask to see any supporting evidence in relation to this COVID Recovery Small Settlements Regeneration Plan, and future funding procurement procedures, payment information, minutes of meetings, letters of offer, contracts for funding etc as deemed necessary.

Signature	
Print name in capitals	ADRIAN MCCREESH
Position in Council	CHIEF EXECUTIVE
Date	21 DECEMBER 2021



ANNEX A –OBJECTIVES

Objectives

1. To agree a costed COVID Recovery Small Settlements Regeneration Plan for each district council and enable programme spend by March 2022
2. To support each district council to deliver the project outcomes identified in its Regeneration Plan by March 2023.
3. By March 2024, 70% of residents surveyed, in smaller settlements where projects have been delivered, agree that funded works would encourage people to live, work, visit and invest in the area.
4. By March 2024, 70% of people surveyed while using smaller settlements where projects have been delivered for work, tourism or leisure, agree that the improvements to the area would encourage people to live, work, visit and invest in the area.
5. By March 2024, attitudinal surveys completed by businesses indicate that 70% believe that schemes funded through this Programme will have positively impacted on sales figures.
6. By March 2024, attitudinal surveys indicate 40% of the public (residents and visitors) agree that projects supported would encourage people to change from car use to more environmentally friendly choices such as walking and cycling for journeys of under two miles.
7. By March 2024, each Regeneration Plan will support projects which increase the use of land for active travel (i.e. extended footways, cycle ways, connecting pathways) which connects people with key services and ensures accessibility for all including those with disabilities.



Appendix 1

Potential options for <u>23/24</u> (subject to availability of funding)	DEA	DfC / DAERA	DfI	Total
Bush - Dungannon road realignment - 1.3km £400- (continuation of footpath from Dungannon to Bush to provide a safe walking/cycling route. The aim of this project is to: The outcomes will be as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One new footpath will be created creating connectivity to encourage walking. • Improved safety in rural areas. • Reduced vehicle use in rural areas. Improved connectivity between Bush Village and the urban centre of Dungannon"	D'gannon	TBC	TBC	TBC
Bellaghy (Green Space) - create an outdoor recreational facility to include circular walking route, trim trail, low level lighting, outdoor gym equipment, create linkages to the two local developments to an open outdoor recreational space. Improve the existing kick about area and carparking (Council owned). Explore option to create a walking & cycling route from Bellaghy village to the GAC on Drumanee Road to further increase the opportunities for outdoor recreation.	Moyola	TBC	TBC	TBC
Benburb Recreation Area - upgrade of a new 3g full-size playing surface with lights. This will assist in meeting the high demand for evening hire from the two local clubs. Currently having to travel to other parts of the district for accommodation. The long established club has in access of 300 members/ 17 teams.		TBC	TBC	TBC
Draperstown - Plantin and Fairhill Phase II – renewal of paths, extension of walkway through Plantin, play area at Fairhill	Moyola	TBC	TBC	TBC
Dungannon - Railway Park to Ballysaggart Lough to link Railway Park (a linear green space that runs from Mark Street, Milltown, Dungannon to Lisnahull Road, Dungannon) to Ballysaggart Lough. It further hopes to create a cycling and walking path around the Lough. Phase 1 – Railway Park to Ballysaggart Lough. A new footpath/boardwalk will be required to continue to the path from Windmill Hill Road to Ballysaggart Lough. Phase 2 – Widen & upgrade existing path around the Lough, until it meets the footpath on the Old Eglis Road. Phase 3 – New path along Manse Road. There currently is no footpath infrastructure along the Manse Road.	Dungannon	TBC	TBC	TBC
Dunmoyle Forest - Develop the forest as a local multi recreational hub, a site developed primarily for the local community, to include a range of outdoor recreation and environmental products, accompanied by appropriate visitor servicing.	CV	TBC	TBC	TBC
Fivemiletown (King George V) - site, upgrade pitch 1 to a 3G facility with floodlights, develop a pocket park on the old play park area. (Fields In Trust)	Clogher	TBC	TBC	TBC
Glenone - develop a trim trail and a green space area, with outdoor gym equipment/ pocket park. Develop the green space & leave a knock about area.	Carntogher	TBC	TBC	TBC
Lower Bann Green/Blue way - This proposal is for Phase 3 of the Greenway which will run from Portglenone to Newferry (west) located on the River Bann southwards along the western shore of Lough Beg , where it will connect with the recently developed Lock keepers Cottage Heritage Centre and Café, in Toome	Moyola	TBC	TBC	TBC



Potential options for <u>23/24</u> (subject to availability of funding)	DEA	DfC / DAERA	DfI	Total
Feasibility study completed Cost estimates completed				
Maghera Development of Lands at Mullagh - Feasibility Study currently being worked up. Development of site as an outdoor recreational facility.	Carntogher	TBC	TBC	TBC
Moy 3G Project, with lighting and changing (dependant on location and potential partners)- land issues	Dungannon	TBC	TBC	TBC
Roundlake: to improve path network around the lake, address flooding & drainage issues, install seating and other outdoor gym equipment.	CV	TBC	TBC	TBC
Tullyhogue to Tullyhogue Fort/Loughrey College/MUSA - community trail linking the sites. Feasibility Study currently underway to determine route, landowners etc	Cookstown	TBC	TBC	TBC

Mr Adrian McCreesh
Chief Executive
Mid Ulster District Council
Council Offices
50 Ballyronan Road
Magherafelt
Co Londonderry
BT45 6EN
(by email)

North West Development Office
West Team
Boaz House
19 Scarffe's Entry
OMAGH
Co. Tyrone
BT78 1JG

Telephone: (028) 82255516
Email: Sharon.mcgowan@communities-ni.gov.uk

Our reference: NWDO/W/RV/CLD/01/21

Date: 17 December 2021

Project Reference No	NWDO/W/RV/CLD/01/21
Project Applicant	Mid Ulster District Council
Project Title	Coalisland Revitalisation
Amount of Grant	£274,000
Period of Grant	20 September 2021 – 31 March 2022
Council's level Of Financial Systems and Controls	Robust

Dear Adrian

1. Revised Approval

The purpose of this letter is to effect certain amendments and variations to the Contract for Funding constituted by the letter dated 17 September 2021 which was issued to Mid Ulster District Council Accordingly upon the Council's acceptance of this letter as hereinafter provided the said Contract for Funding shall be amended and have effect as if
for paragraph (2)

“the Grant” means a sum up to a maximum of £250,000 of which:

“capital items” means Environmental Improvements at Lineside, new festive lighting, development of a new brand for Coalisland and associated merchandise;

“the project start and completion date” means the day by which the project must start and be completed so as to achieve the performance outputs as specified in paragraph 3 below.

“the performance outputs” means the performance outputs specified in the Schedule hereto (see section 18);

“the equality legislation” means the statutory provisions from time to time in force in Northern Ireland in relation to discrimination on the grounds of race, disability, sexual orientation, gender or political opinion;

there is substituted a new paragraph

“the Grant” means a sum up to a maximum of £274,000 of which:

“capital items” means Environmental Improvements at Lineside, new festive lighting, development of a new brand for Coalisland and associated merchandise;

“the project start and completion date” means the day by which the project must start and be completed so as to achieve the performance outputs as specified in paragraph 3 below.

“the performance outputs” means the performance outputs specified in the Schedule hereto (see section 18);

“the equality legislation” means the statutory provisions from time to time in force in Northern Ireland in relation to discrimination on the grounds of race, disability, sexual orientation, gender or political opinion;

2. Acceptance

This letter is issued in duplicate and accordingly if the Organisation is prepared to accept the variance to the original Contract for Funding please return one complete copy of this letter duly signed and dated on behalf of the Organisation within 4 weeks from the date of this letter. Failure to return the acceptance within this period shall result in the offer being deemed as withdrawn.

3. Availability

The foregoing offer shall remain open a period of 4 weeks from the date of this letter. Failure to return one complete copy of this letter duly signed and dated on behalf of the Organisation within this period shall result in the offer being deemed as withdrawn.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Sharon H'Gowan." The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the "Yours sincerely" text.

Deputy Director

4. OFFICIAL GRANT ACCEPTANCE

Project Reference No	NWDO/W/RV/CLD/01/21
Project Applicant	Mid Ulster District Council
Project Title	Coalisland Revitalisation
Amount of Grant	£274,000
Period of Grant	20 September 2021 - 31 March 2022

I **Adrian McCreesh** have authority **on behalf of**
(Name of Chief Executive in Block Capitals)

Mid Ulster District Council
(Name of Council in Block Capitals)

to accept the offer of Grant set out in the letter dated 17 December 2021 and agree to deliver the above project on the terms and conditions therein.

Signed by
(Chief Executive)

Witnessed by
(Registered Office Bearer)

Name in Block Capitals

Name in Block Capitals

Date

Date

5. BANK DETAILS

Project Reference No	NWDO/W/RV/CLD/01/21
Project Applicant	Mid Ulster District Council
Project Title	Coalisland Revitalisation
Amount of Grant	£274,000
Period of Grant	20 September 2021 - 31 March 2022

Please complete Bank details below.

Name of Council:

Name of Account:

Bank Name:

Bank Address:

Sort Code: _____ **Account Number:** _____

Signed by
(Chief Executive)

Witnessed by
(Registered Office Bearer)

Name in Block Capitals

Name in Block Capitals

Date

Date

6. Project Targets and Output Measures

Target Date:	31 December 2021	Output Measure:	Initial stakeholder consultations held Design agreed
Target Description:	Procure a brand consultant and agree on a design and merchandise		

Target Date:	31 March 2022	Output Measure:	Certificate of practical completion
Target Description:	Complete environmental improvement of (Approx Area of Site 4344m2) scheme at Lineside		

Target Date:	31 September 2021	Output Measure:	Festive lighting procured
Target Description:	Purchase new festive lighting and Christmas tree		

Target Date:	31 March 2023	Output Measure:	Increased Civic Pride
Target Description:	Council to complete all post project surveys and complete a Post Project Evaluation (PPE) within a 12 month period of completion		

Target Date:	31 March 2023	Output Measure:	Businesses using the branding
Target Description:	Implementation of the new Town Centre brand in to 60% of all business in Coalisland		

Target Date:	31 March 2023	Output Measure:	Footfall increasing
Target Description:	To increase footfall by 25% on the Lineside scheme		

7. Breakdown of Grant Award (by financial year)

Eligible Expenditure Category and Breakdown	Total Grant Award	Year 1
Capital	From: From:20 September 2021 To: 31 March 2022	From: From:20 September 2021 To: 31 March 2022
Festive Lighting	£80,000	£80,000
Lineside EI Scheme	£169,000	£169,000
Branding & Merchandise	£25,000	£25,000
Total Capital	£274,000	£274,000

8. Expenditure Schedule

* These are anticipated amounts and dates and should only be taken as a guide. Normally Grant will be released on receipt of paid invoices/ receipts up to the maximum as detailed on the Breakdown of Grant Award and paid quarterly during the period of the project.

Date(s) Expenditure Due To Be Incurred	Anticipated Amount	Brief breakdown of Grant amount against eligible expenditure category	Anticipated Payment dates	Related Terms and Conditions (as per CFF)
20 Sept 2021 - 31 March 2022	£169,000	Environmental Improvement scheme – to include Paving & landscaping	31 st March 2022	Claim form with all supporting documentation
	£25,000	Branding & Merchandise	31 st December 2021	Claim form with all supporting documentation
	£80,000	Festive Lighting	31 st December 2021	Claim form with all supporting documentation

14th December 2021

Mr Adrian McCreesh
Chief Executive
Mid Ulster District Council
76-78 Burn Road
Cookstown
BT80 8DR

Dear Mr McCreesh

Re: ESF match funding

We are requesting your support to ensure that c **£20 million** of funding from the European Social Fund (ESF) is not lost to Northern Ireland (NI).

With a budget of £168 million for Call 2 (2018-2022), ESF has been a vital source of funding helping to develop the skills of many of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable members of society whose needs are not met by mainstream employability provision.

In the past 7 years (up to March 2022), ESF projects have helped develop the employability and social inclusion of over 77,000 people, of which over 9,000 have entered paid employment and over 10,000 have entered education or training.

As an outcome of BREXIT, ESF funding was due to end across NI in March 2022. However, at the beginning of 2021 the EU agreed to extend the life of the programme by a further year until March 2023, pledging c £20 million in funding to do so. As there is currently no indication from the UK or NI Government as to what will replace ESF funding following March 2022 this announcement was very welcome. The pledge of c £20 million from the EU is, however, subject to match funding of c £14 million being secured.

Following the announcement, the managing agent for ESF funding in NI (Department for Economy) proceeded with a tendering process (ESF Call 3) in the summer of 2021. Providers bid for the funding, under the premise of how the majority of this 35% (c £14 million) match funding was historically provided for by a number of central government sources, over the past number of decades, including the Department for Communities (DfC), Department for the Economy (DfE), Department of Health (via Trusts) and local councils. Approximately 66 projects were successful in their bid, most of whom already deliver ESF projects including ourselves (Network Personnel, part of the Workspace Group, a social enterprise based in Mid-Ulster).

However, with less than **3 months** remaining until the current ESF programme comes to an end (on 31st March 2022), the match funding position for the 12-month extension, starting April 2022 and running until March 2023, remains totally unclear with DfE and DfC stating that, whilst they have a small pot of funding



available for match funding purposes, the funding available falls far short of the c £14 million required to draw down the c£20 million of European funding needed for Northern Ireland projects.

The impact of not securing this funding would be catastrophic on the 66 projects currently operating throughout NI. Projects that are mostly delivered by voluntary, community and not for profit organisations, like ourselves. This would effectively result in a loss of up to 1,000 jobs and more significantly, the loss of support to the 13,500 people (1,000 families; 2,750 people with disabilities; 2,750 NEET's; 4,000 unemployed and 3,000 economically inactive) who avail of the services of these organisations each year. Individuals who are some of the most disadvantaged in the community and who without support, guidance and upskilling would have great difficulty accessing the labour market.

Having delivered on ESF projects for over 9 years, Network Personnel, was successful in securing c **£2.3 million** of Call 3 ESF funding. This funding is for extending the provision of our three employability programmes, across five council areas (Mid Ulster; Mid and East Antrim; Antrim and Newtownabbey; Fermanagh and Omagh; and Causeway Coast and Glen) throughout 2022/23. Programmes which have been extremely successful in supporting the most vulnerable families, young persons not in employment, education or training, unemployed and economically inactive.

To be able to draw down the c **£2.3 million** of ESF funding we now need to secure **£804k** of match funding. This is in line with the funding required to deliver our projects throughout ESF Call 2.

Historically, DfE have provided between 29% and 35% of the match funding required for our three projects totalling c £700k per annum, with the remaining c £100k being funding by other sources such as local councils and our parent organisation (the Workspace Group). At present DfE are advising that they no longer have that level of funding available.

Failure to obtain this funding will result in the loss of the above programmes leading to a gap in provision and the significant negative impacts throughout the five council areas we deliver in. This gap in provision would arise in what is already an unprecedented time in the economy and a time where barriers to employment are increasing for the most vulnerable.

Specifically, in **Mid Ulster** this would equate to the loss of **£748k** in support to local people via programmes delivered by Network Personnel.

Urgent action is needed to fill the match funding gap necessary to draw down the EU funding which has been secured. The DfE as the managing authority for EU funds, alongside the DfC and other key government departments and agencies must work with providers, such as ourselves, to ensure adequate financial arrangements are in place and to avoid any immediate loss or disruption of provision.

Mid Ulster District Council currently provide a total of £19,877 per annum towards two of Network Personnel's ESF projects (2018 -2022) and we would request that this level of funding is at least maintained and if possible increased in light of the issues outlined and the impact on the local community if funding is not secured.

Whilst the current priority is securing the match funding for 2022/23, the longer-term future of employability provision for the most disadvantaged/vulnerable members of our communities also remains unclear given the uncertainty with regards to the development of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), which is proposed as the 'successor' programme to EU funded projects.

The absence of detailed information about the fund and its future priorities means that the practicalities of providers securing long term funding after ESF monies come to an end are complex, uncertain and present significant challenges. This issue is common to all ESF projects and NICVA has developed a briefing paper providing more detail on the concerns, priorities and actions required. This document is enclosed for your information.

Given the short time frame and the potential loss to NI of c £20 million in EU funding we are requesting your urgent support, and that of your colleagues, to ensure that DfE and DfC, are in a position, as they have done historically, to provide the match funding required to facilitate the ESF projects in 2022/23 and subsequently draw down and prevent the loss of c £20 million in ESF funding to NI.

If you require further information or would like to meet with ourselves or other ESF providers to discuss this further, please contact kristal@theworkspacegroup.org.

I would like to thank you for taking the time to consider our request for support and look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Georgina Grieve', written in a cursive style.

Georgina Grieve
CEO, Workspace Group
Enc.

ESF USER GROUP BRIEFING PAPER

NOVEMBER 2021

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Produced by NICVA on behalf of the ESF Users Group

1. Who We Are?

This briefing has been produced by the **ESF Users Group** - a representative group of voluntary and community organisations, from across Northern Ireland, who are currently in receipt of **European Social Fund (ESF)** funding. Membership of the ESF Users Group includes organisations providing core services to support the long-term unemployed; those with convictions; young people not in education, employment, or training; families and those with a disability. *(A full list of ESF Users Group members can be found in ANNEX 1)*

2. Executive Summary

Our Concerns

1. **The European Social Fund¹ (ESF)**, a vital and unique source of EU funding, **helping 10,000 people each year in Northern Ireland** overcome major obstacles to social inclusion and entering employment, will end soon post-Brexit with no clear replacement agreed.
2. The EU has agreed to extend the life of the programme by a further year until end March 2023 ([ESF Call 3](#)), pledging £20 million but this is wholly dependent on approximately £14 million match funding from NI government departments and agencies, which is currently not all secured. Current ESF funding will end in March 2022.
3. There is **no clarity on how future NI government programmes will meet the social and labour market inclusion needs met for decades by ESF** when its funding runs out.
4. There is also no clarity on how, when, or whether the future promised **UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF)** intended to replace ESF will adequately meet these needs.
5. Meanwhile **50 voluntary and community organisations** currently delivering core services to thousands of people via ESF funding, **will be unable to continue their work or retain staffing and expertise** unless clear commitments are given as soon as possible regarding both immediate and longer-term funding for services. This **places at significant risk the future of these organisations** and unless secured, would mean **the loss of over 1,000 jobs** of those employed to deliver key services. This would result in a **critical loss of much needed support to individuals with acute and complex needs**, that has

¹ The European Social Fund (ESF) (total value €450m with €210.5m contributed by the EU) provides dedicated funding for projects across the United Kingdom (UK) aimed at improving the employability and employment levels of vulnerable and disadvantaged people who are usually overlooked within mainstream provision. The strategic aim of the ESF Programme 2014-2020 in Northern Ireland (NI) is to combat poverty and enhance social inclusion by reducing economic inactivity and to increase the skills base of those currently in work and future potential participants in the workforce.

demonstrated strategic level impact across NI Government departments, specifically Economy, Communities, Health and Justice with no suitable alternative provision in place.

6. An independent report by the Strategic Investment Board², jointly commissioned by the Department for Economy (DfE) and the Department for Communities (DfC), highlighted that **any break in ESF provision would be highly undesirable, leading to unmet need and a 'cliff edge' in terms of access to suitable support at a time of unprecedented social and economic challenge** and therefore must be avoided.

Our Asks

Urgent action is needed to meet the match funding gap necessary to draw down the £20M of EU funding available under ESF Call 3 and to ensure that continued and adequate resourcing for ESF-type activities is made available through both domestic NI Government Departments and/or delivery of the UKSPF.

1. Match Funding/ESF Call 3

- Urgent clarity is needed regarding the match funding arrangements for those projects who have successfully secured funding through ESF Call 3.
- The Department for Economy (DfE), as the managing authority for EU Funds, alongside the Department for Communities (DfC) and other key government departments and agencies must urgently work with providers to ensure adequate financial arrangements are in place and to avoid any immediate loss or disruption of provision.
- The NI Executive, led by the Department of Finance (DoF) should have oversight of the key issues regarding and take timely and appropriate action to ensure that available EU monies are not lost as a result of adequate match funding not being secured.

2. Domestic Policy and Delivery

- NI domestic policy and strategy must adequately mainstream, prioritise and address the needs of those previously provided for under the ESF programme, to ensure there is no break, significant reduction in and/or loss of provision.
- The NI Executive and relevant local Government Departments must ensure the full involvement and participation of the voluntary and community sector and those they

² Strategic Investment Board Landscape Presentation Paper for Strategic Insight Lab, Feb 2021

support in the design of current and future domestic programmes to ensure need is adequately prioritised and reflected in programming.

3. Implementation and Delivery of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF)

- Urgent clarity is needed as to whether the UKSPF will be a viable ‘successor’ programme to ESF, including the level of funding and timeframe in which this is realistically to be made available.
- The powers to allocate and manage funding through the UKSPF in Northern Ireland should be fully devolved to the Northern Ireland Executive in line with its responsibilities for social inclusion and economic development. This will also help ensure compliance with the statutory duty to promote good community relations and equal opportunities.
- In the absence of this, all efforts must be made by both the UK and NI Governments to ensure that there is significant practical involvement of the NI administration in the preparation, implementation, and management of the UKSPF funds, including determining funding priorities. This is necessary to ensure that resources are most appropriately targeted in NI; that gaps in provision for those with complex needs are avoided; and to prevent any duplication of effort or misdirection of resourcing etc by either government.
- The UK Government must urgently engage with all relevant NI stakeholders, including the full involvement of relevant community and voluntary sector partners, to ensure the UKSPF is fit for purpose in terms of its priorities and plans for implementation and delivery in NI. This is necessary to address the unique landscape of need in NI³ and to help sustain essential, embedded services.

³ As captured in the latest NISRA Labour Market survey (Oct 21) NI had the lowest employment rate and the highest economic inactivity rate of all the UK regions. <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/labour-market-and-social-welfare/labour-force-survey>. The disability employment gap for NI in 2020 was 42.2pps, compared to 27.9pps for the whole of the UK. Since 2014, the disability employment gap has consistently been higher in NI than the rest of the UK. <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/Disability-employment-gap-NI-2020.pdf>. The number of young people who are NEET in NI has increased to 26,000, equivalent to 13.2% of young people aged 16- 24 years and is above the UK rate of 12.4% (LFS November 2020).

3. Introduction & Background

Our organisations remain deeply concerned about the absence of any clear plan from both the UK and NI Governments to ensure continuity of funding for European Social Fund (ESF) projects which were formally due to finish in less than 6 months (31st March 2022), with a current proposal [ESF Call 3](#) to extend the programme until end March 2023, remaining wholly dependent upon the securing of adequate match funding.

In addition, the longer-term future of this provision remains unclear, given the uncertainty with regard to the development of the [UK Shared Prosperity Fund](#) (UKSPF), which is proposed as a ‘successor’ programme to EU funds and the implications therefore for its delivery in Northern Ireland. In addition, current domestic policy and strategy does not adequately prioritise or address the longer terms gaps in provision that shall be left by the ending of EU funds.

For decades, the funding provided by ESF has provided critical support to and developed the skills of many of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable members of Northern Ireland society whose needs have not been met by mainstream public policy and services. It has also uniquely provided outcomes spanning responsibilities in various government departments, such as the Departments for Economy, Communities, Health and Justice.

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified many of these aspects of social exclusion, with the need for continued and appropriate investment in effective interventions and supports more critical now than ever.

The current NI ESF budget is £168m delivered across 66 projects⁴. In the 7 years up to March 2022 ESF projects will have helped develop the employability and social inclusion of over **77,000 people**, over **9,000** of these will have entered paid employment directly, and over **10,000** will have entered education or training. Recent data from the ESF Managing Authority shows that providers have met or exceeded all impact targets for the programme.⁵

ESF supported projects in NI have demonstrated consistent success and expertise in their work to address inequalities and ensure greater social inclusion, and in providing real opportunities to individuals to ultimately achieve meaningful and sustained employment⁶. Delivery of the ESF programme in Northern Ireland has been recognised as an exemplar

⁴ 66 projects (involving 50 organisations across NI), are currently operational under the 2nd Call of the NI ESF Programme 2014-2020. The 66 projects are broken down into the following four categories – unemployment and economic inactive (22), NEET (18), Disability (24) and Community Family Programme (5). <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/66-european-social-fund-call-2-projects-by-constituency-and-council-area>

⁵ An Impact Evaluation of the Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme, 2014 -2020, Department for Economy, December 2020 [Impact evaluation of the NI ESF Programme 2014-20 \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

⁶ Chief Inspector’s Report E2016- 2018, Education and Training Inspectorate

model across Europe in addressing many aspects of social exclusion and economic inactivity. External evaluation and review of the programme has routinely evidenced tangible benefits for both individual participants, the wider community, and the economy⁷.

Those individuals and communities ESF projects have typically supported are among the most socially excluded in NI. They face significant personal, societal, and financial barriers when trying to access employment or learning; these challenges only amplified by the continued impacts of the pandemic and growing economic uncertainty. This includes **young people, particularly those that are not in education, employment, or training; the long-term unemployed; people with disabilities and health conditions; people facing multiple complex barriers to employment, those with convictions and families. To date ESF has been the primary and consistent source of funding for these projects.**

In the context of an exceptionally challenging 'post Covid-19' labour market, there are likely to be further complex societal and employability challenges emerging and ESF provision has routinely demonstrated its capacity to adapt and respond to emerging need, as highlighted throughout the pandemic. An independent evaluation of the ESF programme by Grant Thornton⁸ found that ESF projects not only demonstrated excellent value for money but noted key strengths as being flexibility of approach; investment in relationship building; and the provision of tailored, demand driven supports. This includes *'the delivery of 'added value' through a 'wrap around' support approach including intensive mental health and wellbeing supports to cohorts of unemployed people who are particularly distant from the labour market and who have complex needs.'*

4.Current Context

Following the UK's decision to leave the European Union (EU) in 2019, the UK Government committed to keeping in place current ESF arrangements until EU funding came to an end and to create an appropriate 'successor' fund⁹

Despite this, neither the ESF Programme's beneficiaries nor our organisations as providers have been offered any security or assurances on either the immediate or longer-term future of this provision.

⁷ Strategic Investment Board Landscape Presentation Paper for Strategic Insight Lab, Feb 2021

⁸ An Impact Evaluation of the Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme, 2014 -2020, Department for Economy, December 2020 [Impact evaluation of the NI ESF Programme 2014-20 \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](https://economy-ni.gov.uk/impact-evaluation-of-the-ni-esf-programme-2014-20)

⁹ Services in NI are currently being delivered as part of the current ESF funding round for 2018-2022, until March 2022. The UK government stated that in the case of a 'no-deal' departure from the EU, projects will continue to be funded until the end of the current cycle.

Mainstream provision does not meet the needs of those individuals currently supported by ESF funded projects; therefore, the loss of ESF funding and the need to replace it with, as a minimum, the same level of resourcing, is a critical issue.¹⁰ This is particularly important to ensure equity of access to skills development and training and employment opportunities for those most removed from the labour market and excluded from meaningful participation in society.

At present however the future of this vital provision remains more uncertain than ever and as a result there is a need for urgent action to ensure that future delivery is prioritised and protected.

ESF Call 3

In an earlier briefing produced by the ESF User Group in 2020¹¹ we highlighted the urgent need for a ‘bridging or transition’ period to protect the continued delivery of ESF provision, whilst both domestic and UK Government policy was being further developed, and associated funding secured.

We welcomed the continued efforts and commitments made by the Department for Economy (DfE) as the managing authority for ESF to explore all options regarding, including the announcement of the *ESF Succession Project* in partnership with DfC and in securing a planned one-year extension to the current ESF programme via EU funds to be known as [ESF Call 3](#).

However, decision making by DfE in June 2021 not to continue with the ESF Succession Project due to funding uncertainty and their recent confirmation that they may be unable to meet all Match Funding requirements under ESF Call 3 has left ESF providers in a precarious and uncertain financial position.

Whilst we appreciate the continued efforts of DfE to advocate for appropriate funding for ESF type provision, we are acutely aware they do so in the face of competing internal and cross departmental budgetary pressures and demands. With less than 6 months remaining until the current programme comes to an end and successful Call 3 projects set to come on board in April 2022, the match funding position remains unclear, with a risk that over £20 million in EU Funds may not be able to be drawn down and therefore lost to NI due to this funding gap.

¹⁰ [ESF Users Briefing on Future Replacement of ESF Funding Post-Brexit | NICVA](#)

¹¹ [ESF Users Briefing on Future Replacement of ESF Funding Post-Brexit | NICVA](#)

As a recent Strategic Investment Board¹² report commissioned by DfE concluded, any break in ESF provision would be highly undesirable. This report highlighted that such a break would greatly impact people who are deeply disadvantaged socially and economically and who at present do not have access to any suitable alternative provision. The report suggested that any break in provision would lead to unmet need and a 'cliff edge' in terms of access to suitable support at a time of unprecedented social and economic challenge and therefore must be avoided. The report further highlighted that a break or significant delays in securing delivery/provision would also likely mean the loss of providers; their staff and the valuable partnerships, infrastructure and expertise built up via delivery of the ESF programme. The report anticipated that it would be both highly complex and costly to develop this capacity to deliver, from scratch, after or as result of any break in provision.

The UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF)

There remains significant uncertainty as to whether the [UK Shared Prosperity Fund](#) (UKSPF), proposed as a successor fund for EU funded projects, will be in any way adequate to address the needs of those previously provided for under the ESF programme, with all policy insight and intelligence to date suggesting that this is unlikely to be the case.

Whilst many practical details of the fund remain unknown, it is clear that the design and operation of the UKSPF has critical implications for how current ESF funded programmes might be funded in both the immediate and longer-term future. Given this, we have fully supported previous recommendations¹³ that devolved administrations and their partners should hold responsibility for the detailed design and delivery of relevant parts of the fund, with powers to allocate funding through the UKSPF in Northern Ireland fully devolved to the Northern Ireland administration, in line with its responsibilities for social inclusion and economic development.

It appears however that the UK Government aim to retain responsibility for the design and delivery of this fund, centrally, with the role played by the NI Executive to date¹⁴ in informing its priorities and/or plans for its implementation appearing to remain extremely limited at best. This is despite the fact that the fund will spend money on matters that lie primarily within areas of devolved responsibility for the NI Government such as transport, skills, and economic development.

¹² Strategic Investment Board Landscape Presentation Paper for Strategic Insight Lab, Feb 2021

¹³ [All-Party Parliamentary Group \(APPG\) on Post-Brexit Funding for Nations, Regions and Local Areas](#)

¹⁴ [The UK Shared Prosperity Fund \(parliament.uk\)](#)

In addition, the timeframe within which UKSPF funds might realistically become available ‘on the ground’ remains a concern, given the pace at which its predecessor the [UK Community Renewal Fund](#) is being delivered and the significant delays regarding decision making and allocation of funding etc.

Suggestions that providers might come together to make a collective match funding bid to the proposed UKSPF, for a period of one year, to address immediate funding gaps regarding ESF Call 3, therefore appear wholly unrealistic, given the pace at which the UKSPF is being developed. Even if feasible, this would require significant intervention and leadership by NI government departments given the timescales and complexities involved.

In addition, the absence of detailed information about the UKSPF and the policy vacuum in which the programme and its future priorities are being developed mean that the practicalities of providers securing longer term or multiyear funding via the UKSPF after ESF monies come to an end are likely to remain complex, fraught with uncertainty and significant practical challenges.

Without the appropriate involvement and direction of NI Government in its planning and implementation, there is a very real concern that UKSPF resources may be misdirected and opportunities to help secure appropriate longer-term resourcing for ESF provision via this fund missed or underutilised.

This concern is reinforced by the October 2021 budget announcement that total UKSPF allocations will be £400m in 2022-23, £700m in 2023-24 and £1.5bn in 2024-25 – i.e. only building up to the £1.5 billion shortfall from lost EU receipts in 3 years’ time. There is also deep concern as to whether Northern Ireland’s allocation from this fund will be based on need, i.e. will **at least** the existing levels of ESF funding for Northern Ireland projects be maintained under UKSPF, upholding the UK Governments commitment that Northern Ireland will ‘*not be a penny worse off*’ as a result of Brexit.

Questions also remain as to how the UKSPF will operate in the specific context of Northern Ireland in order to comply with the statutory duty to promote good community relations and equal opportunities.

Domestic Policy Development

At present there is no clarity on how future NI government programmes will meet the social and labour market inclusion needs met for decades by ESF when EU funding runs out.

We believe that the provision of supports to those who are socially excluded and are most marginalised from the labour market is a major area of public policy responsibility for Northern Ireland government that deserves to be led by strategy rather than a funding stream.

It is an issue which transcends Departmental boundaries and is interlinked with other issues at the heart of creating a better society in NI such as, among others, underachievement in education and tackling poverty.

As the recent SIB¹⁵ report notes the interventions provided via ESF align directly with the Northern Ireland social and economic policy agenda, as evidenced by references in documents such as the draft Programme for Government (PfG), New Decade, New Approach¹⁶ and a range of policy documents produced by the DfC, DfE, DoH, TEO and other government Departments and agencies. These include but are not limited to the development and delivery of : the *DfE Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland: Skills for a 10x Economy*; *DfE Industrial Strategy 2030*; the Executive Offices 'Building Forward: Consolidated Covid-19 Recovery Plan', *DfC Building Inclusive Communities, Strategy 2020-25*, the Department of Health's *Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together Strategy*, *DfC's Social Inclusive Labour Market Partnerships* programme and the delivery of local *Councils Community Planning Partnerships and Plans*. There is a clear policy link between the needs met via ESF provision and the principles and objectives of the PfG Outcomes 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9 & 12 either directly or indirectly¹⁷.

Despite ESF provision delivering across a range of key government priorities, we remain uncertain whether domestic policy and strategy, is moving at a pace or in a direction that will ensure that this strategically relevant and much needed provision is adequately profiled and resourced for within same.

With increasingly limited resources likely to be available across all Government departments and agencies we are concerned that without adequate profiling and recognition, ESF type provision may receive less priority and risk not being funded or funded adequately to address need once EU funds have ended, resulting in a further cliff edge of support and unmet need.

Current ESF funds also provide much wider health benefits to the most vulnerable, such as those with mental health issues, intellectual disabilities, and autism spectrum disorders (ASD

¹⁵ Strategic Investment Board Landscape Presentation Paper for Strategic Insight Lab, Feb 2021

¹⁶ [A New Decade A New Approach](#)

¹⁷ [TEO Draft PfG and Outcome Delivery Plan](#)

and who it is well evidenced have suffered the most throughout the Covid pandemic ¹⁸. For many years over 20 ESF providers have been part of well-established referral routes for these thousands of vulnerable people and when ESF funding ends there is currently no plan to make provision for this support.

5. What Needs to Happen

Action is clearly needed to ensure both the immediate and longer-term future of ESF type provision.

There are clear steps that must be taken by both UK and Northern Ireland Governments to:

- 1) Meet the match funding gap necessary to secure EU funds available under ESF Call 3
- 2) Ensure that continued and adequate resourcing for ESF-type activities is made available through both domestic NI Government Departments and/or delivery of the UKSPF.

These are:

1. Match Funding Position/ESF Call 3

Urgent clarity is needed regarding the match funding arrangements for those projects to be delivered through ESF Call 3, with assurances that there will be no funding gap between the current ESF funding round and the distribution of any new funding.

- **The Department for Economy (DfE)**, as the managing authority for EU Funds, alongside the **Department for Communities (DfC) and other key government departments and agencies must urgently work with providers to ensure adequate financial arrangements are in place** and to avoid any immediate loss or disruption of provision.
- The **NI Executive, led by the Department of Finance** must have oversight of the key issues regarding and take timely and appropriate action to ensure that available EU monies are not lost as a result of adequate Match funding not being secured.

2. NI domestic policy and strategy

- Whilst we remain disappointed with the decision not to proceed with the DfE's ESF Succession project, in the absence of this, **NI domestic policy and strategy must**

¹⁸ European Human Rights Report, Issue 5, Impact of COVID-19 on persons with disabilities (2021) [Human Right Centre - Università di Padova | Events and Updates :: European Disability Forum: Human Rights 2020 Report EDF. The impact of Covid-19 on people with disabilities \(unipd-centrodirittiumani.it\)](#)

adequately mainstream, prioritise and address the needs of those previously provided for under the ESF programme. This is vital to secure longer term funding and to ensure there is no significant loss or reduction in ESF type provision resulting in unmet need. NI government departments, with responsibility for those whose needs were previously met under ESF funded programmes, must ensure that current strategies and those under development maintain and deliver interventions that reflect the link between inclusion, health, wellbeing, and employability, as well as other interlinking barriers.

- **The NI Executive and local Government Departments must ensure the full involvement and participation of the voluntary and community sector and those they support, in the design of future domestic programmes and in decision making regarding priorities for funding** to ensure need is adequately prioritised and reflected in programming.

3. Implementation and Delivery of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF)

Urgent clarity is needed as to whether the UKSPF will be a viable ‘successor’ programme to ESF, including the level of funding and timeframe in which this is realistically to be made available. In addition, **increased involvement of the NI Government is required in the Fund’s practical design, management, and delivery, including decision making**, to ensure spend is most appropriately targeted and help avoid duplication etc

- **Clear criteria must be established for how spending under the UKSPF will be allocated in NI**, based on a transparent methodology that adequately assesses and reflects local need.
- **Reassurances must be provided to the NI Government regarding the level of funding to be made available in NI and the timescale over which funding will be guaranteed**, ensuring this reflects the commitment to ‘not a penny less’.
- There is a need for **clarity on how the UKSPF will operate in the specific context of Northern Ireland in order to comply with the statutory duty to promote good community relations and equal opportunities.**
- We maintain our position that **powers to manage and allocate funding through the UKSPF in Northern Ireland should be fully devolved to the Northern Ireland administration**, in line with its responsibilities for social inclusion and economic development. The Northern Ireland Executive has extensive experience of administering EU structural funds in a way that supports community relations.

- In the absence of this, **all efforts must be made by both UK and NI Government to ensure that there is significant practical involvement of the NI administration in the preparation, implementation, and management of the UKSPF funds**, including determining funding priorities.
- **NI Government should exert all influence in making the case to the UK government as to how they can contribute significant capacity and experience to a more partnership model/approach to local delivery of the UKSPF** (for eg, via a match funding approach).¹⁹
- **The UK Government must urgently engage with all relevant NI stakeholders, including the full involvement of relevant community and voluntary sector partners, to ensure the UKSPF is fit for purpose in terms of its priorities and its plans for implementation and delivery.**

In closing we are most keen to meet with both UK and NI Government representatives and officials to discuss our concerns and key asks in more detail. *To request a meeting or more information please get in touch via the contact details below.*

FURTHER INFORMATION:

We are happy to provide further supporting information, including Case Study examples upon request.

For more background and supporting information please also read our earlier Briefing document produced in 2020:

[ESF Users Briefing on Future Replacement of ESF Funding Post-Brexit | NICVA](#)

To request more information or to arrange a meeting please contact NICVA via:

Geoff Nuttall, Head of Policy and Public Affairs, NICVA

Tel 07785 278928 **Email:** geoff.nuttall@nicva.org

¹⁹ [shared-prosperity-fund.pdf \(instituteofgovernment.org.uk\)](#)

ANNEX 1

The following organisations are current members of the ESF Users Group:

1. Network Personnel
2. Training for Women Network (TWN)
3. Include Youth
4. RNIB
5. Springboard Opportunities Ltd
6. The Workspace Group
7. Access Counselling NI
8. Women's Resource & Development Agency
9. Disability Action
10. Start 360
11. Upper Springfield Development Trust
12. Action Mental Health
13. Shankill Women's Centre
14. Extern
15. Triaxtaskforce
16. Triangle Housing Association
17. RNID
18. Youth Action NI
19. USEL
20. Clanrye Group
21. Derry Youth & Community Workshop
22. NIUSE
23. Cedar Foundation
24. The Appleby Trust
25. The Ashton Centre
26. Tyrone Donegal Partnership
27. Compass Advocacy Network Ltd
28. Customized Training
29. The Orchardville Society
30. The Princes Trust
31. Access Employment Ltd
32. Mencap
33. Womens TEC
34. The Now Group
35. The Women's Centre Derry
36. Action Deaf Youth
37. First Steps Womens' Centre
38. NIACRO
39. Skills North West
40. Stepping Stones NI
41. The Conservation Volunteers
42. Women in Business
43. Cedar Foundation
44. Bryson Charitable Group
45. Specialisterne Northern Ireland
46. The Bytes Project
47. GEMS NI
48. Access Centre NI

Appendix 5 – Draft Council Response to All Island Strategic Rail Review



22 December 2022

Strategic Rail Review
c/o Arup, Bedford House
16-22 Bedford St
Belfast
BT2 7FD

Ref: Consultation on the All Island Strategic Rail Review

To whom it may concern:

Mid Ulster District Council would like to take this opportunity to put forward its views and opinion in relation to the proposals set out in the Consultation on the All Island Strategic Rail Review.

Introduction

Mid Ulster Council welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the All Island Strategic Rail Review. The Council area covers a geographical area that would benefit significantly from a redeveloped and upgraded rail network on the island of Ireland.

Feedback on each of the 6 Goals and Ambitions detailed in the consultation review document are set out in turn:

Goal 1: Contribute to Decarbonisation

- **To reduce the carbon emissions associated with rail's construction, operation, and maintenance**
- **To reduce the carbon emissions from motor vehicle travel**

As a result of the lack of accessible public transport approximately 85% of households in Mid Ulster own a private vehicle, with this dependency expected to continue in the future. Accordingly, Travel Survey NI 2014-16 notes that 91% of rural workers travel to work by car/van. Unfortunately, residents cannot rely on a poor public transport network which exists and has been reduced further in recent years. For Mid Ulster residents the private vehicle is the only viable option.

Therefore, while the Council recognises that investment in an improved rail infrastructure could contribute to decarbonisation and reduce carbon emissions from motor vehicle travel, this will only be achieved across the Mid Ulster Council area with the restoration of connections that the former rail network afforded. This would improve connectivity to the two major cities in Northern Ireland and create an alternative to private vehicle usage to Derry City Airport, Belfast International Airport and Belfast City Airports located in Northern Ireland.

Goal 2: Improve All Island Connectivity between Major Cities

- **To provide an attractive public transport choice for travel between the seven major cities of Belfast, Cork, Derry/ Londonderry, Dublin, Galway, Limerick and Waterford**

The Council does support the proposal to provide an attractive public transport choice for travel between the seven major cities of Belfast, Cork, Derry/Londonderry, Dublin, Galway, Limerick and Waterford. However outside of these cities, regional imbalances also have to be addressed and this can be achieved through levelling up. To achieve this it is essential in the first instance to install the basic infrastructure systems that boost and underpin the structure of our economy and take advantage of our distinctive positioning along the north/south and east/west border corridors. In the absence of redressing the fundamental economic problem (infrastructure gap), increasing productivity and achieving virtuous economic effects will only remain a distant possibility.

Goal 3: Enhance Regional and Rural Accessibility

- **To give people in rural and regional areas better access to economic opportunities, health, education, and civic services.**
- **To improve inter-regional accessibility**

The Council is supportive of the overall strategic goal of giving people in rural and regional areas better access to economic opportunities, health, education, and civic services.

Mid Ulster District Council is a predominately rural district and is also the fastest growing Council area in Northern Ireland (its population is expected to grow to 165,000 by 2030). The area is within a 30 minute reach of Belfast (Dublin in 2 hours), and shares a land border with the Republic of Ireland providing access to 450,000 people within a 50km radius.

Mid Ulster is however a geographically dispersed population with a quarter of citizens living in the main towns, a third living in local towns and 40% of our homes located in the countryside. The area currently suffers from a lack of rural accessibility and would greatly benefit from investment in its overall infrastructure make up. Therefore, specific consideration needs to be given as to how rural districts are not left behind due to not having access to a rail network.

As such, consideration needs to be given as to how systems such as light rail can be introduced to the West of Northern Ireland, where there is a massive gap in the rail network and this presents a clear disadvantage in the context of economic growth.

Unless significant investment is provided for rural areas then the gap between access to services such as economic opportunities, health, education, and civic services will widen further between rural and urban Districts.

Goal 4: Encourage Sustainable Mobility

- **To help manage demand through compact growth and better integration of public transport with land use.**
- **To enhance the integration of rail with other transport modes.**
- **To reduce reliance on private passenger vehicles**

Mid Ulster District Council supports these goals with the overall aim of encouraging sustainable mobility. However, in relation to a reliance on private passenger vehicles and the enhancement and the integration of rail, the population of Mid Ulster District Council area is heavily reliant on private passenger vehicles both for work and leisure purposes. For anyone wanting to travel to the District by any other method than by bus, private passenger vehicles are the only option. The scale of this private car usage can be demonstrated by highlighting that the District is most accessible to the main East/West and North/South motorway routes and there are approximately 700,000 people who reside within a 1 hour drive of the District. Therefore, unless there is a reintroduction of a form of rail infrastructure to the 'west', it is likely that the heavy reliance on private passenger vehicles for all business and recreational purposes will remain and possibly increase in comparison to other area who have access to a rail network service.

Goal 5: Foster Economic Activity

- **To contribute to balanced economic growth between urban and regional areas.**
- **To support the efficient movement of goods to and from economic centres and international gateways.**
- **To support the efficient movement of people between economic centres, and to and from economic centres and international gateways.**

Mid Ulster District Council is of the opinion that expansion of the rail network to include the district as a gateway to the 'west' and as a cross border link could help to fulfil all the 3 actions associated with this goal and its associated aims.

In order to address regional imbalances and achieve levelling up of Northern Ireland there needs to be a focus on rail investment west of the Bann. A commitment to delivering modern and sustainable economic infrastructure and "levelling-up" is

essential particularly due to the historical underinvestment in Mid Ulster's basic enabling infrastructure. To achieve the aspiration of inclusive, balanced regional growth, rural communities must have greater access to services and an equal opportunity to participate in the economy. Moreover, investment in rail infrastructure West of the region would create opportunities to increase the use of the network for freight which is essential to supporting economic recovery and long term sustainable growth. Rail freight also delivers environmental benefits by reducing congestion and carbon emissions.

Furthermore, research clearly displays that tourists favour using railways and the Council feels that the lack of rail infrastructure discourages tourists from visiting Mid Ulster.

It is important to point out that Mid Ulster district is recognised as one of the most entrepreneurial and enterprising rural regions in Northern Ireland. Its economy is private sector driven, boasting the largest business base outside Belfast with over 9,000 VAT registered businesses. The region has higher productivity per head of population compared to the Northern Ireland average and a GVA (Gross Value Added) of £3.24bn (producing 7.7% of the Northern Irish economic output).

The Council area has strengths in key sectors, including Manufacturing & Engineering; Food and Agri Food; Construction; Retail, IT and Hospitality. Our businesses are the most export-intensive, accounting for 12% of Northern Ireland's exports. Mid Ulster businesses embrace innovation, and the region has the largest uptake of Invest NI's Innovation Accreditation Awards outside of the Belfast region.

Mid Ulster is rightly recognised as the centre of manufacturing and engineering in Northern Ireland, where it accounts for 21% of the local economy (providing nearly 11,000 jobs), compared to 9% in Northern Ireland. The sector is estimated to deliver in the region of £1.67bn GVA contribution to the local economy and over £710m in local wages, directly and indirectly. This world class cluster is of profound importance to the area's economy, especially in key specialisms such as the manufacture of mining and quarrying machinery, production of general and special purpose machinery etc., which have linkages and supply chain associations with the construction and food and agri-food sectors. For instance, 40% of world's mobile crushing and screening equipment is made in the Mid Ulster area.

However, in order to fully capitalise on this entrepreneurial spirit and to achieve efficient movement of people between economic centres and international gateways, investment in physical infrastructure such as new road networks and rail to the 'west' with the aim of creating improved connectivity of cross border connections and greater access to sea and airports via a railway network must be priority. Without this investment it will be impossible to realise inclusive economic growth ambitions and achieve a regionally balanced economy.

Goal 6: Achieve Economic and Financial Feasibility

- **Investment in rail that is financially feasible**

- **To access potential funding**
- **To ensure the benefit cost ratio of investment in the railway network is considered alongside meeting objectives**

While it is recognised that any rail strategy must be realistic and financially feasible the associated cost should not be solely classed as prohibitive if a cost benefit analysis also reflects the significant benefits to the environment as well as increased potential for investment and increased employment opportunities. However, Council do recommend that financial feasibility is based on being realistic on how much consumers are able and willing to pay for the proposed services. It is further recommended that areas such as Mid Ulster, who currently do not have access to rail services, are not disadvantaged in this process because without baseline figures the potential level of usage and demand is harder to quantify. In this instance the wider all island financial benefits should be taken into account such as the economic benefit of getting goods to market and encouraging the creation of new suppliers and supply changes as a result of improved and faster infrastructure for delivery.

The goals set out in this section also underpins details contained in the Regional Economic Strategy for the Mid-South West (MSW) region. This strategy contains a long-term ambition of considering a range of effective sustainable transport solutions to restore some of the connectivity that the former rail network provided. Effective transport solutions considered include light rail that could have the potential to restore some of the connectivity that previously existed in MSW region.

Conclusion

While Mid Ulster District Council is broadly supportive of the goals and policy opportunities set out in this Strategic Rail Review it cannot be ignored that the closure of various rail routes in the 1950s from the western counties of Northern Ireland has left the District economically disadvantaged. The continued lack of rail infrastructure to facilitate travel for social, domestic and employment uses has negatively impacted upon those residing and travelling to the district.

To further compound this situation there has been a the lack of investment of the road infrastructure within the District meaning that Mid Ulster, on a variety of economic and social indicators, is more disadvantaged when compared to other areas of Northern Ireland. One stark outcome of this lack of investment is that Mid Ulster residents are furthest from Accident & Emergency provision and have some of the longest emergency ambulance response times. Good infrastructure networks are crucial to addressing this as well as the other social and economic inequalities that are caused by a lack of adequate infrastructure within the District.

The reintroduction of a rail network to the District has the potential to enhance further economic prosperity for the District Council area. Mid Ulster District Council area already performs very well in terms of the economic and manufacturing outputs. However this is against the backdrop of a largely rural district that is currently experiencing under-investment in its road network. To reintroduce a rail network to the area has the potential to unlock the potential of the District's entrepreneurial

prospects and secure sustained growth for the future and investment in the manufacturing and engineering industries prevalent in the area. Without this infrastructure investment it will continue to be a challenge for businesses in the region to get goods to market in a timely and financially viable fashion.