

Report on	Business & Communities - Covid-19 Update
Date of Meeting	23 April 2020
Reporting Officer	Adrian McCreesh, Director of Business & Communities

Is this report restricted for confidential business?	Yes	
If 'Yes', confirm below the exempt information category relied upon	No	X

1.0	Purpose of Report
	To update Members on the various supports provided to communities and businesses as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic;
1.1	ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT
1.1.1	Responding to Business Enquiries for Grants.
1.1.2	Establishment of Covid-19 Business Section on Council Website.
1.1.3	Issuing E-shots to Businesses to Keep Them Up to Date.
1.1.4	Businesses Webinars.
1.1.5	Business Support Programmes.
1.1.6	Update on Mid Ulster Town & Village Business Spruce Up Scheme.
1.1.7	Mid Ulster Business Leaders Videos.
1.1.8	Restart and Recovery of Town Centres.
1.1.9	Assisting Department for the Economy with £25,000 Business Grants Scheme.
1.1.10	Sourcing PPE for Bloc Blinds.
1.1.11	Rural Development Programme – Grant Claims Process Updated.
1.2	CULTURE AND ARTS SUPPORT
1.2.1	To provide members with an update on the response from Culture & Arts Service Team to the Covid 19 pandemic and the ongoing engagement and contact with customers and users of Culture & Arts services.
1.3	TOURISM SUPPORT
1.3.1	Mid Ulster Tourism Forum
1.3.2	2020 Covid Impact Survey
1.3.3	Corporate Events
2.0	Background
2.1	ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT
2.1.1	

2.1.2	<p>Responding to Business Enquiries for Grants – Continuing to provide ongoing support to businesses which seek assistance on the various types of grant aid available during the Covid-19 pandemic and signposting accordingly.</p> <p>Establishment of Covid-19 Business Section on Council Website – Providing regular updates to Comms to keep the new Covid-19 section of Council's website up to date.</p> <p>Issuing E-shots to Businesses to Keep Them Up to Date – Ensuring businesses on Council's online business directory are kept informed by issuing them with regular e-shots to advise of new grants/supports as they become available.</p> <p>Businesses Webinars – Providing a variety of online business webinars to support business owners during the Covid-19 pandemic.</p> <p>Business Support Programmes – Liaising with Invest NI to 'repackage' the assistance provided to companies through Council's suite of business programmes to ensure they meet business needs during/after the Covid-19 pandemic.</p> <p>Update on Mid Ulster Town & Village Business Spruce Up Scheme – Progressing claims for Phase 1 businesses who have completed works and advising Phase 2 companies that letters of offer will not be issued until the Covid-19 pandemic passes.</p> <p>Mid Ulster Business Leaders Videos – Working alongside our business leaders to garner short video messages from them to inspire resilience and boost morale during the pandemic.</p> <p>Restart and Recovery of Town Centres – Communicating with a cross sample of traders represented on our Town Centre Forums to determine their short/medium term issues when preparing to return to work. These issues along with wider research on potential central/local government support measures will also be given consideration to help rejuvenate our town centres after Covid-19.</p> <p>Assisting Department for the Economy with £25,000 Business Grants Scheme – When requested, assist the Department for the Economy to verify the existence of businesses in Mid Ulster who apply for a £25,000 grant.</p> <p>Sourcing PPE for Bloc Blinds – Ongoing weekly support provided to Bloc Blinds to source PPE for their staff in the manufacture/packaging of face shields.</p> <p>Rural Development Programme – Grant Claims Process Updated – Updated grant claims process to allow applicants to submit claims electronically.</p>
2.2	<p>CULTURE AND ARTS SUPPORT</p>
2.2.1	<p>The impact of the Covid19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the delivery of Culture and Arts Services, at a time when the Council would normally be preparing for a busy Spring and Easter Period of events, activities and performances at Seamus</p>

2.2.2	Heaney HomePlace, The Burnavon Arts & Cultural Centre and Hill of the O Neill and Ranfurly House Arts and Visitor Centre. In addition
2.2.3	Covid 19 has also had an impact on the wider Culture and Arts community across Mid Ulster, including those organisations availing of Culture, Arts and Heritage small grants and our strategic Culture & Arts partners that operate within Mid Ulster.
2.3	The impact of the pandemic also extends to those groups and organisations that are supported by MUDC through the Regional and Minority Languages Programme of activity, including Ulster Scots language and living history events planned and also on Seachtain na Gaeilge activities planned in the lead up to and including St Patrick's festivities in March. There will also be a further impact on the allocation of Language bursaries as we now approach the summer period when the vast majority of intensive language tuition activity, particularly in the Gaeltacht regions would have normally taken place and which have now been cancelled.
2.3.1	TOURISM SUPPORT
2.3.2	Mid Ulster Tourism Forum - This group was established on Monday 16th March in response to the onset and predicted impact of Corona Virus on local businesses. Established by Tourism Development Officer, the Group now has 96 participants representing business from every sector of hospitality and tourism across Mid Ulster.
2.3.3	2020 Covid Impact Survey - As part of the response to this crisis we have compiled a survey asking people about the impacts of the crisis on their business, supports they have received and to identify gaps. Over 40 businesses across Mid Ulster have responded and I have included a synopsis of the results.
	Corporate Events - All Council corporate and town centre events have been cancelled until the end of June 2019 which is being reviewed on a day to day basis, taking into considering the current status of the COVID-19 virus.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT
3.1.1	Responding to Business Enquiries for Grants – The economic development team are dealing with ongoing enquiries from businesses regarding the myriad of Covid-19 business supports currently available and providing guidance and signposting to relevant information sources as appropriate. From this ongoing engagement, staff have identified 'gaps' in the current government business support schemes and have highlighted proposed mitigations to the Department for Economy for consideration.
3.1.2	Establishment of Covid-19 Business Section on Council Website - A dedicated Covid-19 business support section has been established on the Council's website and the economic development team forward updates to Council's Communications team daily ensuring all key support measures are included as they become available.

3.1.3	<p>Issuing E-shots to Businesses to Keep Them Up to Date - Regular e-shots are issued to 1800 businesses on the Council's business directory to update them on new business support measures announced by government agencies and others bodies, especially around Covid-19.</p>
3.1.4	<p>Businesses Webinars – Three free online digital seminars for businesses are being organised as part of the 'Digital First' Programme. The first seminar was held using Zoom on Friday 27 March 2020 focusing on 'Effective Remote Working for Businesses'. 69 businesses took part in the seminar and participating businesses rated the seminar an average score of 4.7 out of 5. A second Webinar 'Building a Digital Business' will take place on Tuesday 21 April 2020 from 10am to 11.30am. Businesses wishing to take part must register at the following link bit.ly/DigitalBusinessMUDC A third and final webinar is scheduled for 12 May 2020 to look at the proposed issue of 'Connecting with Customers'.</p> <p>Additionally, economic development staff are also currently engaging with the MEGA Network to support local manufacturing and engineering businesses through the Covid-19 crisis. It is planned that 2 further webinars will be developed at their behest. The first webinar will focus on encouraging business owners/employees to stay strong and resilient in the face of adversity and look after their mental health; and the second is aimed at helping employers get ready and positioned to return to business again after the pandemic passes.</p>
3.1.5	<p>Business Support Programmes - The Council is working with Invest NI to "review and repackage" our current business support programmes to make them more applicable and accessible to businesses at this time. The 3 programmes ongoing are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tender Ready Programme - Digital First Programme - Transform Programme <p>A further large 'Growth Programme' has been tendered and is currently being assessed. Council will also liaise with Invest NI on this matter also.</p>
3.1.6	<p>Update on Mid Ulster Town & Village Business Spruce Up Scheme - In terms of Phase 1 – Officers continue to work with businesses to ensure that those who have completed their projects are supported through the claims process and reimbursed promptly. Regarding Phase 2, an email was issued to businesses on the ranked reserve list (up to the value of grant aid of £250,000 as per approval at Development Committee and ratified at full Council March 2020), advising that Letters of Offer will be delayed in being issued until after Covid-19 pandemic passes to ensure government guidelines are adhered to.</p>
3.1.7	<p>Mid Ulster Business Leaders Videos – Economic Development staff are making contact with business leaders across Mid Ulster to ask them to prepare "resilience messages" to share with Council (and also their own employees/contacts) to maintain momentum/morale during the Covid-19 crisis. Once Council are in receipt of a bank of videos, these messages will be forwarded to Comms to push out via Council's social media channels.</p>
3.1.8	<p>Restart and Recovery of Town Centres - Staff are currently undertaking extensive research from local traders and wider stakeholders from across NI, RoI, and UK to</p>

	<p>identify the short and medium term issues faced by local traders as a result of the pandemic, and identify potential ways to support them recover. Such proposals may require central/local government support in order to help secure the viability and vitality of our town centres in the future. This piece of work will be concluded shortly.</p>
3.1.9	<p>Assisting Department for the Economy with £25,000 Business Grants Scheme - The Department for the Economy approached Councils to seek assistance in verifying the existence of businesses applying to the £25,000 grant scheme. While they will be accessing other data sources to do this, they have requested help from Councils in verifying businesses and that the business activity is within the sectors eligible for this grant, such as hospitality or retail. Economic development will act the lead contact for this process within Council.</p>
3.1.10	<p>Sourcing PPE for Bloc Blinds - Members will be aware that Council has re-purposed Meadowbank Sports Arena for local company Bloc Blinds as the Magherafelt based manufacturer has gone into production of frontline Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Council officers have continually been assisting Bloc Blinds to source a variety of PPE for their staff to wear when manufacturing and packaging the face shields. This is a not-for-profit venture which will provide vital face protection to those bravely working on the front line against Covid-19.</p>
3.1.11	<p>Rural Development Programme – Grant Claims Process Update - Claims processing procedures have been modified to allow project promoters to submit claims electronically. This is allowing payment of grant aid back to promoters as normal.</p>
3.2	<p>CULTURE AND ARTS SUPPORT</p>
3.2.1	<p>As a result of the pandemic, all activities across all three venues, planned from mid-March up to the end of June 2020, have been either rescheduled to the Autumn season (where possible) or have been cancelled. Where events, activities and performances have been rescheduled, customer tickets have been re-allocated to those dates. Where the alternative dates do not suit customers, or where activities have unfortunately been cancelled, the venues are currently arranging through finance department for full refunds to be issued.</p>
3.2.2	<p>In addition to all internal arranged events and activities being cancelled or rescheduled, all external conferences, seminars and meetings across all 3 venues have also been cancelled.</p>
3.2.3	<p>While Culture and Arts facilities are all closed to the public, they continue to be inspected and checked by staff on a regular basis and indeed our facilities continue to play their part in showing their appreciation for the good work of the local emergency services and NHS workers throughout this difficult period by lighting up blue the Burnavon, Cookstown, Ranfurly, Dungannon and the Bridewell, Magherafelt, each Thursday evening from 8.00pm</p>
3.2.4	<p>The developing and ever changing situation continues to be closely monitored across the culture and Arts service within Mid Ulster and indeed in liaison with counterparts in</p>

	<p>other council areas as the weeks and months progress in order to provide reassurance and support to our customers and the wider culture and arts community at this difficult time and indeed in preparation for when normal functions and services resume</p>
3.2.5	<p>Although facilities remain closed to the public, staff within culture and Arts services continue to deliver key culture arts product to the customer base using innovative and creative methods to maintain engagement at this difficult time with our key facility users and our audiences for arts and cultural activity. This includes free access to online activity delivered throughout the week via social media channels in addition to Youtube which includes: Weekly education activity, Arts and Craft activity with local artists, Traditional music in schools online lessons, Pipes and Drums lessons and a weekly Book club delivered via Twitter.</p>
3.2.6	<p>Education Officers are redeveloping scripts and training resources to train tour guides and to develop online education and programme activity alongside social media plans to include the creation of content for online workshops, history talks, music performances for users and customers to access remotely. Staff are currently developing scripts for living history aspect of proposed visitor experience for Tourism NI Embrace a Giant Spirit and staff continue to process Grant payments and support the local Arts infrastructure.</p>
3.2.7	<p>In addition to the above, other staff within Culture & Arts Services have volunteered to be redeployed to support other key council services and initiatives at this difficult and challenging time, including bin collection services and working with colleagues across the Business and Communities and other Council departments in support and coordination of the Council food distribution service.</p>
3.2.8	<p>The Regional and Minority Languages Programme is facing a number of significant challenges as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic in the incoming year. Not least of these will be the Regional Minority Language Bursary Programme which provides support for attendance at residential summer courses for indigenous language learners. It is now Increasingly unlikely that these language courses will take place in 2020/21. Irish in the Primary and Adult Education programmes which are due to re-commence in September may also be significantly impacted however these will be kept under review.</p>
3.2.9	<p>Locally based town centre family focused summer activities planned to be delivered through Culture & Arts Services over the summer months in key locations may also be impacted, however these will be kept in the programme at present and will remain under review as the days and weeks progress as these will be required to assist and support activities planned by Council during the recovery phase.</p>
3.3	<p>TOURISM SUPPORT</p>
3.3.1	<p>Mid Ulster Tourism Forum - The forum has been posting regular updates on supports for businesses in the sector including financial, human resource, legal and is attempting to be a one stop shop for up to date information in an evolving and increasingly bleak situation for business. Member can post questions, scroll through</p>

previously published information and search on links to some of the following: nibusinessinfo, tourismni, hmrc and the public health agency.

This group have held 9 webinars to date. To date with the support of Tourism NI we have hosted law experts from Cleaver, Fulton, Rankin (CFR) and accountants from FPK/FPM. We have also had Geraldine Egan, Tourism Ireland and today welcomed Valentina Salaris from Milan give her perspective on Italy at the minute, planning for the future and the freedom phase.

Rosemarie McHugh, Product Development Director, Tourism NI or one of her colleagues also dial in and answers any tourism related enquiries. An average of 35 businesses dial in and the Q&A to these experts follow up lasts on average 1 hour and 15 minutes. The webinars are working well in the sense that businesses get an opportunity to get advice from some of the top law, tourism and accounting experts in the country plus the mental health benefits continue to be cited by the participants, which at this time is much needed. The group is being coordinated by the Business Engagement Officer with the support of Hugh McCloy. Anyone who would like to join simply contact Mary McGee on 078 67520681. In addition to this the Mid Ulster Council Tourism Development Group will be meeting on 21st April to consider and advise Council on its tourism recovery plan.

3.3.2 **2020 Covid Impact Survey** - Over 40 businesses across Mid Ulster have responded and I have included a synopsis of the results. 50% of businesses stated that there is a risk they may not reopen with others commenting that whilst they plan to the supports promised need to start to flow including the £25k grant and employee support scheme.

73% of respondents stated that without the employee retention scheme they cannot continue to pay staff wages, hence it is imperative that this comes onstream quickly. Within this scheme though some issues remain: Workers who commenced employment after 28th February excluded from employee retention scheme. People working for cash, again excluded from all support

On cash flow key issues for the businesses are paying the following:

Energy Bills	70%
Insurance	67%
OS Trade invoices	62%
Wages	62%
Loan/debts	54%

In terms of receiving the business support grant (£10k), 20% have received it, 60% haven't and 20% identified issues around why they are deemed ineligible, these include:

- New start businesses struggling to get support.
- Non rateable business – No NAV
- Industrial/Manufacturing derating
- Business and family home joined hence not eligible
- Bed & Breakfasts paying domestic rates ruled out for support plus on farm activities paying farm rates ruled out.

3.3.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Businesses with plus £51 k NAV no support apart from loans. Don't want to incur more debt. - Leisure activities e.g. Golf Clubs Sports and Recreation rates – excluded. - Business operating from a leased premises <p>Corporate Events - All Council corporate and town centre events have been cancelled until the end of June, which is being reviewed on a day to day basis, taking into considering the current status of the COVID-19 virus. Tourism NI are going to established a Events Task Force, including all the Councils and Tourism NI/Tourism Ireland, to specifically review and advise all Councils on planning and rolling out a recovery plan, which will play an important role in relaunching our hospitality, town centres and tourism sector.</p> <p>The events teams within Business and Communities are currently working on scenario roll out recovery plans for Corporate & Town Centre Events. Council will take into consideration the advice and guidance from the NI Events Task Force and considering the type of events that will be appropriate and support the Mid Ulster Council businesses, with a very clear focus on reenergising our town centres and hospitality sector.</p>
4.0	Other Considerations
4.1	<p><u>Financial & Human Resources Implications</u> Significant impact on ability to deliver key programmes within Culture and Arts activity and regional and Minority language activity which will result in key activities being cancelled, depending on duration of current lock down and social distancing period. While this will result in underspend in certain areas, it should also be noted that income targets for activity delivered and income from events cancelled, will not be realised.</p> <p><u>Professional Support</u> None</p>
4.2	<p><u>Equality and Good Relations Implications</u> None</p>
4.3	<p><u>Risk Management Implications</u> None</p>
5.0	Recommendation(s)
5.1	<p>ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT</p> <p>5.1.1 Responding to Business Enquiries for Grants – to note an update on progress.</p> <p>5.1.2 Establishment of Covid-19 Business Section on Council Website – to note an update on progress.</p>

5.1.3	Issuing E-shots to Businesses to Keep Them Up to Date – to note an update on progress.
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5.3.1	Mid Ulster Tourism Forum – to note an update on progress.
5.3.2	2020 Covid Impact Survey – to note an update on progress.
5.3.3	Corporate Events – to note an update on progress.
6.0	Documents Attached & References
	No appendices.