

Report on	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Christmas 2023 Town Activities 2. ICBAN – Peace Plus Funding 3. Digital Transformation Flexible Fund (DTFF) Update 4. Mid Ulster Enterprise Week 2023
Date of Meeting	12 October 2023
Reporting Officer	Assistant Director of Economic Development, Tourism and Strategic Programmes

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

1.0	Purpose of Report
1.1	To provide Members with an update on key activities as detailed below.
2.0	Background
2.1	<p>Christmas 2023 Town Activities</p> <p>In an effort to create a festive ambience in our main shopping towns in the lead up to Christmas 2023, it is proposed the Economic Development team organise entertainment on several Saturdays in December.</p>
2.2	<p>ICBAN – Peace Plus Funding</p> <p>The Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) is currently working with partner Councils to develop and submit two major funding bids under the Peace Plus Investment Area 2.4: Smart Towns & Villages & 4.2: Rural Regeneration and Social Inclusion, which is anticipated will open in November 2023.</p>
2.3	<p>Digital Transformation Flexible Fund (DTFF) Update</p> <p>The Digital Transformation Flexible Fund (DTFF) is a new initiative developed by Belfast Region City Deal partners and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council (NMDDC) and is supported by the wider city and growth deals across the region. It is a unique project as it is one of the first Cross-Growth deal projects to be developed and funded. The DTFF has been in development since May 2020 and</p>

the business case has gone through a series of iterations as it has migrated through the City and Growth deal approval process. The project was approved by Invest NI and Department for Economy in June 2023 and more recently by Department of Finance on 26 September 2023, now enabling the project to go live in October 2023.

DTFF is an important step forward in Councils positioning their intent to drive their local economies – with an increasing focus on innovation support for our local businesses. The Programme’s key purpose is to support economic recovery and fast track the progress of the micro and small business community to respond to the opportunities of digital transformation using advanced and emerging technologies.

Fund Value and Overview - £6 million has been secured for the DTFF through the Complementary Fund. The Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) has committed a further £1.1 million. Having secured funding from the NI Executive for an Inclusive Futures Fund, Derry City and Strabane District Council (City Deal Region) were excluded from applying to the Complementary Fund. However, given Derry City and Strabane District Council’s interest in participating, it will now contribute £450,000 to pay for their involvement thereby creating a total capital grant fund of £7.5 million.

The DTFF will be led and managed by Newry, Mourne and Down District Council (NMDDC).

2.4 Mid Ulster Enterprise Week (2023)

Mid Ulster Enterprise Week is now in its fifth year. The activities this year will take place from 13th – 16th November 2023.

Event details are being finalised and include a mix of in person events and online webinars encompassing a range of issues relevant to all types of businesses, set within the context of the current economic climate.

Operational Excellence Workshop Series

Mid Ulster District Council has agreed to partner with Invest NI in the roll out of an innovative new series of Operational Excellence Workshops for Businesses. These are aimed at supporting Mid Ulster companies from all sectors to implement more efficient processes which will help them improve their competitive advantage by increasing their productivity and profitability. With the increase in the cost of doing business, this will equip businesses from across Mid Ulster to analyse their cost model and operations to increase efficiency, reduce waste and implement change.

It is proposed to launch the first Operational Excellence Workshop during Mid Ulster Enterprise Week 2023.

3.0	Main Report
3.1	<p data-bbox="228 257 715 293">Christmas 2023 Town Activities</p> <p data-bbox="228 331 1406 555">To complement the Christmas switch on events across the five main towns, there will be entertainment from 12noon – 3pm on Saturday 9th December and 16th December 2023. This will include characters in costumes walking around the towns greeting children and handing out sweets, live music entertainment and face painting. The purpose of this is to create festive cheer and festive spirit for the shoppers.</p> <p data-bbox="228 593 1337 667">The Christmas lights switch on and events in the five towns will be held on the following dates:</p> <ul data-bbox="276 705 1037 891" style="list-style-type: none"> - Cookstown - Friday 24 November 6pm - 8pm - Dungannon - Saturday 25 November 6pm - 8pm - Magherafelt - Saturday 25 November 2pm - 8pm - Maghera - Saturday 2 December 3pm - 6pm - Coalisland - Sunday 3 December 2023 5pm - 7pm <p data-bbox="142 920 539 956">3.2 ICBAN – Peace Plus</p> <p data-bbox="228 1003 1326 1077">ICBAN staff together with partner Council officers are in the pre-development stages and are currently developing funding bids under the Peace Plus;</p> <ul data-bbox="276 1115 1222 1189" style="list-style-type: none"> • Investment Area 2.4: Smart Towns & Villages and; • Investment Area 4.2: Rural Regeneration and Social Inclusion. <p data-bbox="228 1227 1390 1368">Both calls are due to open in November 2023 until January 2024. The Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) has reiterated that all projects must be able to measure the change and show how a peaceful and prosperous society has been achieved.</p> <ul data-bbox="276 1406 847 1442" style="list-style-type: none"> • Area 2.4: Smart Towns & Villages <p data-bbox="228 1480 1326 1592">The Project Lead for this application is ICBAN. Partners are the eight ICBAN member Councils, Southern Regional College and the Western Development Board.</p> <p data-bbox="228 1630 1401 1816">The project is identifying ways the area can best use ICT to enhance social and economic development across the Central Border Region. This includes looking at smart solutions for rural communities and cross border relationships. It provides the opportunity to build on existing infrastructure to use technology to generate prosperity.</p> <p data-bbox="228 1854 1337 1928">The working title of this project is ‘DS3’, which means: Digital Services, Digital Support and Digital Services.</p> <ul data-bbox="276 1966 1098 2002" style="list-style-type: none"> • Area 4.2: Rural Regeneration and Social Inclusion

The Project Lead for this application is ICBAN. Partners are the eight ICBAN member Councils, Community Transport UK (N Ireland), ESB and the Technological University of the Shannon.

The project is looking to develop strategic investment in a series of mobility hubs across the Central Border Region to provide a comprehensive transportation facility that prioritizes the integration of various modes of transportation, promotes sustainable practices, and enhances the overall travel experience for local citizens.

The mobility hub concept is designed to provide seamless connectivity and a range of transportation options that play a crucial role in creating more efficient, accessible, and sustainable transportation systems. The working title of this project is 'Refresh'. MUDC has highlighted the potential to link hub development with local disability groupings in their area.

Both projects are still in their early stages and further workshops are planned to finalise ideas and prepare for submission of detailed applications.

3.3 Digital Transformation Flexible Fund (DTFF) Update

The DTFF seeks to address the financial barrier that many small businesses face when seeking to digitally transform, by establishing a capital grant fund that will support investment in equipment critical to their strategic digital transformation ambitions. This grant can assist those smaller organisations that do not have the necessary capital available to develop and trial new products and services using new and advanced technologies.

Grant funding levels: will range from £5,000 - £20,000 with a grant rate of 70% of total project costs.

Eligible expenditure: will be limited to the purchase of capital equipment to advance the business' digital transformation and/or resources for software or bespoke system development.

The DTFF capital investments are designed to enable business transformation and not improve the 'digitisation' of existing business models/operations. As such the DTFF will fund advanced digital technologies projects which include the following:

- Smart technologies/ smart environments and the Internet of Things (IoT);
- Process automation via robotics/robotics;
- Big-data and analytics;
- Immersive Technologies (AR/VR/MR/Haptics);
- Artificial intelligence and machine learning; and
- Distributed ledger systems/ blockchain technologies.

The DTFF will not cover the on-going revenue costs of leasing software, any ongoing maintenance/update costs or the digitisation of existing operations.

Eligibility Criteria

Businesses wishing to access the DTFF must be:

- Based in Northern Ireland and operate within 1 of the 11 local Council areas;
- A small or micro business (Micro business: 1-9 employees (full time). Small business 10-49 employees.)
- VAT registered
- Actively trading for a minimum of 12 months
- Have a Digital Transformation Plan or equivalent
- Centred on one or more of the six advanced digital technologies; and
- Have not received State Aid/Subsidy (funding from any national or local public sector scheme) in excess of €200,000 over the previous three financial years (De Minimis aid).

The Programme is open to all sectors with the exception of primary agriculture, forestry and fisheries.

For more details and full eligibility guidelines please refer to the DTFF website: www.dtff.co.uk

The programme aligns with a number of other key projects in the Digital and Innovation Ecosystem including those offered through the City and Growth deal projects and is supported by a number of key stakeholders operating in the same area.

Newry, Mourne and Down Council Officials will centrally manage and administrate the DTFF grant with support from all Councils. Marketing and PR activities will be coordinated by NMDDC with local animation conducted by local Economic Development teams.

Provision has been made to fund approximately 600 businesses across the 11 Council areas through the DTFF, (subject to the demand and the levels of grants requested) with **60** of these being allocated for Mid Ulster.

The first call for applications is planned for mid-October 2023, during this call a series of pre-briefing sessions will be delivered by an external delivery agent across all council areas including online sessions for those businesses that cannot attend in person. It is anticipated there will be 3-4 calls for applications over the next 2 years.

Eligibility and Application guidance will be outlined at the pre-briefing sessions and is also provided through the DTFF website, along with the Expression of Interest: www.dtff.co.uk. The Expression of Interest (EoI) stage is mandatory, businesses will not be allowed to progress to complete an application without first submitting an EoI to NM&DDC's Team.

With the slippage of timescales during the approval process for the Business Case, the priority now is to open the first funding call to allow businesses to apply, and a formal launch is being developed in parallel to promote the scheme officially.

	<p>Members will be updated on the progress of this project on an ongoing basis.</p> <p>3.4 Mid Ulster Enterprise Week 2023</p> <p>Mid Ulster’s fifth Enterprise Week will take place from Monday 13th to Thursday 16th November 2023, with a series of online webinars and in-person events to support local businesses, from start-up through to growth.</p> <p>Provisionally there are ten events being staged across the week, that include Cyber Security/Artificial Intelligence, Marketing for Businesses, Topical Tourism matters and much more.</p> <p>A full programme of events is under development and will be issued to all Members in advance of Mid Ulster Enterprise Week. There will also be the opportunity for Members to attend any of the events via an Enterprise Week 2023 link when this has been developed.</p> <p><i>Invest NI – Operational Excellence Workshop Series</i></p> <p>The series of five workshops will take place from 10am – 1pm in consecutive weeks. The first workshop is scheduled to take place within Mid Ulster Enterprise Week, marking the launch of the series, on Thursday 16 November 2023 in The Junction, Dungannon, with the remainder of workshops occurring over the following four weeks in venues across the District as noted below;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thursday 16 November (10am–1pm) – Improving Processes & Visual Management • Thursday 23 November (10am–1pm) – Identifying & Quantifying Wasteful Processes • Thursday 30 November (10am–1pm) – Organising the Workplace for Improved Workflow • Thursday 7 December (10am–1pm) – Make Value Flow • Thursday 14 December (10am–1pm) – Managing Change in Your Business <p>Invest NI has agreed to cover the costs of Speakers at each of the events. Mid Ulster District Council will cover the venue hire costs and hospitality.</p>
4.0	Other Considerations
4.1	<p>Financial, Human Resources & Risk Implications</p> <hr/> <p>Financial</p>

Christmas 2023 Town Activities

Budget will be available from the existing Economic Development budget 2023/24.

ICBAN – Peace Plus Bids

Financial contribution to the bid writer previously agreed as £1,500

Digital Transformation Flexible Fund (DTFF) Update

Revenue contributions for all Councils have been previously approved. The revenue cost contribution (for programme management) from Mid Ulster District Council across the three-year period is £87,055 to March 2026, as approved by the Development Committee in June 2023.

Mid Ulster Enterprise Week 2023

Provision made in 2023/24 Economic Development budget circ. £28,000

Human:

Officer time

Digital Transformation Flexible Fund (DTFF) Update

In addition to the budget requirement, Council’s participation will require Officer resource input to promote the DTFF to businesses and other key economic stakeholders, liaise with and signpost businesses to NMDDC Team to check if they have the capacity to avail of this opportunity, co-assess applications, issue payments and undertake post-project monitoring checks.

Risk Management:

Digital Transformation Flexible Fund (DTFF) Update

A Risk Register has been developed for the DTFF to help identify and manage risks. The project is being led, managed and administered by Newry, Mourne and Down District Council (NMDDC) on behalf of the 11 Councils.

4.2 Screening & Impact Assessments

Equality & Good Relations Implications:

Digital Transformation Flexible Fund (DTFF) Update

It is not anticipated the proposal will have an adverse impact upon equality of opportunity or good relations.

Rural Needs Implications:

Digital Transformation Flexible Fund (DTFF) Update

Rural Needs Impact Assessment has been completed.

5.0	Recommendation(s)
	It is recommended that Members;
5.1	Christmas 2023 Town Activities Note update.
5.2	ICBAN – Peace Plus Note progress of funding bids.
5.3	Digital Transformation Flexible Fund (DTFF) Update Note update.
5.4	Mid Ulster Enterprise Week 2023 Note Mid Ulster Enterprise Week will take place from 13 th – 16 th November 2023, and will include a wide range of business events, including the launch of a series of Operational Excellence Workshops.
6.0	Documents Attached & References
	Appendix 1 – Digital Transformation Flexible Fund (DTFF) Information Flyer