

Appendix 1

Vacant to Vibrant Eligibility Criteria

Grant Programme Context

Under the Future City Centre Programme 'addressing vacancies' has been identified as a key strand in increasing footfall, increasing vibrancy, addressing dereliction and reducing the level of vacancy within the Primary Retail Core (PRC) in Belfast City Centre. Over recent years the level of vacancy within the Primary Retail Core has increased 2% every year since 2019 and is currently at 23.41%, with the rest of the city centre (outside PRC) currently at 21.3%. Although the pandemic has accelerated the trend across High Streets in the UK and Ireland Belfast already had a higher-than-average vacancy level when compared to comparable cities as evidenced within the Pragma Report 2019 with vacant ground floor premises in multiple locations, including along established and resilient streets within the city centre.

This grant programme is aimed to promote the reanimation and reactivation of these premises, supporting local independent businesses and SME's, social economy businesses and creative and cultural organisations through capital grant support to establish new businesses, to expand existing businesses or to address long standing dereliction aimed at bringing forward active ground floor usage. Successful applicants will need to demonstrate how the funding will contribute to the **key objectives** of the grant, through one or more of the following:

- Occupy a vacant premises and bring it back into permanent (2+ years) or temporary (meanwhile or pop up) use
- Encourage the establishment of businesses/organisations in the city centre and support existing businesses to diversify into unoccupied space
- Make external and internal improvements to vacant premises to support long term occupation
- Enhance the streetscape with high quality external works and activation of ground floor space
- Contribute to the vibrancy of the city centre and increase footfall in the area
- Make the city centre more diverse and attractive with unique/distinct businesses/organisations

Grant Proposal

The grant scheme will provide capital support to bring forward sustainable opportunities within the city centre.

The grant process will provide capital grant support towards;

- smaller financial support to pop-up shops and meanwhile test space;
- larger grants to encourage uptake of vacant units;
- external capital works to façades to improve look and feel of the high street;

- internal capital works to make a vacant property fit for purpose and support long term occupation;
- diversification of unoccupied space to help existing businesses expand.

Funding will awarded based on the quantum of floor space to be activated, as outlined below, and subject to a minimum of a 10% contribution from the applicant;

Larger grants to encourage uptake of vacant units:

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

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

Smaller financial support to pop-up shops and meanwhile test space:

Grant 3. Applicants seeking to test space in the city centre for **1 year or less (minimum 4 months)** can access a grant of up to £2,500 with 10% match funding from business/occupier/owner.

All capital spend must be procured and delivered in accordance with BCC procurement guidelines and costs will be reimbursed following receipt, and clarification, of incurred spend.

Process

Application, administration, and awards will be managed by City Regeneration & Development division in conjunction with the Place & Economy Department and Physical Programmes Department. Existing council grant management and due diligence process and oversight will apply.

Criteria

Eligibility Criteria for the grant scheme will adhere to council regulation for council investment and will include any additional criteria where applicable or associated with the contribution of capital resource. The following eligibility criteria will be applied on a pass/fail basis;

- The scheme will be open for local independent businesses and SME's, social economy businesses and creative and cultural organisations;
- The property must be within the Belfast city centre boundary.
- The property must not have been in occupation for a period of 12 months at the time of application (properties that have been occupied by temporary meanwhile use/pop ups are acceptable).
- Grants will be allocated one per property only.
- Proposals should seek to activate ground floors units. Proposals activating upper floor units only will not be eligible unless they can clearly demonstrate that the proposal will have a meaningful and measurable impact on the street character and vibrancy.

- Proposals should seek to make an impact on streetscape with high quality external works
- Applicants will be responsible for leading and conducting relevant stakeholder engagement: applications must demonstrate engagement to date in securing and supplying agreement from all directly affected stakeholders, including landlord and adjacent businesses or residents.
- Applications from businesses/occupiers will need to provide evidence of property owner agreement (written consent) and lease /proposed lease arrangements for a minimum of two years (excluding grants for test space). In addition, a three-year business and financial plan will need to be provided. Business plans will be assessed, and quality assured by Council. Applications must clearly identify benefit for the area they are locating in, ensuring they do not duplicate an existing offer that could displace a nearby business.
- Applicants need to demonstrate an ability to deliver the scheme within 6 months of Letter of Offer.
- Applicant will be required to gain the relevant statutory permits or permissions: applications must outline the relevant permissions required and confirmed status.
- Applicants must have evidence of an Equal Opportunities policy

Where applicants have indicated that they need support in developing their business plan they will be able to avail of the Councils existing wrap around support services, subject to eligibility. Where applicants have indicated that they need support in finding a suitable location or leasing advice they will be able to avail of the Council supplied Commercial Agent under the Vacancy Programme.

Who is eligible to apply

Property Owner/Occupier: Through this capital grant, both property owners and businesses/organisations wishing to renovate or repurpose a vacant space can apply. Please refer to the list of non-eligible businesses and organisations below. Organisations must be an existing, registered business, or social enterprise. They must be able to provide appropriate proof of registration (eg companies house; or HMRC self-assessment number). Or, a not-for-profit / community organisation who are a constituted organisation and have been actively operating for at least the last 3 months as the date of applications.

Location: Council wish to pilot this grant incentive within the defined boundary of the city centre only. Project proposals outside of the boundary will not be considered. We are seeking to target ground floor vacancies and are therefore keen to support project proposals for ground floor units but will also consider proposals where the business/organisation's ground floor activities extend into upper floor units. Projects proposing to target upper floor units only will not be considered unless

they can clearly demonstrate that the proposal will have a meaningful and measurable impact on the street character and vibrancy.

Assessment Criteria

The following assessment criteria will be applied to the applications

Title	Description
Affordability	Business Plan and Financial Forecasting Assessment
Definition and Deliverability	Definition of the project is in line with the scheme’s aim and objectives, eligibility criteria and capital expenditure guidance. Statement of deliverability and consideration of all necessary approvals (landowner; planning etc.)
Property Proposal	Location and activation of vacant property. Commitment and evidence of long-term operation and maintenance of the capital works. <i>Note Belfast City Council will not be responsible for the any maintenance and management costs post-project completion</i>
Project Proposal	Evidence of efforts made to ensure the investment will improve the area and be a long-term success

Funding Allocation

It is proposed that the funding will be allocated to successful applicants as below;

Property Owner	Tenant	Property Owner with no confirmed Tenant
70% Upfront	70% upfront	60% upfront
30% Completion	30% Completion	40% Completion and Tenant secured