

# Derry and Strabane launches dedicated Covid recovery drive



This time last year local Councils were on the countdown to Halloween and planning a packed programme of events leading in to Christmas, with Christmas switch ons galore, Christmas markets and plenty of opportunities for businesses and traders to piggy back on civic events.

2020 has undoubtedly been a challenging year for local businesses left to deal with the unprecedented scenario of a lockdown on regular retail and trade conditions that turned city centres into virtual ghost towns over the busy tourist season. Like other local government organisations, Derry City and Strabane District Council is now facing the uphill struggle of restoring public confidence, supporting businesses as they rebuild trade and encouraging customers to shop local at a time when once again we are being asked to curtail our movements in response

to Covid-19. While safety is paramount, economic recovery is also vital to sustain both employers and their staff through the difficult months to come. With that in mind the Council has been busy working with local businesses to help them adapt and diversify to meet the safety expectations of customers, as well as creating a welcoming environment that will reassure local people that their concerns are being adequately addressed. Much work has gone into liaising with statutory and business stakeholders to identify new ways to

breathe life back into town and city centres in Derry and Strabane. The result is a range of measures tailored to meet both the necessary safety requirements and also provide the information and tools for local businesses to protect their staff and customers. As restrictions began to ease in July, Derry City and Strabane District Council applied to the Department for Communities for grant support under its COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme. The initial application sought to support local businesses by delivering a number of interventions in Council's two main urban centres (Derry City & Strabane Town) as well as its expansive rural district, to help address the many challenges and negative impacts arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Business Support, Physical Infrastructure and Marketing were identified as the key themes to be progressed through the Recovery Revitalisation Programme. Early priorities were the introduction of a number of physical streetscape and public realm enhancement measures, and also providing direct financial grant support for eligible businesses, equipping them with the necessary tools to conduct business in the new COVID-19 trading environment. As well as the €350,000 of support from the Department for Communities, DCSDC has benefitted from additional funding contributions from both DAERA and DfI to the sum of €148k and €373k respectively, increasing its capacity to address need across a broader spectrum.

This has already enabled the launch of the Council's COVID-19 Recovery and Revitalisation Grant Scheme, confirmed the schedule of interventions for the physical infrastructural improvements identified including urban design concepts, and initiated a supporting marketing campaign and animation activities. All of these plans remain fluid and subject to change in keeping with the government guidance but they are the first steps towards reimagining a new post pandemic economy. Stephen Gillespie is the Council's Director of Business and Culture, two areas which have been hard hit during the pandemic. He and his team have had little downtime since March as demands for support and advice have flooded in, and they have had to come up with some new and creative ways to help individuals from both sectors adapt to ever changing demands, as he explains. "Since the lockdown we've faced many challenges in adapting our own ways of working and offering support to ensure they are meeting the urgent needs of businesses and cultural organisations facing the very real possibility of closure. Obviously there are limitations on our own resources so the funding support from government has enabled us to be more proactive in our approach and to activate this vital programme of intervention quickly on the ground. "The overall objectives of the campaign are to help footfall levels return to 70% of what would be expected



Performers and artists pictured at the first instalment of the 'Inside Out' programme on the streets of Derry and Strabane. This new programme has been designed to help breathe life back into the streets and support local hospitality businesses in a safe but engaging way.



prior to this public health crisis and to assist business sales figures in returning to at least 70% of expected levels. "One of the first measures introduced was a Business Grant Scheme to assist in covering a variety of costs associated with the practicalities of reopening in a very different post-Covid working environment. Grants ranged from £500 - £3,000 and were open to businesses within both the urban and rural area. The funds could be used to help equip businesses with things like awnings, seating and heating to facilitate outdoor opening, as well as deliver health and safety training for staff returning to work. "In addition to this support, Council has channelled its own direct investment into a vibrant animation programme designed to support the above measures through a programme of on-street activities. Inside Out

aims to encourage increased footfall back onto our streets in a safe but engaging way running from September through to December, subject to the latest guidance from government. The programme successfully kicked off in September on Culture Night and will return for Halloween, the Christmas switch on and in the run up to Christmas. "A COVID 19 public information campaign will be initiated to include promotion of local commercial areas, make the public aware of the new physical interventions in place and enable people to make informed travel choices on how best to visit commercial areas." Infrastructure was also identified as a priority as growing numbers of people took to the outdoors, with increasing volumes of walkers, runners and cyclists seeking solace in outdoor exercise during lockdown. A range of interventions to help with

challenges such as 'pinch points' on walkways, pedestrian and vehicular conflicts and limited trading space had to be initialised quickly. Karen Phillips is Director of Environment and Regeneration with Derry City and Strabane District Council, the department tasked with redesigning urban spaces and thoroughfares to reflect the growing focus on socially distanced, outdoor living. "A range of needs soon became apparent as the pandemic pushed more and more people and businesses to the safety of the outdoors," she explains. "Businesses were telling us their customers needed more space, more outdoor seating, better public realm design, temporary closure of streets, enhanced city dressing and other improvements which would make it better for both the public and business owners. "Cleansing was also a major concern, and throughout the pandemic despite pressures on resources, we have maintained a high standard of services and introduced specialist cleansing equipment to ensure our streets have remained clean and people feel safe when out and about. "I have to acknowledge the contribution of all Council's stakeholders who have engaged with us from the outset through the two groups established in Derry and Strabane in mitigating against the worst impacts of Covid-19 and promoting and supporting the Recovery Action Plan. "Obviously this is a fast changing landscape, and we've had to learn to adapt our approaches, which we will continue to do as long as we have the capacity to do so," Karen stresses. "The thing to remember is that we are all in this together and we should continue to support local businesses in a safe and responsible way - we can all do our bit help sustain our economy through the challenging times ahead."



Castle Street, Strabane - An urban design vision illustrating proposals to create an attractive and pedestrian friendly streetscape, through environmental improvements, new outdoor cafe/dining opportunities and animation. (image courtesy of OGU Architects & MMAS)

**Eye**

For more information on the Recovery Plan visit [www.derrystrabane.com/recovery](http://www.derrystrabane.com/recovery)