



Belfast
City Council

Vacant to Vibrant

Guidance Notes

October 2024



www.belfastcity.gov.uk/vacanttovibrant

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Application pack contents	
Document type	Who should complete
Application form	To be completed by all
Business plan template	To be completed by applicants seeking grants 1 & 2
Business proposal template	To be completed by applicants seeking Grant 3 only
Property owner consent form	To be completed by the proposed occupier
City centre boundary map	For reference only

Introduction

Please read these guidance notes carefully before you complete your application form. If you have any queries, or wish to discuss your project with a member of staff before submitting your application, email vacanttovibrant@belfastcity.gov.uk.

Building on the success of our initial two-year pilot (July 2022 – July 2024), we are extending the Vacant to Vibrant capital grant scheme until all funding allocated to the scheme has been exhausted.

The Vacant to Vibrant capital grant scheme has been created to incentivise both property owners and potential occupiers to bring vacant Belfast city centre spaces back into use and support the city centre's revitalisation.

As well as encouraging and diversifying use of vacant premises, the Vacant to Vibrant capital grant is designed to improve individual properties, contribute to higher quality streetscapes, sustain jobs and help create new employment opportunities. The scheme will continue to support start-ups, independent retailers, social enterprises and cultural and voluntary organisations to make our city centre offering more diverse and transform vacant spaces to become vibrant once again.

Through this capital grant, property owners, businesses and organisations wishing to renovate or repurpose a vacant space within the city centre boundary (**See Annex A – Belfast City Centre Boundary Map**) can apply.

Financial support includes smaller financial support to pop-up shops and meanwhile test space (minimum four months lease) and larger grants to encourage uptake of vacant units (minimum two year lease).

The capital grant scheme will fund both external and internal improvements to buildings, expansions or repurposing of vacant spaces (including diversification of unoccupied space in the property), and other associated capital set-up costs required to bring a vacant space back into use for long term occupation.

- External capital works to façade 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 in the property to help existing businesses survive

Vacant to Vibrant funding aims

1. Incentivise occupation of vacant spaces for new businesses/organisations to reduce the number of vacancies in Belfast city centre.
2. Provide support for existing businesses/organisations wishing to repurpose vacant space to expand or diversify their offer to reduce the number of vacancies in Belfast city centre.
3. Improve the vibrancy and animation of Belfast city centre to encourage people to live, work, study, socialise visit and invest.
4. Increase the number of SME's, start-up retail/ businesses and the cultural and third sectors accessing vacant space in Belfast city centre, supporting them to grow, sustain jobs and create new employment opportunities, either directly or indirectly.
5. Support, enhance and diversity the existing Belfast city centre experience and offer

Vacant to Vibrant funding objectives

Successful applicants will need to demonstrate how the funding will contribute to Vacant to Vibrant's key objectives, through **three** or more of the following:

1. Occupying a vacant premises (property vacant for a period of 12 months) and bring it back into permanent (two+ years) or temporary (meanwhile or pop up for minimum of four months) use.
2. Encouraging the establishment of city centre businesses/organisations and supporting existing businesses to diversify into unoccupied space.
3. Making external and/or internal improvements to vacant premises to support long term occupation.
4. Enhancing the streetscape with high quality external works and activation of ground floor space
5. Contributing to the vibrancy of Belfast city centre and increasing footfall in the area.
6. Making Belfast city centre more diverse and attractive by introducing unique/distinct businesses/organisations.
7. Creating new local employment either directly or indirectly.
8. Promoting sustainability through for example, the use of recycled materials, adoption of zero waste principles, use of clean energy etc.

Funding levels

The funding brackets below are proposed as a stimulus to businesses/occupiers and property owners to bridge a viability gap and should not be considered a fully comprehensive funding package. Grants 1 & 2 are deemed larger grants to encourage uptake of vacant units, while grant 3 relates to smaller financial support to pop-up shops and meanwhile test space (less than two years, minimum four months), as well as those occupying smaller spaces less than 25 m².

Grant	Space requirement	Lease length	Funding opportunity
1	Up to 150 metres ²	Minimum two-year lease	Up to £15,000 + 10% contribution from applicants
2	151 metres ² and above	Minimum two-year lease	up to £25,000 + 10% contribution from applicants
3	Meanwhile/pop up space or less than 25 metres ²	Less than two years (minimum of four months) to test space in the city centre	up to £2,500 + 10% contribution from applicants

Please note that all applicants will be required to match fund 10% of any awarded grant to be deemed eligible for grant funding.

Footprint size should only include space actively used by the business/organisation i.e. total floor area of the property that is utilised for the occupier's commercial/active uses and is not inclusive of the property's gross measurements incorporating storage/utility space etc. If you are applying as an existing business diversifying unoccupied space within a property, this is the footprint size relating to the unoccupied space you are transforming **only**.

Applicants should ensure that they apply for the correct type of funding that relates to the active footprint of the property. If Belfast City Council deems that an applicant has applied for the incorrect grant through follow up inspections, then funding will be recalculated and applied to the correct funding bracket.

Please note, Grant 3 is the most applicable grant for the permanent activation of spaces smaller than 25 m² or spaces within buildings that once occupied would not have a significant impact on the streetscape. Applications will be assessed on a case-by-case basis and the panel will have the final say on the appropriate level of award for each project.

Timescales

Grant 1 & 2:

The turnaround time from application submission to outcome is approximately eight to 11 weeks (depending on clarifications required, scheduling of assessments and committee meetings).

Grant 3:

The turnaround time from application submission to outcome is approximately three weeks.

If you intend to submit an application, inform the team at the earliest opportunity and they will advise on the estimated timeframe for an outcome on your application. Please be reminded that if you are successful, your project cannot commence until you receive a formal letter of offer from the council.

Eligibility criteria

Only property owners/businesses/organisations which meet the below criteria are eligible to apply

<p>1. The property must be a vacant premises or vacant space within a premises, that is located within the Belfast city centre boundary (See Annex A – Belfast city centre boundary map).</p>
<p>2. The business/organisation must be an existing registered business/organisation or social enterprise that has been actively operating for at least three months as of date of application submission.</p>
<p>3. 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. Meanwhile use/pop up uses are eligible to occupy properties that haven't been vacant for less than 12 months.</p>
<p>4. Occupiers must submit the relevant template within the application pack to demonstrate viability. Grant 1 and 2 will require completion of the two-year business plan, while Grant 3 will be required to complete a Business Plan Proposal template for the duration of the proposed lease period. (Property owners applying without a confirmed occupier do not need to submit a business plan)</p>
<p>5. Properties at ground floor vacancies are priority, but we may also consider upper floor improvements if the occupier's ground floor activities extend into upper floor uses, where they deliver a meaningful and measurable impact on the street character and vibrancy. Projects proposing to target upper floor units only will not be considered, unless they can clearly demonstrate that the proposal will have a positive impact on the street character and vibrancy of a street or area.</p>
<p>6. Have the ability to deliver the scheme within nine months of Letter of Offer.</p>

Who is eligible to apply?

Proposed occupier

A business/organisation wishing to renovate or repurpose a vacant space within the Belfast city centre boundary can apply with permission from the property owner.

This includes start-up retail, independents, small and medium sized enterprises (SME's), social enterprises, leisure, hospitality and the cultural and third sectors. Businesses will need to provide proof through provision of a company number and three months bank statements relating to the business. A business or constituted organisation can be either not-for-profit or community based. Sole traders will need to provide a letter from a financial professional/practitioner, such as an accountant, to verify their status as well as their unique tax payer reference.

If an organisation is a constituted not-for-profit organisation, it must supply a signed copy of the organisation's constitution. It must be signed and dated as adopted by the Chairperson at the time, or by the current Chairperson to confirm it is your group's constitution.

The business/organisation must provide evidence of tenure and permission from the property owner to complete the works. For the purposes of the application, we will accept written consent from the property owner through the 'Property Owner Consent Form' template provided, but if grant is awarded, we will require a copy of the lease agreement prior to any grant being paid. Grants 1&2 require a minimum lease period of two years, while grant 3 requires a minimum lease period of four months.

Property owner

A property owner wishing to renovate or repurpose a vacant space within the Belfast city centre boundary can apply either with or without a confirmed occupier or as the owner occupier.

Property owner confirmed occupier:

Property owner can apply on behalf of the proposed occupier, as a way to incentivise occupation of their space. They will need to provide evidence and proposed lease arrangements on foot of the improvement works being undertaken (Grants 1&2 require a minimum lease period of two years, while grant 3 requires a minimum lease period of 4 months) and have the occupier complete the relevant viability templates to support the proposal.

Property owner occupier:

Property owner can apply on behalf of themselves if they are to be the occupants of the space. They will need to complete the relevant viability templates to support the proposal.

Property Owner No Occupier:

Property owners are encouraged to identify a suitable occupier before applying (and should contact the City Regeneration and Development Team if having difficulties). However applications may be considered from property owners of vacant premises seeking occupiers to occupy their premises subject to work being undertaken. These applications will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis however, to incentivise the uptake of the vacant space, it is anticipated that a conditional offer may be made available.

If property owners are unable to secure an occupier within nine months, then they will only be able to access 60% of the total grant available. Property owners must make every reasonable effort to secure an occupier within this nine-month period, including serious consideration of any matchmaking efforts made through the scheme and accommodation for lease agreements for two years if seeking Grant 1 or 2, or 4 months if seeking Grant 3.

What costs are eligible for funding?

The following list of capital expenditure qualifies for funding. This list is not exclusive and alternative improvements may be considered in line with the aims of the scheme.

Examples may include:

External improvements

- shop frontage enhancements
- repair/restoration of architectural elements
- signage, painting, and lighting
- installation of new or replacement of awnings and external furniture
- removal of shutters and replacement with toughened glass
- external CCTV
- access improvements

Internal improvements/fitting out vacant premises

- upgrading internal fixtures and fittings
- new or upgraded equipment including point of sale technology
- access improvements
- internal lighting
- catering equipment
- customer facilities
- improved security features
- furniture required for project delivery

Organisations or types of activity not eligible:

Non eligible businesses include (but are not limited to):

- Multinational corporations
- Pay day loan shops
- Betting/ gambling shops
- Charity shops
- Pawn shops
- Vape shops
- Adult shops

- Budget/Pound shops
- Projects which are of a party-political nature
- Projects which promote a particular religion
- Private healthcare businesses

We do not fund businesses / organisations that are:

- Closing an existing unit in Belfast city centre to open alternative premises (unless evidence can be provided to demonstrate current premises is not fit for purpose).
- Seeking Grant 1 or 2 and are unable to provide evidence of property owner agreement (written consent) and lease /proposed lease arrangements for a minimum of **two years** (template included in Application pack).
- Seeking Grant 1 or 2 and are unable to provide a two-year business plan (templates included in Application pack).
- Seeking Grant 3 and are unable to provide evidence of property owner agreement (written consent) and lease /proposed lease arrangements for a minimum of **four months** (template included in Application pack).
- Seeking Grant 3 and are unable to provide a business proposal (templates included in Application pack).
- Not a registered business, social enterprise, or charity; and have not been operating for at least the last three months. Sole traders will need to provide a letter from a financial professional/practitioner, such as an accountant, to verify their status as well as their unique tax payer reference.
- Not prepared to share learning from their project with us and other relevant groups.
- Businesses/Organisations that are not willing or cannot show effective financial control
- Are outside the Belfast city centre boundary area.
- Do not propose to activate ground floor frontage. Above ground floor will only be considered if the applicant can clearly demonstrate that the proposal will have a positive impact on the street character and vibrancy of a street or area (these will be assessed on a case-by-case basis).
- Could displace existing businesses nearby with same offer.
- Are multiple proposals for the same space (**only one application can be submitted per property**).
- Have no distinct benefit to Belfast city centre.
- Are seeking funding for works that have already taken place or are already under way at the time of the assessment.
- Contradict Belfast City Council policy.

- Do not provide an outline project budget.
- Are unable to commit to opening the business/organisation a minimum of 30 hours/week (Grants 1 or 2) and 18 hours/week (Grant 3) unless a reasonable rationale can be provided that will be determined on a case-by-case basis.
- Propose the purchase of land/property or for land/property which is to be sold within 12 months from the receipt of final payment of grant aid and could result in full repayment of grant to council.
- Are seeking to occupy a property that has been in active occupation within the last 12 months (occupation by or for pop ups/meanwhile use is acceptable).
- Are actively trading in the vacant space at the time of application submission or intend to trade in the immediate future following submission.

The council will have ultimate discretion in determining the types of business/organisation that are eligible for grant funding assistance. This will be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

What costs are not eligible for funding?

The following costs are not eligible for funding:

- Rent, rates, utilities or other running or administration costs.
- Professional fees such as Planning or Building Control or for specialist advice on bringing the premises back into use.
- Any costs which someone else is paying for, whether in cash or in kind.
- Routine repairs and maintenance to buildings or ongoing maintenance costs.
- Maintenance equipment or office equipment which is not essential to the project.
- Any transport that is necessary for the project.
- Running costs for the building/proposal after the project is complete.
- Funds to build up a reserve or surplus, whether distributable or not.
- Loan repayments.
- Donations to general appeals.
- Work that has already taken place or is underway prior to an offer of funding.
- Costs representing poor value for money.
- Items purchased outside of council procurement guidelines (see section on council procurement below).
- Recoverable VAT.
- Insurance costs.
- Cash expenditure.
- Costs of any consumable items e.g., masks/ gloves/ visors/ alcohol.
- Costs that are not auditable (e.g., cash payments and credit card).

- Payments made from non-business accounts.
- Debt, retrospective costs.
- Websites or training costs.
- Purchase of stock for general trading.
- Overheads allocated or apportioned at rates in excess of those used for any similar work you carry out.
- Costs which are not clearly linked to the project.
- Costs that are already covered by other funding or income sources.
- Costs related to private or unfunded pensions.
- Amounts for gifts and donations, including vouchers.

The council will have ultimate discretion in determining the types of costs that are eligible for grant funding assistance. This will be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

How does funding work?

	Property owner led application	Occupier led application	Property owner with no confirmed occupier
Allocated funding from council	70% upfront	70% upfront	60% upfront
Allocated funding from council	30% on completion	30% on completion	40% on completion and occupier secured

The Vacant to Vibrant scheme is expected to be delivered until the committed funding pot has been fully awarded, at which stage the council reserves the right to review the grant process. Once we receive completed applications with all necessary supporting documents (See 'Supporting Information Checklist'), we will begin assessment.

Applications can be submitted by either the property owner or business/organisation

Eligible property owners, businesses and organisations can seek funding to complete external capital works to façade and improve the look and feel of the high street; internal capital works to make the property fit for purpose and support long term occupation; and diversification of property's unoccupied space to help existing businesses survive.

Funding to successful applicants will be paid out in two instalments: 70% of the grant will be offered further to successful submission of all application documentation (See Section 'Supporting Information') to the satisfactory standard of the panel. We will pay the remaining 30% once we have received a satisfactorily completed monitoring form with all requested evidence/ documentation verifying spend against the Letter of Offer requirement.

Property owners without a secured occupier will only be able to access 60% of the total grant available within the relevant funding bracket, for example, if the footprint is less than 150 m², the maximum grant the property owner can access initially is £9,000. If a occupier is secured within nine months, they may be eligible to draw down the remaining 40% of the funding available within the relevant bracket (subject to funding availability and occupier meeting grant eligibility). Property owners must make every reasonable effort to secure a occupier within this nine-month period, including accommodation for lease agreements for two years (or minimum four months if seeking support through Grant 3), and serious consideration of any matchmaking efforts made through the scheme.

The fund will cover eligible costs only (See 'What Costs are Eligible for Funding'). Please note equipment purchased should be new and must meet any environmental or licensing standards.

Previously used or second hand equipment must comply with current safety requirements, and it is the applicant's responsibility to ensure that the equipment complies with current safety requirements. Please ensure you review the list of identified eligible and non-eligible costs.

Applicants cannot start any work or purchase any items of equipment until they receive their Letter of Offer. Work or purchases made prior to receipt of the Letter of Offer will not be eligible.

Works, including the successful application for any and all Statutory Approvals, must be completed within nine months of the Letter of Offer.

Applicants should be aware that information on applications and claims for payment for Grant assistance is stored on computer in accordance with the Data Protection Act (DPA) 2018, and that such information may be subject to the Freedom of Information Act 2000; in addition this shall include any applicable national implementing Laws as amended from time to time including (i) the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Law Enforcement Directive (LED) and (ii) Data Protection Act (DPA) 2018 to the extent that it relates to processing of personal data and privacy; and (iii) all applicable Law about the processing of personal data and privacy; if you are awarded a grant, Belfast City Council does not provide insurance for any activity you undertake. We strongly advise you to consult an insurance broker or advisor about the possible insurance requirements for your proposed activities.

Please note that financial assistance provided under this scheme may be considered as State Aid and successful applicants may be required to complete a State Aid declaration form.

Risks and insurance

The applicant, his/her/its agent(s) and/or contractor is/are responsible for all risks in connection with public or employer liability associated with any works funded by a grant under the Vacant to Vibrant scheme. The council accepts no liability in respect of any loss, damage, charges, or expense which are incurred by any applicant and are attributable to any delay in payment under the Vacant to Vibrant scheme or due to any suspension, reduction, or cancellation of funding.

The council does not and will not accept liability or responsibility in respect of any grant-aided work carried out; accordingly, the applicant cannot and should not rely on the payment of grant monies by the council as any proof or guarantee that the contractor engaged to execute the works has completed said works to a proper standard prior to payment. All successful applicants should satisfy themselves that all work has been carried out to a satisfactory standard and meets all statutory requirements.

Ongoing and future inspection, maintenance or repair of any items purchased/works completed under the capital scheme are the responsibility of the applicant.

The council accepts no responsibility, financial or otherwise, for expenditure or liabilities arising out of any work carried out by or on behalf of an applicant under the scheme. Any financial commitment incurred by the applicant which exceeds the amount of any approved grant, shall be the sole responsibility of the applicant. It is the applicant's responsibility to ensure that it is appropriately insured (including satisfactory building, contents and public liability insurance). The applicant must confirm that insurance is in place as part of their application.

Statutory consents

Applicants must comply with all statutory obligations associated with their capital proposals e.g. disability considerations, environmental health, licensing, etc.

For proposed applications which include works that require statutory approvals e.g. planning permission, building control approval, it is the applicant's responsibility to ensure they have all necessary approvals in place **projects must be completed within nine months of the Letter of Offer.** **Please ensure this time constraint is taken into consideration when developing any proposal.**

Applicants are expected to adhere to conservation area guidelines when completing works on properties. This includes, but is not limited to materials used, paint colour, and signage.

Letters of offer may be issued in advance of full approval, but payment will be strictly conditional on applicants having necessary approvals in place and providing satisfactory copies of same to the council. For advice and guidance on these please email:

- Planning: planning@belfastcity.gov.uk
- Building Control: buildingcontrol@belfastcity.gov.uk
- Licencing buildingcontrollicensing@belfastcity.gov.uk

Procurement guidance

The council's procurement thresholds must be complied with where grant funding is used to purchase goods or services. If you intend to purchase (or contribute to the purchase) of any goods or services costing £3,000 or over with this grant you **should make every effort to provide three price checks / quotations**. The following guidelines must be complied with:

Total estimated cost	Action and minimum number
£0 - £3,000	No quotes required, but needs to represent value for money
Over £3,000 to £8,000	At least three companies invited to provide written quotations
Over £8,000 to £30,000	At least four companies invited to provide written quotations

Quotes from suppliers should be sought as per the guidance outlined above.

- Quotes must be sought from suppliers who can realistically supply the good/service i.e., suppliers who normally stock the item.
- Where there is limited competition in the market for the good/service you are procuring (i.e. niche/specialist items) resulting in you being unable to request the minimum number of quotes required, then this should be documented, and an explanation provided.
- You or a business that you are an owner/partner/director of, are excluded from quoting for the supply of goods/services/works to a project that you may be offered funding for.
- Where possible, quotes should be from Belfast based suppliers..
- Quotes should be 'like-for-like', particularly where goods/services are specific e.g. awnings etc. Quotations for the same make and model of products are acceptable and should be obtained where possible. All quotations must meet the specification provided and demonstrate 'like for like' comparison in order to verify value for money.
- You should ensure that all costs are quoted and accounted for, e.g.delivery and installation should be part of the quote.
- Email quotes are acceptable and the covering email from suppliers must be provided.
- Quotes must contain the supplier's full details.
- If VAT is applicable to the items quoted, this should be clearly noted on the quotations to establish total project costs.
- The lowest quotation should be selected with corresponding costs detailed on the application form. If the lowest quotation has not been accepted as a result of quality considerations the applicant must provide a clear rationale for this.
- Details of the quotes received must be listed in the application form. Quotes in other currencies should be compared using the rate of exchange through www.x-rates.com

Whilst multiple comparative quotes are not required for items below £3,000, goods or services need to represent value for money. Applicants should supply any information relating to how costs have been estimated, for example, links or images of a product cost advertised online; an email further to a telephone call with a supplier; or for items like flooring or lighting, information on the chosen product, cost per item and the quantity required to cover the space. If this information is not submitted with your application, you may be asked to supply it as part of a clarification process and could result in delays to your application progressing to assessment.

Please be aware of aggregated values where a single supplier is providing multiple goods or services to the project with a combined value above £3,000. If the total cost is above £3,000, we require procurement policy to be complied with.

Budget breakdown

Within the application form you are asked to provide a breakdown of the capital works to be delivered as part of your project proposal. Budgets must be completed in enough detail to allow the assessment panel to judge value for money on costs provided. Applicants should include as much detail as possible to support how the cost was identified.

Applicants must provide an accurate cost breakdown as the figures presented as part of your application submission are what council will detail on your Letter of Offer should your application be successful.

We can only provide Letters of Offer for 90% of the total capital cost of works. For example, for Grant 2, if you are seeking the full £25,000, we would expect to see capital costs totaling £27,500. Please note that we cannot provide funding for an anticipated contingency as your 10% contribution. If your total capital costs come to £25,000, we will only offer funding to the value of 90% i.e., £22,500.

Please be aware that copies of any relevant statutory approvals e.g. planning permission/ listed building consent (where applicable)/advertisement consent (where applicable) must be provided before any grant payment can be made. If a business receiving grant funding is later held to account for any breaches relating to those improvements, the funding could be held back or if paid then claimed back from the recipient through clawback proceedings.

Note Belfast City Council will not be responsible for the any maintenance and management costs post-project completion.

Application submission

Upon submission of the completed application form, applicants will be assigned a unique reference number once the application has passed the eligibility check. Grants are awarded on a first come first served basis and this grant scheme will close when the available funding has been fully awarded. Once we receive the completed application with all necessary supporting documents, we will begin assessment. These guidance notes set out the supporting documentation required to meet eligibility criteria.

If an application is missing supporting documents which are required to assess eligibility, then Belfast City Council will issue a clarification to the email provided outlining the required documentation. The applicant will then have five working days from date of clarification email to provide the requested documents. Failure to submit within five working days will render your application null and void and if you wish to be considered further, you will have to submit a new application, forfeiting your place in the queue. Upon resubmission, a new unique reference number will be issued when the application passes the eligibility check.

It is the ultimate responsibility of all applicants to satisfy themselves that all appropriate information has been provided. Applicants should not assume that assessors will request additional information or notify you of any omissions.

Your application, including all supporting documentation, should be emailed to vacanttovibrant@belfastcity.gov.uk

Getting help with a Vacant to Vibrant application

If you need help with the guidance notes or application form, email vacanttovibrant@belfastcity.gov.uk and a member of our team will assist you.

We can support you by email, phone or video call, or, where appropriate, in a face-to-face meeting.

We welcome applications from people of all abilities. If we can help you to apply by making any reasonable adjustments to our process, let us know.

The application process will include the submission of a business plan or proposal. You may be able to gain assistance with completing a Business Plan through our Enterprise and Business Growth team. Let one of the Vacant to Vibrant team know if you would like avail of this assistance.

Evaluation process

The assessment process will be completed in two stages. The following criteria will be used to assess the quality of applications that have met the basic eligibility criteria; however, **the council will have ultimate discretion on the outcomes of all application submissions and will assess each one on a case-by-case basis.**

STAGE 1: In the first instance all applications must satisfy all basic eligibility criteria by supplying a completed application form with all required supporting information (See ‘Supporting Information Checklist’). Total marks available at this stage: 70/100. This assessment will be completed by a panel of Belfast City Council officers. Applicants will need an eligibility score of **45/70** marks to progress to the next stage of assessment.

Property owners without an occupier will only be assessed at Stage 1 however they will need to score a minimum of 45/70, and will only be eligible to draw down 60% of the grant when works are completed and an occupier has been secured within nine months of the letter of offer being issued, if successful. Applications with a secured occupier must go through Stage 1 and 2 assessment.

STAGE 2: Applications involving a secured occupier that pass Stage 1 assessment will then be recommended for assessment of their Business Plan (Grant 1 & 2) or Business Proposal (Grant 3), which must be submitted using the template provided as part of this application pack, commensurate with grant level to demonstrate affordability and long-term sustainability. Total marks available: **30/100**. This is assessed by an independent third party on a **PASS/FAIL** basis and applicants will be eliminated should they fail to satisfy the assessment criteria of this element. A pass mark for stage 2 is **18/30** (further detail below). Dependent on its nature, if there is data missing from relevant template documents that would be required for a robust assessment of viability, the assessor may notify the applicant and allow up to two working days for the data to be provided. Failure to provide outstanding information will result in applications being recorded as incomplete and recorded as a fail.

Stage	Title	Score	Description
1	Definition and deliverability	10	Definition of the project is in line with the scheme’s aims and objectives, eligibility criteria and capital expenditure guidance. Statement of deliverability and consideration of all approvals.
	Property proposal	40	Location and activation of vacant property. Commitment and evidence of long-term operation and maintenance of the capital works.
	Occupier/owner proposal	20	Evidence of efforts made to ensure the investment will improve the area and be a long-term success.
2	Viability	30	Business Plan/Proposal Assessment. Assessed as a pass/fail

Scoring matrix – Stage 1

Stage 1 Scoring matrix			
App type	Stage 1 Assessment criteria	Score range	Weight
	Definition and deliverability		(Total:10)
All	Project meets a minimum of three or more objectives of scheme and deliverability criteria		10
	Property proposal		(Total: 40)
All	Property activation	10: Vacant ground and upper floors	10
		6: Vacant ground only	
		2: Upper floors only	
All	High vacancy area	10: Street with above average vacancy (considered above average if 20% or 1 in 5 properties on the street/block are vacant)	10
		6: Problematic cluster area (evidence of vacancy/dereliction on street near property)	
		2: Street with low vacancy	
All	Location/prominence	5: High prominence in Primary Retail Core (PRC) – see Annex B below for reference	5
		3: PRC/ High prominence in wider city centre	
		1: Low prominence in wider city centre	
All	Impact on streetscape and vibrancy	5: Significant external improvements	5
		3: Minor external improvements	
		1: Internal improvements only	
All	Vacancy duration	5: 3+ years	5
		3: 2+ years /Property expansion and diversification	
		1: 1+ year/Meanwhile use	
All	Quality of works Assessed against statement of quality	5: High quality of works	5
		3: Average quality of works	
		1: Low quality of works	
	Occupier project proposal:		(Total: 20)
OCC	Occupier	5. Local Independent/SME/Social Economy/Arts and Cultural organisation	5
		3. Anchor /new business/organisation	
OCC	Occupier proposal (*Unique/distinct defined as providing something different/additional to that which currently exists.	5: Unique/distinct* offer for the city	5
		3: Somewhat unique/distinct offer for the city	
		1: Less unique/distinct offer for the city	
OCC	Economic benefit Proposals that will create new and local employment (directly or indirectly)	2.5: 5+ new jobs created and/or volunteering opportunities	2.5
		2: 2-5 new jobs created and/or volunteering opportunities	
		1: 1-2 new jobs created and/or volunteering opportunities	
OCC	Vibrancy (Weekly operating hours of occupier)	2.5: 30+ / 18+ hours	2.5
		2: 30 / 18 hours	

OCC	Investment Any additional investment applicant is making into premises to ensure long term success	2.5: Indication of additional investment	2.5
		0: No additional investment beyond 10% contribution	
OCC	Sustainability Proposals that promote sustainability e.g., use of recycled materials, zero waste principles, clean energy ¹	2.5: Indication of sustainability	2.5
		0: No indication of sustainability	
Property owner no occupier (PONO):			(Total: 20)
PONO	Scale of additional investment beyond total grant (which includes 10% match funding)	+100 % additional	7.5
		51% - 100% additional	5
		Up to 50% additional	2.5
PONO	Sustainability/Climate adaptation: Investment is being made to reduce the building's emissions and improve every performance through insulation, low carbon heating and renewal energy generation	Significant works (multiple measures/envelope scheme)	7.5
		One major measure with significant impact	5
		Minor works/low impact	2.5
PONO	Commitment to a heritage led conservation approach	Evidence of taking a heritage-led conservation approach to redeveloping the property	5

Stage 2 Assessment criteria	Score range	Weight
Viability (Business Plan assessment)		(Total 30)
Grant 1 & 2 applicants: Business Plan assessment	Max 10: Vision and business Idea	30
	Max 5: Marketing	
	Max 5: Operations and Legal Issues	
	Max 10: Finance	
Grant 3 Applicants: Business Proposal assessment	Max 5: Executive Summary	30
	Max 25: Vision and business Idea	

¹ For ideas and inspiration on making your business more sustainable, please see the FSB Sustainability Hub: www.fsb.org.uk/knowledge/fsb-infohub/small-business-sustainability-hub

Scoring matrix – Stage 2

Viability (Business Plan/Proposal assessment)

Applicants that successfully pass Stage 1 of the assessment will be recommended for Stage 2, assessment of viability. This will be based on the submission of the relevant template commensurate with grant level to demonstrate financial viability and long-term sustainability.

The relevant templates have been provided as part of the application pack. You must complete these in line with the grant level you are applying for and submit as part of your application.

Grant 1 & 2	Grant 3
Business Plan template	Business Plan Proposal template

Business plan/proposal scoring guidance

Given the need to ensure the probity for any grant awarded, businesses will be required to submit a business plan/proposal reflective of the level of grant requested and would refer applicants to information below to ensure that they complete appropriate templates and to familiarise themselves with assessment criteria.

Scoring matrix

Associated business plans/proposals will be scored and weighted using the attached matrix.

	Score	Rationale
Excellent	5	Excellent plan/proposal that meets the requirements. Response is clearly detailed, and all relevant sections are completed to a very high standard. Information/figures provided also provide clear evidence of a comprehensive approach to achieving stated goals and ability to remain viable in the longer term.
Good	4	A good plan/proposal that meets the requirements with good, convincing supporting information and figures. Demonstrates good understanding on requirements needed to ensure viability for a defined period and capacity to achieve stated goals.
Acceptable	3	Plan/proposal generally meets requirements but with minor reservations in one or more elements. Demonstrates reasonable understanding and suggests the ability to achieve stated goals, but lacks sufficient detail to award a higher mark.
Poor	2	A plan/proposal with reservations. Limited detail and supporting information/figures across differing elements. High risk that the proposed approach would be viable or achieve stated goals.
Very poor	1	A plan/proposal with serious reservations. Required information/figures are missing from specific elements. Unable to fully assess the viability of stated goals.
Unacceptable / no response	0	Plan/proposal fails to supply appropriately detailed information/figures in virtually all elements.

Marking and applied weights for Grant 1 & 2 applicants:

Assessment will be completed across four main headings using scoring matrix and individual weights applied, e.g. if for Vision and business Idea, the response scores a 4 out of 5, then that translates to a score of 8 out 10 marks.

Headings and weight applied, including elements assessed.	Max marks available
Vision and business Idea x2 Elements assessed: Business Goals Product/Service Details Key Selling Points Future Plans	10 marks
Marketing x1 Elements assessed: Market Research Sales Justification Action Plan Competitors Pricing Marketing, Advertising, Promotion	5 marks
Operations and Legal issues x1 Elements Assessed: Staff Premises Capital Expenditure Stock and Suppliers Insurance Legal Issues	5 marks
Finance to include attached 2-year financial projections x2 Elements Assessed: Funding Sales Projections Revenue Expenditure Capital Expenditure Financial Projections Summary & Analysis	10 marks

A score of 18 or more across all headings will equate to a pass and resulting award of 30 marks will be allocated. Please also note:

An assessment of poor or below in more than one heading will result in a score of 0 for assessment of business plan and subsequently marked as having failed assessment.

Marks and applied weights for Grant 3 applicants:

Assessment will be completed across two main headings below using scoring matrix and with individual weighting applied, e.g. if for Vision and business Idea, the response scores a 4 out of 5 then that translates to a score of 20 out of 25 marks.

Headings and weight applied, including elements assessed.	Maximum marks available
Executive Summary x1: Elements assessed: ExecutiveSummary Business details	5 marks
Vision and business Idea x5: Elements assessed: Business idea Business goals Pricing, marketing strategy and competitors What makes the business different? Legal requirements	25 marks

A score of 18 or more across both headings will equate to a pass and resulting award of 30 marks will be allocated.

Please also note: an assessment of poor or below in any one heading will result in a score of 0 for assessment of business plan and subsequently marked as having failed assessment.

The scoring matrix for Stage 1 assessment will differ based on whether the application is being submitted with a confirmed occupier or a property owner without an occupier – the matrix will identify if the scoring element applies to known occupier (OCC) or property owner with no occupier (PONO).

How decisions are made

All applications are checked for completeness and eligibility against the guidelines. We are unable to progress ineligible applications.

As per the Outline of Process adopted for these grants, if, following application submission:

1. The declaration page is not signed (please note that a scanned digital signature OR typed name is satisfactory),
or
2. There is verification missing specific to eligibility and evidence of eligibility cannot otherwise be found via other means, the organisation will be contacted via vacanttovibrant@belfastcity.gov.uk and given five working days from date of email clarification, to supply only related and specified information back to us within a reply email. If verification is required during the viability assessment, the assessor will require a return of information within two working days.

Belfast City Council may not be able to fund all successful applications as there may be more applications than funding available. However, all eligible applications will be considered carefully and assessed.

Note: In order to ensure that there is no duplication of applications, and to ensure a fair distribution of the grant, council reserves the right to refuse any application that is deemed to be a duplication or directly aligned with another application.

Applicants must not place any reliance whatsoever on the support of Belfast City Council until formally notified in writing and your authorised signatories have executed and returned a funding agreement, which Belfast City Council will send to you, should your application prove successful. Accordingly, any expenditure that you incur and/or to which you commit (including that which you have incurred or committed to in relation to the preparation of your proposal for funding) prior to formal notification and execution and return of the funding agreement is incurred and/or committed entirely at your own risk.

What happens if the application is successful?

If an application is successful, the council will issue a Letter of Offer, which is an offer to the successful organisation to deliver on the proposal outlined in their application form.

Signed Letters of Offer must be returned by email within **14 days of receipt**. If the signed Letter of Offer is not received by the council within this 14-day period, the offer of grant funding will be withdrawn without further notice and the application will be rejected. You must use the same email address to return the Letter of Offer as was used to submit your application form.

When you receive your Letter of Offer it must be signed by an actual signature by authorised signatory for your organisation scanned and returned by email. If you cannot access an electronic signature, please contact us well in advance of the deadline for assistance. At this stage, applicants can proceed to purchase the items as outlined in their Letter of Offer, and monies can then be claimed back from the council. Applicants cannot start any work or purchase any items or equipment until they receive their Letter of Offer.

Payment

It is anticipated that grant offers will be made following the successful completion of the approval process, and your project if successful, **cannot commence until you receive a formal letter of offer from the Council**. Projects must be completed within 9 months of the Letter of Offer, with all works finished, paid and through the bank account by this date.

We will pay 70% of your grant when we receive your signed letter of offer (Property owners without a secured occupier will only be able to access 60% of the total grant available within the relevant funding bracket and can draw down the remaining 40% should they secure a occupier within 9 months). We will pay the remaining 30% once we have received a satisfactorily completed monitoring form with all requested evidence/ documentation verifying spend against the Letter of Offer requirement, including:

- Electronic invoices for each item purchased
- Copy of bank statements showing payment for each item being paid from the business

bank account If the requested documentation is not supplied, payment will be withheld.

Please do not apply for funding if you cannot supply these items.

Payment of grant will be made to applicant via direct BACS payment. Cash payments by applicants are not acceptable and will not be eligible for any refund from the council.

Applicants are responsible for paying the contactor(s) and claiming back VAT, if applicable, within six weeks of completing your project.

Successful applicants will be awarded funding on the basis that they are committed to a minimum lease period commensurate with the level of funding (minimum of two years for larger grants and minimum of four months for smaller grants). **If for any reason applicants awarded with funding are unable to fulfil their lease period, they must notify council immediately, and may be subject to claw back proceedings. Claw back will be commensurate with the length remaining on the lease, e.g. if lease is broken after one year then applicant will owe 50% of grant; after 18 months applicant would owe 25% of grant etc. If the lease is broken before 12 months, claw back will be calculated by months. If the grant was applied for by the property owner, they will have six months to find a replacement occupier to satisfy the remainder of the lease period before claw back proceedings are initiated.**

What happens if the application is unsuccessful?

The council's decision on whether to award funding is final, however if your application is unsuccessful, you can contact an officer for feedback and advice on future funding applications.

The applicant can submit a new application, however there is no guarantee that it will be successful. This will mean starting the process from the beginning with a new unique reference number assigned.

If you believe the funding process has not been followed correctly, or your application has been deemed ineligible incorrectly, you may request a review within seven working days of receiving your Letter of Outcome via email to vacanttovibrant@belfastcity.gov.uk. A Senior Council Officer will review the process and accuracy of the decision and respond to your review request. The Senior Council Officer's review decision is final.

Unsuccessful applicants will be provided with feedback and may apply again further to taking on board the feedback from the first unsuccessful assessment. If the applicant submits a second application which is also unsuccessful, and wants to be considered a third time, they will require written evidence of assurance from a third-party organisation (such as an Accountant, Solicitor or Business Advisor) confirming that the application and supporting documentation successfully demonstrate the eligibility and financial viability of the project, and that the applicant has taken on board feedback from the previous assessments.

Belfast City Council reserves the right to determine the outcome of any application and will assess applications on a case-by-case basis.

Marketing and promotion

You must acknowledge our support by including the Belfast City Council logo on all printed materials associated with your programme of work. We will give you more information about marketing and promotion requirements if your application is successful. For information on Belfast City Council branding and logos please refer to www.belfastcity.gov.uk/brand. Please get in touch in advance so that we can help you promote your project. If you are awarded Vacant to Vibrant funding, you must agree to details and photography of your project being used in council communications including case studies, media releases, social media, presentations and publications – for example City Matters residents' magazine. Email us on vacanttovibrant@belfastcity.gov.uk if you have a query.

General principles

The Vacant to Vibrant capital grant scheme is funded by Belfast City Council. It is a prime responsibility of Local Government to ensure the proper and efficient use of and the accountability for public monies. To this end, applicants will be required to provide relevant supporting information when applying for funding.

Following completion of the scheme, applicants will be required to engage in an evaluation process which will aim to demonstrate the effectiveness and impact of the project on their business and on the wider business environment. Applicants will be expected to complete and submit two post project monitoring forms (with supporting documentation/evidence), the first at the point of project completion and the second 12 months after project completion.

The person responsible for the project and application must be aged 18 or over at the application deadline. You may be asked to provide evidence of this if you are awarded a Letter of Offer.

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.

Supporting information checklist

To make a formal decision on your eligibility for this grant scheme we require the following supporting information to be sent to us with your initial application. If you do not supply all relevant supporting documentation as part of your submission, then this will cause a delay in processing your application.

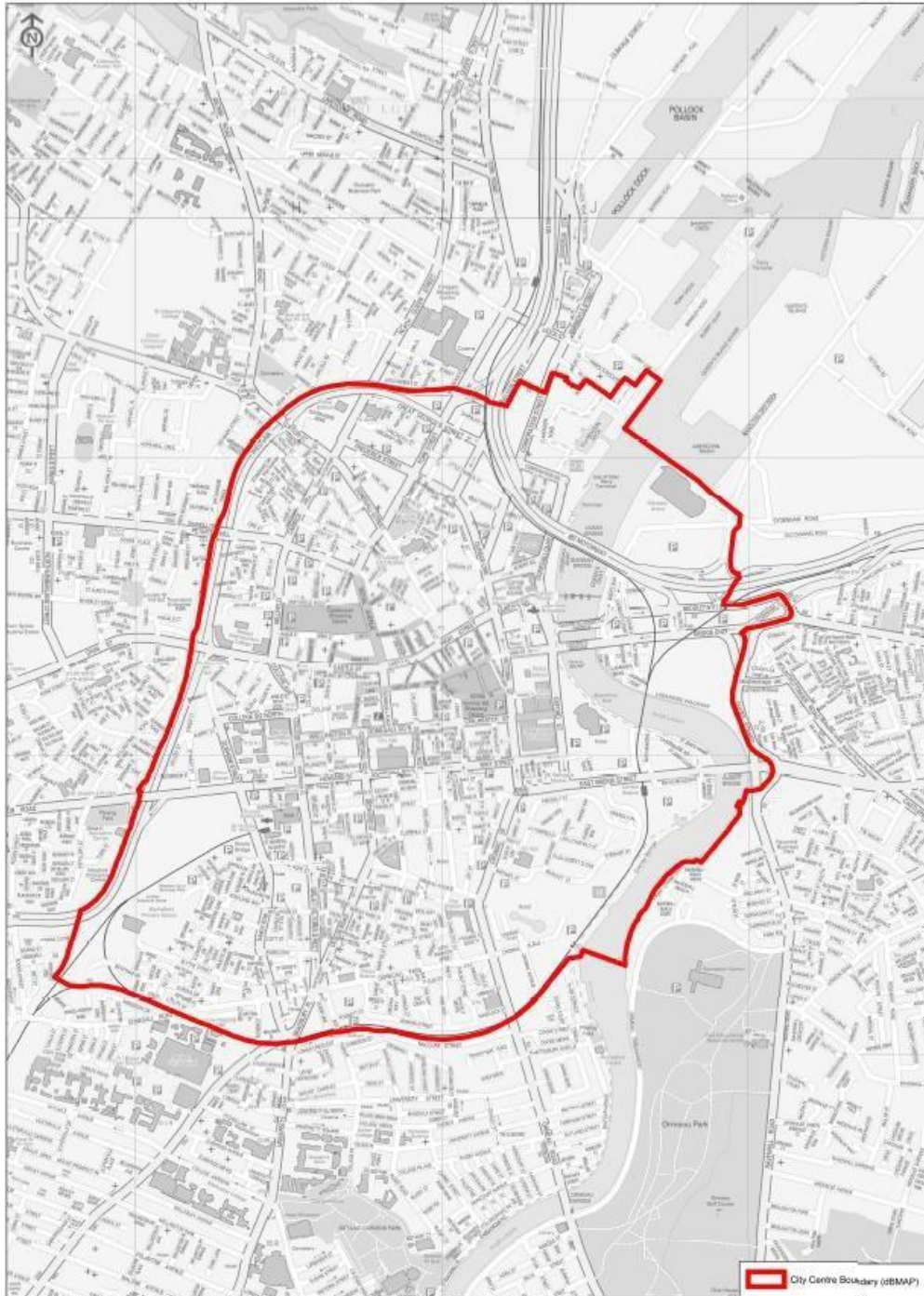
To speed up the application process, please ensure all attached files are Microsoft compatible (not Apple/Mac format) and that they are named meaningfully, so it is obvious what information they contain, for example: ‘*Applicant’s name - signage quotation 1*’, ‘*Applicant’s name – Property owner consent form*’

Have you provided the necessary supporting information with your application?		<i>Delete as appropriate</i>
1.	Proof that you are a registered business/organisation that has been actively operating for at least three months as of date of submission of application. <i>Please provide confirmation of company number. For charities, please provide your Northern Ireland Charity number.</i>	YES/NO
2.	Overview of business/organisation’s finances. <i>Organisations must provide bank statements (or other financial institution account) in the name of their organisation and for the <u>sole purpose of the organisation</u>, i.e. separate from personal financial accounts or details of any person involved in the organisation for the last three months.</i>	YES/NO
3.	Evidence of Viability through completion of relevant templates of a Business plan/Business Proposal. <i>This will provide information about the proposal, demonstrating that it is a viable and sustainable investment opportunity (commensurate with grant levels).</i>	YES/NO
4.	For businesses/organisations, submission of signed property owner consent form (template included as part of application pack) providing confirmation/consent for the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The property has not been in occupation for a period of 12 months at the time of application* - Commitment to lease property <i>(if application is deemed eligible for funding then payment is subject to providing copy of the lease agreement (minimum two years, grant 3 applicants minimum of four months) signed by all parties</i> - Written confirmation from the landlord that they consent to your proposed changes to the property <i>(if you are requesting works including structural changes).</i> <p>*Property owners please provide copy of their current or most recent Land and Property Service valuation certificate demonstrating that the property is in their ownership and has been vacant.</p>	YES/NO YES/NO
5.	Evidence of quotations sought for any goods or services in compliance with the procurement guidelines as detailed in the Guidance Notes.	YES/NO
6.	Interior and exterior photographs that show the scale of the property. <i>Please ensure you the images you provide show us the scale of each room or space in the unit and how the frontage appears on the high street.</i>	YES/NO

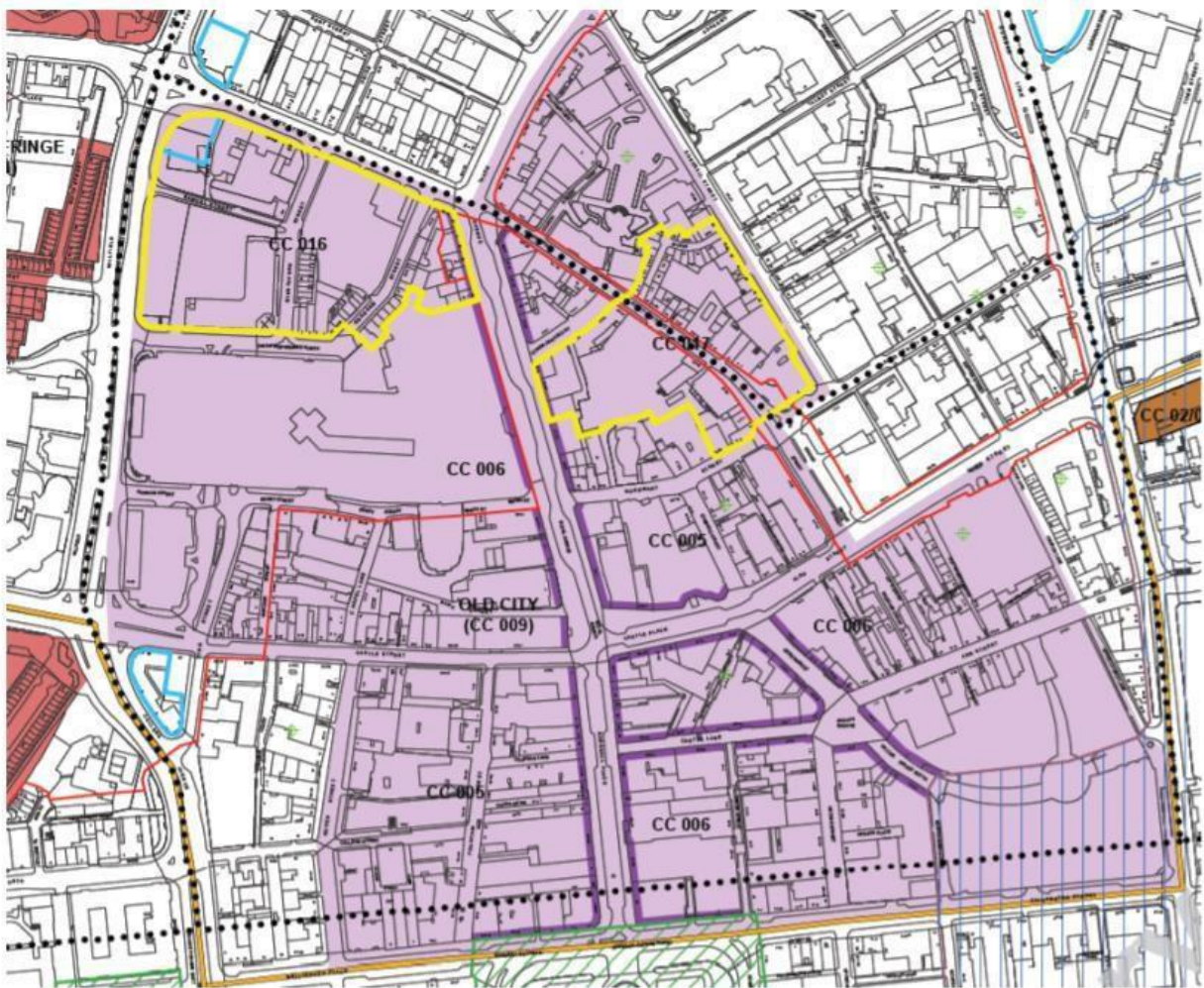
Annex a: Belfast city centre boundary map

City centre boundary description:

Belfast city centre's geographical boundary limits extend from Belfast Clarendon Dock in the north east of the city, travelling clockwise parallel to the M3 motorway east to the Short Strand, then in a south westerly direction along the Ormeau Embankment to Bradbury Place in the south of the city, then continuing clockwise in a westerly direction to Broadway Road, following the Westlink



Annex b: Belfast primary retail core area map



Primary Retail Core description:

Belfast city centre's Primary Retail Core defines the main focus of retail activity and retail investment. It includes the main retail outlets along Donegall Place/Royal Avenue and extends westwards to Millfield/King Street/Queen Street and eastwards towards Bridge Street/Church Lane and Victoria Street. The Primary Retail Core also contains banks and professional offices on Royal Avenue, Wellington Place and Fountain Street, civic buildings, dispersed cafés and pubs and restaurants between Ann Street and High Street and off North Street.

If you seek additional clarity around your property's location within the boundary, please email: vacanttovibrant@belfastcity.gov.uk