

SERVICE UPDATE

<u>Name of Cluster:</u>	City Development and Regeneration
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<u>Title of Update:</u>	Union Street Empty Shops Action Plan – Annual Update
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UPDATE:

This Service Update is in response to item 1.5 (g) from the decision sheet of the Finance and Resources Committee, 13 March 2024, providing an annual update on the Union Street Empty Shops Action Plan. An interim Service Update was circulated on 5 September 2024 in response to a request made at the Special Council meeting on Monday 2 September, item 4 (ii, 2).

Progress Report 2024

Union Street Benchmarks

1. Frequent walkabout surveys of Union Street to monitor the number of units occupied and vacant have continued through 2024. Both Our Union Street and FG Burnett conduct similar surveys. As these are done visually the numbers reported can occasionally differ, but officers engage with these partners regularly to discuss new leads, changes or any inconsistencies.

Over the past year the number of vacant ground floor units on Union Street has varied between 36 – 41, and of these the number currently available for purchase or lease is 31.

2. Since Autumn 2024 Aberdeen City Council has procured new footfall data from Huq Signals. Huq Signals footfall data is derived from mobile trace analytics for the city centre. Each visitor is recorded once a day if they visit the city centre in that 24 hour period thus Huq Signals footfall data records unique visitors to the area. The data revealed from 1 January 2024 to 31 December 2024 that the total number of unique visitors for the year had risen 3.6% on the year before (2023). The HUQ data includes Union Square, a growth area in the city. A briefing session on Huq Signals for Elected Members is being planned for June 2025.
3. Events taking place through 2024, led by ACC and partners, have continued to support footfall including Spectra, the Christmas Market, NuArt, Aberdeen Restaurant Weeks, and the Aberdeen Masterclass Series. These regular events were supplemented with Festival of the Sea in July 2024 and the Iconic Dinosaur Trail in October 2024, bringing families into the city centre during peak school holiday periods.

Our Union Street

4. As one of Our Union Street's supporting partners, and as observer to the Board, regular engagement and collaboration on projects related to city centre regeneration has continued.
5. Progress is ongoing towards Our Union Street's five objectives of Brighten the Street; Fill the Units; Use the Space; Tell the Story; and Engage the City. A full programme of on-street clean-up work and shopfront updates was completed through 24/25. Research has been conducted to support temporary exhibitions on the street on topics of local music, medical history, space, science and technology – the first of these on local popular music history is being installed in 172 Union Street. In May 2024, Our Union Street launched a website and digital CRM platform marketing all vacant ground floor units on Union Street in one place alongside upfront costs, support packages available and AI-generated images of how the units can be used. This is a valuable asset in determining a pipeline of prospective tenants to engage with.
6. Discussions are ongoing with Scottish Government in relation to financial support for Our Union Street, to accelerate progress and support running costs.

Union Street Empty Shops Grant Scheme

7. At Council Budget in March 2024, the capital funding for the Union Street Empty Shops Grant Scheme was increased to £1,000,000 and the duration of the Grant Scheme extended into the 2025/26 financial year.
8. To date there have been 15 applications approved, representing an allocation of £510,000. There is 1 application of status 'progress with conditions' awaiting a final decision at the next Review Panel meeting.
9. Over 110 enquiries have been received in relation to the Union Street Empty Shops Grant Scheme and of these, there are 4-6 in the pipeline for future Review Panels currently. Many of the enquiries received have been from early stage or start-up businesses that need additional support before being ready to take on a commercial premise. These enquiries are signposted to partners including Business Gateway, Scottish Enterprise or Opportunity North East for further business support, or are signposted towards more appropriate opportunities.
10. Marketing activity to promote the Empty Shops Grant Scheme is ongoing on social media and printed material (including property brochures), the Our Union Street website, and via professional services (architects, surveyors, agents) and references from partners.

Union Street Empty Shops Action Plan

11. In the Union Street Empty Shops Progress Update shared in March 2024, priority activity for the next 12 months was identified and progress is reported below:

- Recruitment of an additional Project Officer – complete. UKSPF funding was sourced to support creation and fulfilment of this post in 24/25 and it will be continued with core ACC funding in 25/26 to support delivery of related activity and the Grant Scheme.
- Identification of funding to support provision of a pop-up pilot retail scheme – ongoing. Following engagement with letting agents, a suitable unit on Union Street could not be identified for pop-up activity in 24/25. Pop-up opportunities for small businesses who wish to trial physical retail space have been made available by the Trinity Centre, adjacent to Union Street, with short-term and shared lets in small units; pop-up/market space on high footfall thoroughfares in the run up to Christmas; window displays in empty units incorporating QR codes to enable online purchases; and a monthly local Produce Market.
- Identification of additional funding for the Union Street Empty Shops Grant Scheme beyond the allocated £500,000 – complete, see paragraph 8.
- Securing a new tenant for 81 Union Street – ongoing. The prospective new tenant identified in the September 2024 Progress Update did not complete final checks. Marketing of the unit and viewings continue.
- Collaboration with Marks & Spencer on options for the St Nicholas store – ongoing. Where any new information becomes known this would be circulated via a Service Update as per the approved recommendations of [report](#) CR&E/24/157 presented at Finance and Resources on 8 May 2024.
- Supporting Aberdeen Inspired with a feasibility study on Union Street upper floors – ongoing. The final report from the initial study, funded by UKSPF, was published in March 2025. Implementing a recommendation from the report, an expert technical panel has been assembled including specialists from the Planning and Building Standards services at ACC, architects, developers and commercial letting agents to assess barriers and put forward solutions for each of the empty and available upper floor units on Union Street.
- Collaboration with city centre stakeholders and continued monitoring of benchmarks – ongoing. In addition to one-to-one meetings and observer attendance at both Our Union Street and Aberdeen Inspired Boards, a strategic-level City Centre Partners' meeting has been established monthly, and officers attend Aberdeen Inspired's quarterly BID network meetings.

- Development of the Council's Union Street Cross-Service Working Group – ongoing. In January 2025, an ACC post of City Centre Manager was recruited to, and the role will act as a key liaison between businesses, visitors, residents, city centre stakeholders and Council services. The Cross-Service Working Group now serves as an officer network for the City Centre Manager, to ensure quicker response times, better communication and proactive resolution to city centre issues. The City Centre Manager brings increased visibility and attention to these issues via the City Development Board.

An example of good practice, piloted by officers from the Working Group representing Planning, Building Standards and Economic Development alongside external partners, was to attend a number of unit viewings on Union Street with a prospective tenant, in-person, to offer tailored pre-application advice. This has resulted in a lease being signed for 201 Union Street.

12. In addition through 2024/25, there have been numerous new actions and activity commencing and undertaken in support of the city centre, aligning with the themes of the Union Street Empty Shops Action Plan:

13. Aligning with 'Distinctive Aberdeen', £100,000 of UKSPF was allocated to deliver the Vibrant and Sustainable City Centre Pilot, strengthening the resilience of local businesses in the city centre through the creation of an autumn events programme and development of a business toolkit.

This included the Iconic Bricks Dinosaur and Hidden Lego Minifigure trail projects which ran during the October school break, with an accompanying marketing campaign and a free weekend parking offer. Of the participating businesses that provided feedback, 93% reported seeing an increase in footfall over the duration of the trails.

The funding also supported launch of the online Business Toolkit, available to all, but targeting resource and finance which can enable city centre businesses to capitalise on the opportunities of an evolving city centre. The Toolkit signposts the support and training available from partners in the business support ecosystem in one place.

Working with Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce and Business Gateway, and informed by engagement with businesses, 7 tailored training sessions have been offered between January-March 2025, both online and in-person, free for businesses to attend. Topics covered include business resilience; customer service; social media and digital marketing.

Recognising the importance of a varied and busy events schedule to attract visitors to the city centre, the Toolkit offered a City Centre Events Grant Scheme and 'Spectrafy Your Business' grant scheme. Business could apply for one-off grants ranging from £250 - £750 to host or capitalise on events happening in the city centre, to increase vibrancy and footfall.

To support Aberdeen Inspired who lead on the Aberdeen Gift Card – the most successful in the UK with almost £830,000 in sales in 2024 - £10,000 of UKSPF funding was allocated in February 2025 to support a marketing campaign and website build focused on corporate sales, a key area for growth. The Gift Card represents a commitment to in-person, in-store sales, thus offering a boost to the local economy and spend, as well as supporting the delivery of ACC's Community Wealth Building Action Plan.

Finally, with over £100,000 of UKSPF funding, 'Freebie Fortnight' took place in March 2025. By underwriting a headline "freebie" offer in 23 city centre businesses, and delivering an adjacent marketing and radio campaign, participating businesses and the wider city centre benefitted from new and returning customer numbers instore. In-store transactions increased by an average of 34% over the campaign duration. The unique offering and campaign attracted interest on social media, with a number of local influencers posting videos and content on platforms not traditionally used by ACC and attracting thousands of views.

14. Aligning with 'Culture and Heritage' and ensuring that city centre businesses are prepared to capitalise on the opportunity of the Tall Ships in July 2025, a dedicated business support workstream is being delivered. 275 attendees joined a Tall Ships Industry Webinar in February 2025; a Tall Ships Aberdeen Business Guide has been produced; and marketing packs including branded window dressing materials are being disseminated.
15. Aligning with 'Net Zero Union Street' and as previously reported, green roof bus shelters will be installed within the Union Street Central works section. Between November 2024 – January 2025, funded by Bus Lane Enforcement surplus, the Night Bus service was reinstated from the city centre to key destinations across the city and Aberdeenshire, boosting the night-time city centre economy over the busy festive period.
16. Aligning with 'Funding', an application was submitted to Keep Britain Tidy for external funds for a chewing gum removal exercise and preventative communications campaign on Union Street. The application was successful due to the wealth of ongoing activity to regenerate Union Street that could be demonstrated in the application. The £27,500 grant contributed towards additional cleaning on Union Street between August – October 2024, and signage aimed at preventing people from littering again.
17. To continue delivery of the programme themes of the Union Street Empty Shops Action Plan, the below actions will be prioritised over the next 12 months:
 - New and additional promotion of the Union Street Empty Shops Grant Scheme, identifying funding for this marketing activity if required;
 - Submission of an application to Keep Britain Tidy for a repeat chewing gum removal exercise focused on different areas of the street in 25/26;
 - Refresh, update and identification of new sources of support and resource via the Business Toolkit;

- Integration of the City Centre Manager role within ACC, to include leading on submission of the Purple Flag accreditation application and strengthening the cross-service Union Street Working Group and pilot activity;
- Engagement with Aberdeen Inspired's convened expert technical panel to progress recommendations of the upper floors feasibility study;
- If confirmed, and pending any required Committee approval, dissemination, monitoring and reporting of Scottish Government's funding contribution to Our Union Street;
- Seek external sources of place-based funding to support project development and delivery on Union Street aligning with Action Plan themes;
- Support city centre partners to identify and apply for relevant ACC sources of funding for city centre improvement projects, for example the Bus Lane Enforcement fund or LEZ funding;
- Continued collaboration with city centre stakeholders to dovetail policy and actions to avoid duplicating resource and maximise impact;
- Continued monitoring of Union Street benchmarks, while identifying additional measurements for success informed by wider place-making policy.