

Shaping the future of the BID Industry:

An analytical review of
Business Improvement
Districts during the
pandemic and their plans
and needs for the future

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Foreword

The purpose of this report highlights where the Business Improvement District [BID] industry was and how British BIDs might best respond to the needs of that industry following the COVID-19 pandemic.

We therefore set up a number of different research streams to see both where the industry was going and how best we might support it. These research streams included work conducted by NEF Consulting, Rocket Science and British BIDs.

This report brings together all three of these strands, making use of as much of the original data and insight as possible. In total more than 100 BIDs have been involved in the research.

All BIDs taking part in the focus groups saw the post-Covid 'new normal' as a place of major change, with much uncertainty but also much possibility. The consensus in all the focus groups was that of opportunity, of BID managers being positive individuals who had come into the industry because of the challenges and variety. This was refreshing and spirit lifting.

It will now be for all of us in BIDs to reflect on both our own shared thinking, and the thinking taking place across the world outlined in this work about this 'new normal'. It will be for BIDs to then integrate it into the way that we work, the way that we cooperate, and the way that we move toward an increasingly shared vision of place that brings together businesses, all the varied place users, and our local authorities.

For British BIDs, the research now paves the way for the organisation to develop its business plan to best support the needs of the BID industry.

Professor Christopher Turner
Chief Executive
British BIDs



Executive Summary

BIDs and their membership bodies demonstrated their resilience and agility in responding to the initial emergency phase of the pandemic and the ensuing lockdown, during which no BID has had to stop operating.

The main concerns for BID levy payers in the lockdown were the uncertainty, the contraction and decline of retail, the huge footfall and customer reductions, and the antisocial behaviour.

During the pandemic, BIDs were good at engaging and communicating with their businesses, re-crafting their activities, training and supporting their levy payers, continuing basic services such as security, and focusing on regeneration and sustainability. Collaboration increased with local authorities, other BIDs, other stakeholders, and business crime partnerships.

The new challenges were levy payments, future ballots, community relationships, land and property owners, national head offices, and who is in charge of a town centre.

The future for many town and city centres will be affected by the levels of working from home, the changes in the office and service industries, the huge changes in retail, the growth in new experiences, the return to the local, the growth of new residential and the new regionality.

On policy matters, BIDs looked for new understanding from national and local government on what they did, the need for curation of place, the innovative use of new planning rules, a new business rate system and a stronger green and sustainable economy.

BIDs were looking to explore new business models, and want to review the length of BID terms, Property owner BIDs, and the BID levy.

BIDs want their representative agencies to represent and lobby, act as advocates, review GDPR rules, work with head offices, work together, support the smaller BIDs, provide leadership and look at their governance, provide case studies and good practice, plan events and conferences carefully, support the 'here and now', stimulate BID collaboration.

British BIDs and other BID agencies provided good services in the pandemic; Bb needed to continue government lobbying, providing webinars, training, Accreditation, Ballot Buddy support, continue adding new suppliers and expand the Industrial BIDs group. Also look at a national governing body, and review its cost structure and most importantly be on-call as a support for BIDs.

British BIDs set up a number of different research streams to see both where the industry was going and how best we might support it.



Introduction

British BIDs [Bb] is now 10 years old, and the time seemed right, in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, to review where the Business Improvement District [BID] industry was and how British BIDs might best respond to the needs of that industry. We therefore set up a number of different research streams to see both where the industry was going and how best we might support it. The findings, detailed here, are intended to inform both the BID sector at large and the Bb Advisory Board's positioning of the organisation and its potential growth and development at what is a pivotal moment for the country's economy.

The BID industry has proved itself to be remarkably resilient over the past 20 years, riding the economic recession and financial crash of the late 2000s and continually adapting the BID offer to the needs of a wide variety of communities, towns and cities up and down the country. There are now 329 BIDs¹ in total across the UK with an estimated combined expenditure of over £225m and a direct-employee workforce of well over 1000.

The industry is now facing its biggest challenge to date. The crisis afflicting the UK's retail sector which is symptomatic in the decline of many of our high streets, was already in evidence before the pandemic (a record net 2481 stores disappeared from the main 500 high streets in GB during 2018). However, its effects have now been accelerated by Covid-19.

Methodology

Firstly, we worked with NEF Consulting (New Economics Foundation) to study the ways in which town and city centres might change as part of the new normal emerging after the pandemic, and the ways that BIDs were responding to that. The full research involved a wide range of focus groups, desktop research and a detailed telephone survey. The full report is available², and some key headlines are included in this report.

Secondly, we asked Rocket Science to explore how individual BIDs saw themselves performing during and after the Covid-19 pandemic and what those BIDs wanted from their trade and professional body. Rocket Science interviewed a mixed group of BIDs, both Bb members and non-members, and provided an opportunity to test their understanding and interpretation of what a "new normal" might look like as the country begins the recovery from the pandemic, and how support organisations like Bb can best contribute and support them in this endeavour. They invited BIDs to reflect upon the key challenges facing the businesses they support and the places that they manage, both specifically working on recovery and looking forward more generally. Much of this report comes from the work that Rocket Science undertook, and very often mirrors the vocabulary of the focus groups to retain that level of 'authenticity'.

Thirdly, the British BIDs team, working with a large number of our members, explored further the future of BIDs and membership services. In the context of the longer-term period of transition, this research identifies what services and products British BIDs might develop and offer to help meet current and future members' needs, whilst facing the additional challenges that the modes of service delivery (such as training and practice sharing) are likely to change, and the BID marketplace is increasingly diversifying.

This report brings together all three of these strands, making use of as much of the original data and wordings as possible. In total more than 100 BIDs have been involved in the conversations.

¹ <https://britishbids.info/publications/national-bids-survey-2019>

² https://cdn.britishbids.info/publications/BIDs-and-the-new-normal_their-response-to-COVID-19-pandemic_BritishBIDs_June2020.pdf?mtime=20200610094558

Key Headlines on the Pandemic and recovery

BIDs and their membership bodies demonstrated their resilience and agility in responding to the initial emergency phase of the pandemic and the ensuing lockdown, during which no BID has had to stop operating. As a vaccine emerges and towns and cities across the country begin to come out of lockdown and work out what a “new normal” looks like, BIDs are adapting once again in order to be instrumental in the recovery of local economies and a new-look civil society, whilst taking an active role in the work in many locations to “reinvent the high street.”

Uncertainty

Many BIDs felt strongly that the level of uncertainty and start-stop approach to recovery have shaken business communities and stalled planning and decision-making. BIDs faced last minute, unclear messaging from national government and a lag between announcements and guidance was unsettling and confusing. The confusion is compounded by differences between government approaches across the UK nations, prompting frustration amongst businesses. Interpreting safety-related guidance – including ‘lockdown silage’ issuing from head offices – and translating this into robust practices and processes on the ground was a real challenge. Grants, loans and business rate breaks were a life saver for many, albeit mainly for smaller businesses, but cash flow struggles and fear of furlough being followed by large scale redundancies are beginning to eclipse the relief at initial government cash injections. Anxiety is increasing from speculation as to what the next six months have in store.

The contraction and decline of the retail sector

Large, national chains and small independent retailers alike are suffering, with most BIDs seeing closures and the likelihood of many more; the vulnerability of many independents tends to be heightened by the inability to balance the fortunes of multiple branches across different geographies. Business closures are far from limited to the new or smaller concerns. Established household names have fallen victim to the national condition. Some retailers have pivoted their practices and processes well and embraced different ways of working, combining online with bricks and mortar. Some are more reticent or less able. There are some winners: lockdown rigours like avoiding public transport, widespread tendency to purchase more goods and services online and additional time and space available to households to consider home improvements have seen bike shops, print companies, art distributors, speciality electronics and technology companies thrive in some locations. There are examples of some doubling and tripling their floorspace during lockdown. Lockdown witnessed some business start-ups in the hospitality and hairdressing/beauty services; probably the result of lease terms committing businesses to open within a set timescale. Providers of professional services like lawyers and accountants sustained and increased their business in some areas. Within the retail sector, the clear winners are those that have secured a web-site presence, capitalising upon an evident increase in local online browsing, translating into shop visits.

Footfall and customer changes

Some large hospitality sector businesses have successfully secured loans to keep afloat, but significant cash flow struggles and day to day survival are preoccupying most. There is a projected reduction in annual hospitality and retail turnover of between 70% and 80% to March 2021. Scant international travel, a major contributor to high net worth spending and a generator of consistent, high levels of spend across visitor destinations generally, has been a major cause of plummeting hospitality and visitor sales.

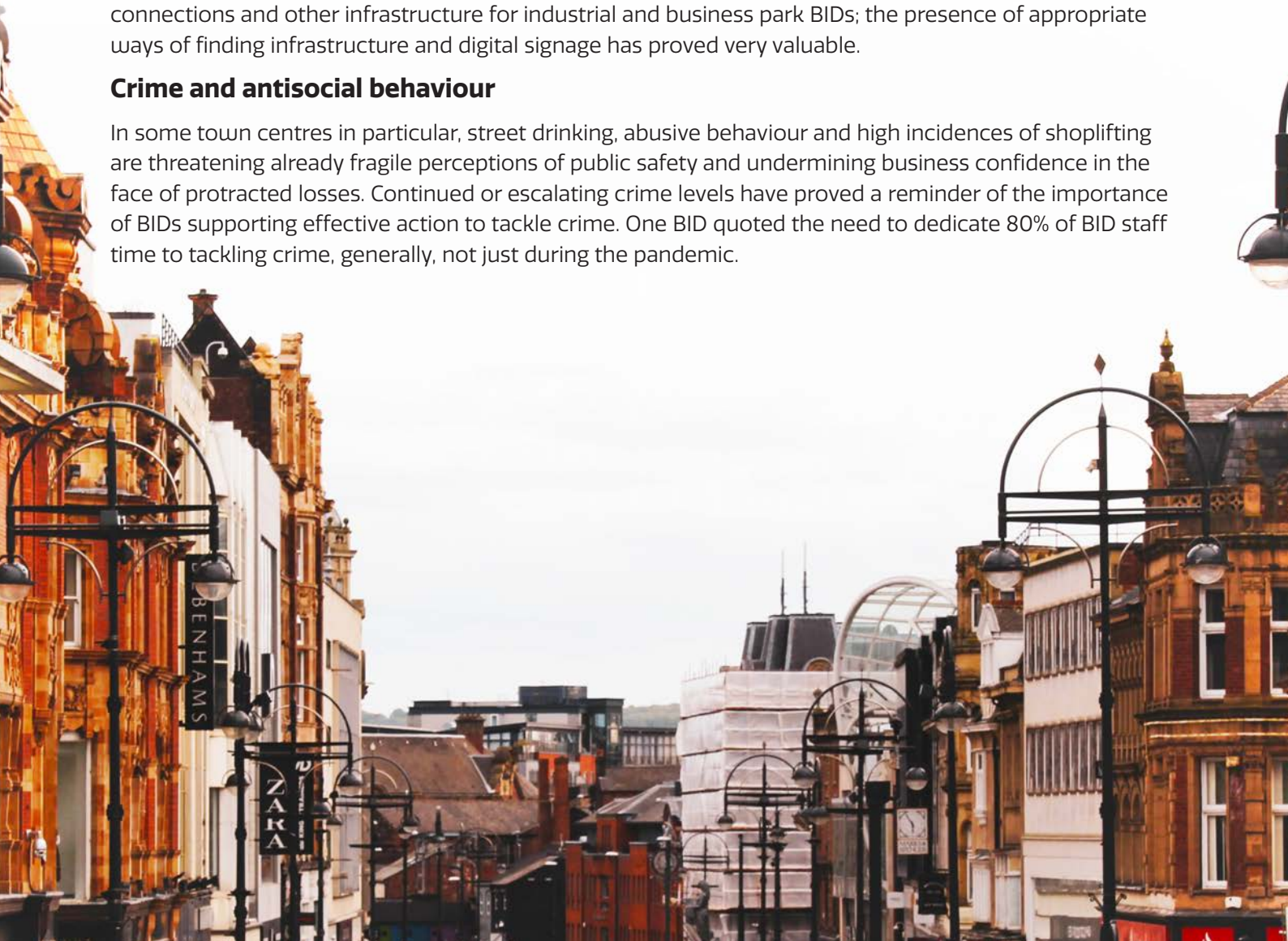
People becoming accustomed to working from home and a reluctance to use public transport has seen a greater tendency to shop locally; footfall in City Centres, some Town Centres and visitor tourist destinations has dropped dramatically and remain stubbornly low. However, Town Centres with a diverse sectoral mix and greater volumes of local residents (notably shared accommodation and flat occupiers) who regularly rely upon the Centres for exercise, recreation or a coffee break, have been better insulated from the footfall hit that working from home and office closures have inflicted. Low footfall challenges are exacerbated by the patchy return of students and attendant footfall (families and international travellers) in university towns.

Industrial and business parks

The mix of uses in industrial areas and lower dependence of occupiers upon footfall generation provides a level of futureproofing against the vulnerabilities of places dominated by the retail, hospitality and entertainment sectors. Nevertheless, activation of these areas has been adversely affected by a reduction in footfall; crime, antisocial behaviour, fly tipping and rough sleeping have crept up as a result of lower vehicular and pedestrian traffic levels. The pandemic had reinforced the importance of good transport connections and other infrastructure for industrial and business park BIDs; the presence of appropriate ways of finding infrastructure and digital signage has proved very valuable.

Crime and antisocial behaviour

In some town centres in particular, street drinking, abusive behaviour and high incidences of shoplifting are threatening already fragile perceptions of public safety and undermining business confidence in the face of protracted losses. Continued or escalating crime levels have proved a reminder of the importance of BIDs supporting effective action to tackle crime. One BID quoted the need to dedicate 80% of BID staff time to tackling crime, generally, not just during the pandemic.



BID Support in the COVID-19 pandemic

BIDs were asked about the approaches and support that they are providing; describing what is working well and what they would wish to continue or perhaps scale up; collaborations with partners to combine efforts and the relative success of these arrangements; and what they struggle with and are challenges.

What has worked well?

The frequency and quality of BID engagement with businesses

Although one or two BIDs struggled for the attention of businesses whilst they focused on immediate priorities, a deeper appreciation of the role of BIDs emerged in most cases, with communications with BIDs increasing dramatically. Smaller businesses, in particular, became very reliant upon BIDs for clear advice around the interpretation of national pandemic-related guidance and for short, sharp and timely training opportunities to address immediate challenges. BIDs allayed panic and became the 'go to' adviser for businesses and shook off the perception around the limitations of the BID role that had persisted too long amongst too many; they were clearly 'more than just an events company'. A significant number of BIDs extended their reach into business communities beyond BID boundaries and smaller non-member businesses within their own areas: the potential levy payers of the future. It was recognised that this extended reach had the potential to support BIDs that had ambitions to extend their area going forward, to win new hearts and minds. Enhanced engagement with businesses enabled BIDs to develop previously passive members into engaged, active partners and advocates. Regular pulse check surveys to check business health through the progress of the pandemic provided invaluable intelligence to inform BID activity, but also enabled provision of real time feedback to local authorities and members of parliament on matters such as grant thresholds, and other services with a role in supporting businesses and employees. Simple actions and flexibility proved powerful in building stronger relationships, such as the distribution of free hand sanitiser to all businesses; lending a helping hand and just doing what needs to be done, getting hands dirty; and being visible and a friendly face in the mornings when businesses were opening. Initial teething problems with video meetings gave way to BIDs and businesses valuing Zoom for catch ups and good practice sharing and the potential to tune in and trade at the same time.

The regularity of clear and timely communication from BIDs to businesses

Many BIDs scaled up their regular communications with businesses: distributing newsletters with full explanations in simple language of how national guidance impacts upon business rather than relying on businesses to read web-links; dropping in and writing individually to businesses offering hands-on support with matters such as government grant applications; and driving up use of email and social media to ensure all had access to key, timely and accessible messaging. 'Return to business' packs offered practical tips and tools on re-starting trade; from the nuts and bolts of re-connecting with services, to new Covid security compliance.

Re-crafting business plans and re-focusing activity

With the exception of some low-key footfall generating activity, most BIDs turned their focus and resources away from larger scale events towards advice, guidance and training related to Covid safety; the development and printing of floor vinyls, posters and other public guidance signage, and also wider business sustainability, including risk assessments, and cash flow planning. The need to re-focus quickly presented opportunities for some to achieve longer-term goals to alter an outdated direction of travel that might, ordinarily, have taken far longer and required far more persuasion across the business community; one BID reported transitioning away from an over-emphasis upon projects that offered short-term benefits rather than wider, sustainability gains for businesses, focusing now on support and advice rather than events. Another had instituted a root and branch review, distancing the BID from being a 'puppet'/extension to the local authority and realigning that relationship to drive up the BID's reputation across wider key stakeholder groups and re-positioning it as a strategic partner and influencer. This involved refreshing Board membership, bringing in more high profile, strategic and experienced personnel; developing a much-needed robust strategy and processes; and re-crafting operational frameworks. BID Boards met more frequently and stepped-up hands-on activity in order to support executive teams that had, in some cases, been stripped back to one staff member.

Training, innovation and business support

BIDs generally redoubled efforts to connect businesses with experts: through interactive webinars bringing in expert panellists to speak on a variety of subjects; developing online training portals; developing or procuring short, sharp training sessions; posting tips and tools on websites. Subjects were many and varied including deciphering national guidance, grant and loan availability and how to access it; business rate reductions; BID levy; furlough; managing cash flow; maintaining good mental health, including during furlough; exercise; GDPR and data sharing; safeguarding vulnerable adults. Shop front grants programmes were paused and re-configured to provide e-commerce grants to support businesses to get online and develop web-based training capabilities, including driving up Search Engine Optimisation. Grant regimes were realigned to support covid regulation-compliant infrastructure to enable businesses to trade outside and BIDs procured Personal Protective Equipment, sneeze guards and safety vinyls and stickers. Destination and tourism BIDs' approaches included re-focusing promotional activity away from attracting tourists to getting businesses online and inspiring residents to shop locally. Collaborations between large and small businesses have been: a branch of John Lewis providing space for independent businesses to showcase products and services to customers; and support local schemes, signposting small service/product providers to larger counterparts. Recognising that success in driving up traffic to restaurants and cafes would need to go beyond traditional visitor promotional activity, building upon the principle of the 'Eat Out to Help Out' scheme, one BID sponsored lunches out for office workers. Business promotional schemes and support have been embraced and enhanced, and for a broader business base than retail, hospitality and entertainment. A number of BIDs have developed online business support and development products and tools which they are keen to showcase, share and/or licence, and questioned whether this presented a potential role/business opportunity for British BIDs?

Business appreciated the continuation of the basics

BIDs adjusted the level of regular services they continued throughout the pandemic, with a need to reduce or reallocate resources. However, continuation of work to supplement local authority cleansing, refuse collections, pest control and security guard and ambassador services were not only effective in maintaining the quality of the place, but were powerful signals of 'normality' and continuity to businesses. BIDs were swift to point out that for smaller businesses in particular, simple, very local actions with immediate and visible results were important: chewing gum removal is likely to resound far more with small businesses than government lobbying, irrespective of both being crucial. Escalating security and re-briefing security staff to increase their business engagement supported businesses to diffuse and effectively challenge aggressive behaviours in-store and outside. Some businesses realigned their trading hours with BID security presence. BID security activity was also driven up around vacant property checks, and crisis support such as continued ram raiding.

Regeneration, sustainability and the green economy

There have been opportunities to apply greater focus upon environmental projects including cycle lanes and city and town centre greening projects from parklets to significant public realm creation and enhancement projects, catalysed by social distancing. The roll out of public realm projects during the pandemic reinforced BIDs' ability to be an effective partner, designer, procurer and deliverer of major infrastructure projects and some have been entrusted with significant additional related investment from other agencies as a result; a boost to the status of BIDs from the perspective of partners, with potential for the future diversification of BID remits.

Collaborations and relationships

The pandemic has held up a mirror to the quality of relationships between BIDs and other agencies. With few exceptions, relationships between BIDs and public and private sector partners improved considerably and the perceived value of, and respect for, BIDs enhanced.

Collaborations between BIDs

Collaborations between BIDs were successful in providing mutual support, achieving real strides for members and places generally, but also in supporting public sector planning. Welsh BIDs conducted a survey of businesses to understand past, current and future intentions around travel to work, to support effective transport planning. Scottish BID Managers share a Facebook page, but increased their meetings and networking through the pandemic. One of the most prominent BID collaborations catalysed by the pandemic was the 'Raise the Bar' campaign to increase the grant eligibility threshold, led by Croydon BID. Although unsuccessful, it galvanised collective action from BIDs right across the UK. The existing BID networks across the country became stronger and new collaborations emerged. This included a network for smaller counterparts, arising from a need to share insights around new and different emergencies as well as good BID practice. Outcomes included: narrowly avoiding legal challenge and contraventions of Operating Agreements by less experienced BIDs considering discounting the levy; BIDs collaborating not only with other BIDs and business representative agencies, but also working with passionate individuals and civil society leaders who have proved effective lobbying vehicles. There is an increasing tendency for BIDs to collaborate on projects, like the introduction of promotional loyalty and gift card initiatives.

Relationships with local authorities and wider public/private sector partnerships

In the run up to, and during the pandemic, all BIDs extended their reach and connections with agencies across all sectors. For some BIDs, particularly those that sit amongst a complex web of local authority tiers, the pandemic was instrumental in marking out 'who's who', transforming the operational environment. Unsurprisingly, partnership working with local authorities was most effective where good relationships had already been established. There are many examples of productive collaborations that already existed between BIDs and local authorities, particularly around visioning the future of places and designing and developing public realm schemes. Some BIDs have places on Towns Fund Boards and/or are in line for substantial associated investments. The pandemic introduced new opportunities for BIDs to embed their relationships with the public sector; shifting from lobbying to a greater focus on sustainability within places, and implementing discrete projects around city centre greening, through to becoming a valued partner, entrusted with designing and commissioning significant public realm enhancements. For some BIDs, relationships that were already good got better. Cornwall County Council gave Cornish BIDs an interest free loan by way of an advance on their levy. They also actively encouraged BIDs to make full use of their Covid grant. Some local authorities were much more circumspect, particularly where the latter were facing large debts and fearing a risk of being unable to recoup the grants from national government. BIDs came into their own in cases where local authorities lacked an economic development department, and even more so, in areas that have no Chamber of Commerce. In these instances, authorities positioned BIDs as their key business partner and local authorities became entirely reliant upon them for brokering relationships with the business community and acting as a bellwether of business opinion.

BIDs engaged in activity in areas that were not, generally, their prime area of focus

BIDs worked with public health partners to connect businesses with mental health support services and chaplaincy services. In some cases, BIDs engaged more proactively with cultural leaders, charitable organisations and street pastors around safeguarding homeless and other vulnerable people. There was a reinvigoration of activity to facilitate business volunteering.

Business Crime Reduction Partnerships

BID resources have been instrumental in expanding the area of focus of some Business Crime Reduction Partnership areas, enabling support to be afforded to more businesses – this has been effective not only in tackling crime, but in making the case for potential BID expansion. National Business Crime Solutions is seen as an important source of insight into criminal activity and how to tackle it. BID wifi and smart phone data helped the Police to identify hot spot areas, enabling the dispersal of crowds, but also pinpointing optimal signage and messaging locations.

Business-to-business collaborations

Increasingly, professional services are coming to the fore to offer support and advice to local counterparts, keeping spend local. The need, on the part of some businesses, for critical and urgent advice at junctures during the pandemic and reaching out to experts and other businesses as a consequence, had driven up businesses' awareness of who's who within their area.



The challenges in the pandemic

Securing BID Levy payments

The fortunes of BIDs in bringing in levy income have varied. Those that invoiced for payments in the latter part of 2019 have been most fortunate, with some in receipt of an average of 80% to 98% of their target levy, but as the pandemic grew larger on the horizon of businesses, reticence to pay has increased dramatically resulting in receipts of nearer 30% in some cases. National businesses have had significant problems and faced with financial demands from multiple BIDs, questioned value for money more than ever before. Although there has been shedding of staff across almost all BIDs (redundancies and furlough) some of the larger, longer-established BIDs have been able to weather the financial storm better, with reserves available to cushion the impact of an inevitable drop-off in income in 2021. BIDs with smaller incomes and teams are struggling far more: typically relying upon the BID manager and one or two business-facing team members e.g. a warden or ambassador-type role. There is a difficult balance to be achieved between maximising resources for front-line projects that visibly maximise benefit for business, with maintaining sufficient staff resource to safeguard the continuation of that activity. Some BID Board members have refused to pay the levy. Within this context, it is difficult to expect the levy from others. The most significant losers in terms of levy income have been small BIDs operating within areas with low Rateable Values; low collection rates have proved punitive for BIDs whose income generation potential is already low. There are instances where relationships with local authorities (in their capacity as collectors of the levy) have influenced collection: the urgency of one BID to secure the levy jarred with the council's overwhelming commitment to write off outstanding business liabilities and avoid burdening businesses with more. Another experienced four months devoid of any service from the local authority business rates team, rendering impossible either enforcement or the procedure necessary to take court action.

British BIDs and other BID representative agencies advised BIDs to adjust their business plans to accommodate large cash flow drops, which was strongly heeded by all, with budgets and project expenditure reduced to around 50% in most cases. However, BIDs are now looking forward to 2021 but wondering how confident they can be about income levels, as businesses will still be struggling – some more than ever. Drastic reductions in budget have a substantial impact upon the ability of BIDs to 'do' rather than simply 'communicate'. However, in some cases budget savings from cancelled events could lead to the rolling forward of substantial funds into 2021. There will be significant implications for business in the drop off in government support, however tapered or gradual. BIDs are concerned that the cessation of government grants, Eat Out to Help Out and the end of the furlough scheme in particular, is storing up cash flow crises for businesses down the line.

Future ballots

The focus of many businesses has largely, and understandably, been upon their own survival and sustainability. It is proving difficult for BIDs to gain audiences and enter into dialogues that are likely to translate into securing support for a further term. Fortunately, the data thus far on ballots has suggested an increased level of support:

Term	Number of Ballots March – November	Turnout %	% in favour by number	% in favour by RV
1st term	1.0	29.0	57.0	61.0
2nd term	6.0	42.0	76.1	80.3
3rd term	1.0	46.0	92.0	89.0
4th term	2.0	51.5	91.0	95.0
Grand Total	10.0	43.1	78.7	82.2

Communities

Although far from a new challenge, the need to navigate tensions between residents and businesses is difficult, particularly in locations where residents are particularly knowledgeable, well-educated and demanding of a full say on the evolution of the place. The pandemic and associated drops in visitor traffic, have thrown a spotlight upon the importance of harnessing the spending power of residents, driving up the importance of keeping businesses and residents alike on board with the current and future shape of places. The difficulty in attracting residents to retail, hospitality and entertainment destinations becomes exponentially more difficult the larger and more significant the place. Residents are more comfortable using their local shops than town centres. Those who are increasingly gravitating to town centres are resisting temptation to travel as much into city centres.

This has led to greater interest in Community Improvement Districts.

Land and property owners

Although some land and property owners have been helpful in providing rent holidays – largely deferring rather than waiving payments; they have been stubbornly inflexible in realigning terms so that they are more accommodating of the current crises facing business. e.g. through turnover rents. With some exceptions, high street vacancy rates are escalating.

National business head offices

With the exception of finding the time to question branches on BIDs' value for money during the pandemic, national business head offices appear, sometimes, tricky to pin down, whilst local store managers are committed and willing to work with BIDs and business colleagues in their areas as a collective force for good. There is, typically, a lack of clear guidance from head offices on key policies affecting the wellbeing of localities; local managers' discretion over the supply of CCTV images to BIDs or the Police.

Relationships with local authorities

Some BIDs are frustrated by the apparent dissonance between local authority practices and the needs and aspirations of business communities. This is encapsulated by recent experiences during the pandemic, whereby a lack of local authority leadership and clear decision making resulted in: considerable time lags between national government guidance/regulation and local authority reaction; or, well-intentioned, but over hasty, action by local authorities in rolling out pedestrianisation schemes, without consulting BIDs and businesses, split business communities between those who directly benefit and those whose business is disrupted (e.g. delivery access) and missed some important tricks in terms of spreading benefit to both business and customer. In some cases, the pandemic and associated joint working with local authorities has served, unhelpfully, to blur the boundaries between BID and public sector. Despite the uses of Zoom, the reduction in "water cooler conversations" amongst staff in local authorities, which encourages the flow of ideas and stimulates action, is perceived to have impacted upon ability to get things done and undermined accountability amongst officers.

Who is in charge?

The increased interaction between BIDs and statutory partners brought about by the pandemic alongside renewed focus upon the future of the high street and cities, has called into question 'who is in charge' in terms of place making and associated decision making. The real powers to effect change sit with local authorities. However, there need to be checks and balances in terms of ensuring that other parties have an opportunity to input and influence; what is the role of BIDs and how much influence should they have? The relationships between different stakeholders are often interdependent, but there is no blueprint for how they should work effectively together. Some BIDs sit amid a highly complex map of statutory agencies, with city and county councils, multiple local authorities and parish councils all having a say on strategic planning, regulation and enforcement. The need to establish who is responsible for what prior to any positive action, creates challenges from achieving strides on strategic issues like transport through to negotiating pavement licences.

Relationships between BIDs and Destination Management Organisation

Some BIDs have either seen the recent demise of a Destination Management Organisations (DMO), within their boundary, with a consequent requirement to participate in the establishment of a replacement or are juggling their plans with those of sometimes multiple DMOs. In order for turnover to return to anything like previous levels within destination and some city and town centre BIDs, it is important to secure the return of the 'right type' of visitor – "dwellers not trippers" – and DMOs can be helpful in the associated promotion of areas. Destination BIDs have challenges ahead in terms of reinventing their approach to supporting tourism-related activity, with a greater focus likely on 'hardier', out-of-season visitor destination promotion and supporting leisure and entertainment businesses, some of which had yet to open.

Whilst the future was obscure, many BIDs felt that there were some evident trends. The role of retail and the look of the high street was uncertain some time before the coronavirus pandemic; the setting up of the Future High Street Task Force, and the major government investment in the area was symptomatic of this recognition. The major pressure points of increasing online retail, the cost of high street rent and rates, and the level of debt in some of national businesses was always pointing to major structural change and the BIDs in the focus groups all recognised this; the pandemic had merely exacerbated this, albeit in a dramatic and very sudden fashion.

A number of possible impacts of the pandemic were discussed in the focus groups at some length: working from home, the change to residential, the effect on leisure and tourism, the changing role of service industries and offices, the move toward supporting 'local' during the pandemic and how long that would last, and the changing types of town and city centres in the new normal.



**Future Planning
for the 'new
normal'**

Working from home

The lockdown has produced a very new way of looking at the work habits of much of the population. Businesses have found that home working can be successful, it is greener, it has fewer capital costs, and staff like it. As people become more used to working from home, many employers are now reconsidering their established working practices and potentially shifting towards a future where the traditional office plays a less central role.

There are downsides, particularly for creativity, in the relationship between vibrant towns and their workforces working from home. Research at the Centre for Cities and the London School of Economics, looking at the relationship between science, creativity and innovation, examining the interplay between the creative and non-creative sectors and how they foster innovation³, suggests that while this will change how we use cities, face-to-face working still matters as a means to foster innovation. Some towns and cities will change much faster than others, depending on the types of businesses within them.

However, many BIDs see the change in working patterns as one key driver of change - with impacts on travel, parking, food and beverage in those cities with a large working population, and more positive ones in the smaller towns, cities and suburbs that will inevitably benefit. Indeed, the move to living out of towns and moving to more rural communities was mentioned in some of the focus groups.

Offices and service industries

Thus, a move to more working from home may impact on the range and types of office provision. Large multi-floor office blocks for service industries may be a thing of the past. There was no sense that there would not be a need for corporate headquarters, merely a sense that they might be smaller, occupied on a less permanent basis and far more innovatively designed. Again, there might be an increased interest in small towns with high quality transport access.

At the same time of course, there was an acute tension between the need for social distancing in the new work environment, with a requirement for large office spaces, with people still working from home⁴. This would only become clearer as the new normal developed.

Nonetheless, some BIDs were most certainly thinking through a major shift in their business communities away from traditional retail toward new sorts of service and specialist offices. Over recent years there has already been a growth in BIDs in areas of office, commercial and services and this is impacting on types of service provision; an increase in safety and security, more work on broadband, more work on secure waste, insurance services etc. Many BIDs feel this will continue.

³ <https://www.centreforcities.org/podcast/city-talks-coronavirus-and-the-future-of-work/>
⁴ <https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/return-to-work-will-hot-desking-go-cold/>



Changes in retail

It was very clear to many BIDs that retail would change in a major way after the pandemic, but many felt that this change would be varied across towns and cities as the shifts in working from home, and the residential, office, retail balances in towns, worked their way through society and the economy.

For most BIDs the retail industry had already changed, with online and high rents and rates already driving out the traditional department store; the Coronavirus pandemic has merely accelerated that which was already taking place. *"Vibrant city centres where there are a lot of workplaces, residential movement etc., they have got a future, but city centres that don't have that vibrancy and have been struggling anyway, where people have to flock to on public transport, they have taken a hit during this period. It should be a catalyst for every city council, local authority across the country and retailers like ourselves to come together and start planning for how you make these urban centres vibrant again."* (Steve Rowe, CEO, Marks and Spencers)⁵

The 'experiential'

The 'experiential' had become a key element in many high streets, and BIDs have been responding to that change, with an emphasis on events, a returning interest in key anchors like libraries, theatres, cinemas and museums, supported by high quality food and beverage. Now, it is these very anchor roles that are most at risk in the new normal, with many BIDs working out how cinemas, and theatres, or the small food and beverage offering high quality experience could survive the current problems. Creative thinking includes how cars could make way for dining tables in the city's streets⁶. Cities around the world are looking at regulating the way people gather together with social distance rules while planning how to jumpstart the economy. Allowing businesses to take to the streets is seen as a measure that might provide assistance to currently closed businesses; restaurants and bars will be able to reopen yet maintain physical distancing^{7,8}. There will be far fewer shops selling actual goods, and a far stronger focus on the experiential – a catch-all that takes in everything from escape rooms and nail salons, to restaurants and street performers. In town, bricks-and-mortar stores are expected to survive if they're able to provide something beyond the purely transactional – excellent service that can't be replicated online, expert knowledge, or a space where people like to get together. Community hubs are frequently mentioned, while brands such as Patagonia, Glossier and Nike are cited as role models for bigger retailers.

Return to the local

There is a sense that some local business communities, with small footprints, serving a local, increasingly working from home group of users are benefitting. Such communities retain the stored memories of retailers that had been caring and supportive in the pandemic and would keep using them. Those who could 'walk to the shop' would increase in number as working from home became more normal and the generally smaller BIDs in suburban or small market towns might prosper.

Such BIDs might need to return to an earlier more traditional set of aims and objectives and mirror what Mary Portas is calling a new emerging 'kindness economy'⁹; "Covid-19 has crystallised a social and economic movement that has been bubbling under this past decade." "We've seen mass introspection and a re-examination of how we live and want to live. Globally, 77% of people now say they value decency in business as much as price and convenience. Deeper, meaningful connections with where you live will become far more important than a day trip to an out-of-town shopping centre or retail park."¹⁰

5 <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/marks-and-spencer/mands-set-to-gravitate-away-from-high-streets-more-after-coronavirus/605042.article>

6 <https://www.cambridgeindependent.co.uk/news/coronavirus-how-cambridge-city-centre-will-adapt-as-cars-make-way-for-street-diners-9110909/>

7 <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/traffic-free-zone-clifton-village-4165684>

8 <https://www.glasgowtimes.co.uk/news/18463882.open-streets-save-glasgows-restaurant-scene-glasgow-might-reopen/>

9 https://www.ted.com/talks/mary_portas_welcome_to_the_kindness_economy?utm_campaign=tedsread&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare

10 <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/dec/06/dont-save-the-high-street-change-it-completely-says-retail-guru-mary-portas>

Residential

The reduction in retail provision, and the rethinking of office and service industry space requirements was seen by most as resulting in a return to more residential occupancy in town and city centres; and, of course, the newly relaxed Permitted Development Rights and the huge demand for affordable accommodation allows some virtuous circles to emerge. Again, any moves out of larger cities to smaller towns will impact on the 'look and feel' of towns and cities, and the types of BIDs that provide services to their towns and cities. There was a sense that many BIDs will need to review and rethink their business plans, aims and objectives as they come to ballot in the next few years.

A new regionality

Quite a few BIDs were thinking through the issues of cities versus towns, the growth of the local, and the impacts on tourism and holidays. They were already analysing the possibilities that the end of cheap international air flights will bring holidays back to the UK and revive the ailing seaside economies in the UK.

Some BIDs hoped that the move toward small towns and a reduction in long distance commuting might shift the dominance away from London and the big cities of the UK.

Some conclusions: a new opportunity

All BIDs taking part in the focus groups saw the post-Covid 'new normal' as a place of major change, with much uncertainty but also much possibility. The consensus in all the focus groups was that of opportunity, of BID managers being positive individuals who had come into the industry because of the challenges and variety. This was refreshing and spirit lifting.

It will now be for all of us in BIDs to reflect on both our own shared thinking, and the thinking taking place across the world outlined in this work about this 'new normal'. It will be for BIDs to then integrate it into the way that we work, the way that we cooperate, and the way that we move toward an increasingly shared vision of place that brings together businesses, all the varied place users, and our local authorities.

The policy and regulatory context

We asked BIDs about their aspirations for practical changes to policy or regulatory frameworks that would make BIDs more effective or support members to do better.

National Governments

National government needs to be much clearer in its thinking and communications about what it expects of BIDs. It needs to be clear about how it sees and treats BIDs as an integral element of placemaking. This is particularly pertinent given the inevitable constriction of the public purse and a consequent increase in reliance upon BIDs in the recovery and beyond. Clearer articulation of the government's expectations of BIDs would assist in brokering more productive relationships with nationals, particularly large retailer head offices, whose support will more than ever before be critical to successful ballots. BIDs should be consulted upon major local government boundary changes: National government should seek and take very seriously BIDs' views on the creation of new unitary authorities, which would aim at avoiding disruptions curating places and maintaining cohesive business communities.

Local Government

There is some way to go before local government can be fully acknowledged for its recognition, and embracing of the potential of, BIDs as serious and effective partners, key deliverers of economic development, place makers and a broker of cross sectoral alliances.

There was a difference of opinion, influenced largely by the size and capacity of the BID, as to whether BIDs should automatically be a statutory consultee on all planning applications within their area. This consideration stems, essentially, from the inevitability that land for residential use will encroach upon employment-generating uses, to the detriment of its business base. Generally, smaller BIDs felt that more could be gained from building strong relationships with planning authorities whereby consulting BIDs on relevant applications was informal, but automatic.

Land searches should reveal that a property is within a BID area and should be reflected in lease details. This would give prospective occupiers confidence that their interests will be represented by the presence of a BID as well as early warning of the strong likelihood that they will be required to engage with and fund the BID.

During the pandemic, some BIDs saw local authorities shed staff in key areas upon which successful business safety-related adjustments depended e.g. pavement licensing, environmental enforcement, road closure applications and public realm re-modelling. Local authorities need to be more mindful in their resource decision making, of the need to play a full part in swift and effective action to support business sustainability during the pandemic.

The ability of BIDs to influence the curation of places and put business interest at the fore, often falls back upon 'who is in charge of the place' and the willingness of national and local government to devolve power, influence and responsibility as far as possible to the local level. Local is best and local communities know what works best (ref: The Grimsey Review, Build Back Better).

There is too much regulatory emphasis on what cannot be done, rather than what policy and regulations will allow. Essentially, government needs to 'stop stopping things' and be permissive rather than obstructive. BIDs, other agencies and businesses should feel enabled to be bold in their interpretation of policy and regulation in the interests of change for good.

Some BIDs are encountering persistent push backs from local government (notably planning and highways) towards delivery of even the most basic interventions to enhance environments and vitality of places e.g. creating attractive distancing signage, wrapping vacant units without the need to negotiate planning processes, restoring historically significant street furniture to its former glory and creating art trails – all approaches that have been embraced in other areas. There is learning to be conveyed here.

There should be a swift, balanced review of how policy and regulations can be deployed most effectively to support recovery and local authorities should be given freedoms to do so. It is possible for national and local government to identify exceptions to policies without compromising safety (e.g. disabled parking), so why not explore how this might be applied to specific sectors? Local authorities could be much more imaginative in the deployment of their own assets to support recovery e.g. opening up car parks as safe venues for entertainment.

Flexibilities in the planning system

Flexibilities to convert B class uses to residential will be particularly problematic, with the associated propensity for residential to displace, or sit uncomfortably alongside, business. Careful consideration needs to be given to how increased residential use can be accommodated within town and city centres in particular, in order to ensure a good balance of uses and that the 'right type' of residential is introduced; government pressure to increase housing stock should not inhibit the careful curation of places. This is beginning to present in some areas in an over-emphasis on small, studio units.

Greater Permitted Development latitude is likely to be problematic. Although some BIDs may have Article 4 direction in place at the moment, it is unclear how long this can protect business locations. Planning flexibilities to allow pubs and restaurants to provide take-aways were welcomed. The relaxation of pavement licence to enable trading out of doors enabled the safe animation of areas, but there are differences in licence application practice and cost across the UK that need to be aligned.

The reduction in enforcement action and increased pragmatism evident during lockdown, in particular, was welcome. It would be helpful if this continued in appropriate circumstances: national government guidance to avoid public transport and car sharing is adversely affecting footfall in town and city centres. Within this context local authorities should be actively exploring the provision of additional private car parking, especially since street scape enhancements have already reduced capacity, and certainly not profiting from parking enforcement at the current time.

Regulations and incentives should be aligned better to support high streets, including rates reductions and the introduction of incentives for businesses to locate in and remain in high streets.

Business Rates system

Notwithstanding the potential to bite the hand that feeds BIDs, Rateable Values and Business Rates require review and a far more robust rationale offered that makes sense and explained in simple terms. Should a Business Rate Review take place, there could, potentially, be significant mid-term BID income reductions. This would have implications for BID business planning and could impede ability to deliver against commitments. BIDs will need clear operational guidance on the approach that they should take in such instances.

There is a need to adjust multipliers for certain operations. In the interests of healthy high streets there needs to be a re-balancing mechanism around relative opportunities and advantages of trading online and investing in bricks and mortar. Premiums should be introduced to reflect the financial advantage of online traders, who are not directly investing in bricks and mortar and contributing to the vibrancy of places. There should be additional taxes on online sales.



Covid-related government grants, loans and business rate relief

Regret was expressed at the failure of the Croydon BID-initiated Raise the Bar campaign to persuade the government to allow the award of grants to businesses with Rateable Values of £51,000 and over. The imposition of an absolute threshold, irrespective of how this would discriminate towards businesses within geographical areas with higher Rateable Values, was considered a blunt instrument and flawed. More local discretion should have been inbuilt into the process and should be in future, accompanied by transparent announcements that local authorities have such discretion.

Local authorities still hold unallocated/unclaimed discretionary grant. On the basis of knowledge of the level of grant funding currently sitting within its host authority, one BID estimated that up to £1.5 billion could still be sitting in local authority coffers. This could either be recouped by National Government and re-distributed, or local authorities could be instructed to allocate the remainder they hold, via a second round of grant allocations, benefiting from more nuanced, locally defined and relevant objectives. e.g. it could target vulnerable, but important suppliers of sectors hit hardest by the pandemic or struggling businesses that are crucial economic anchors, but were ineligible for the first round of grants. Additionally, avoid allocating grants on a first come first served basis. Avoid prioritising speed over need.

The provision of Business Rate relief for absentee landlords was counterproductive in terms of stimulating town and city centre vitality. The financial cushion reduced the incentive to lower rents – the most effective way to bring vacant units back into use.

The furlough initiative was welcomed, but there was a difference of opinion around whether and how it should be continued. Some were reticent artificially to extend the life of businesses that will fail and acknowledged that some sectors are hiring, like delivery brands, hospitals and supermarkets. More felt that the government should refine the criteria and focus resource upon businesses hit hardest by social distancing; hospitality, retail, entertainment and leisure.

The Eat Out to Help Out initiative was widely praised for reigniting activity across local operators and enabling them to re-engage with residential communities; the latter being extremely important within the context of big reductions in visitor traffic.

There was a strong sense that government should not repeat the mistake as occurred following the 2008–9 financial crisis of stopping support too early, catalysing disastrous level of business failure and, importantly, loss of ongoing business revenue to the exchequer. e.g. Business Rate reductions should continue, or at least be phased out over the six months post the formal Business Rate reduction period. This would help prevent the loss of businesses that would generally survive the winter period with an income cushion accumulated over the summer months. In the West End of London, it is suggested that Business Rate reductions should continue for 12 months, given that they are based upon outdated (2015) economic conditions (rental levels and economic performance). Retailers' operations have fallen to, at best, between 10% and 20% of 2015 performance levels, and much lower in the case of hotels.

The green and sustainable economy

A greater focus on repurposing roads, increasing and enhancing public realm and providing more and better cycling facilities has emerged¹¹. This is something that BID representative agencies should really consider putting their weight behind.

Notwithstanding the concerns that many BIDs expressed about the displacement of business uses by residential, there are sustainability benefits to supporting strong residential markets in cities. This would need to be accompanied by measures dramatically to reduce pollution levels in cities if they are to be attractive places to live.

¹¹ <https://www.cbi.org.uk/events/annual-conference-2020/>

The future of BIDs: business models and funding mechanisms

A few BIDs felt that BID business models and funding mechanisms were outdated and that the BID levy, in particular, was proving to be a brake upon the building of relationships with business. Businesses approach payment of the BID levy with reluctance. The term 'Levy' is suggestive of an extra 'tax' linked to Rateable Values, which are generally not understood, disputed by businesses and generally lack a clear rationale. Change would require a different collection rationale and mechanism. It was recognised that this would require careful exploration, but one suggestion would be to add a BID cost to a bill that is routinely presented to business by a local authority. So, adopt an approach similar to a resident's Council tax bill, whereby the BID represents an additional service area e.g. waste collection.

Given that the nature of places will change, with an almost inevitable wider mix of uses (notably residential) within BID areas, catalysed by enhanced planning flexibilities, the BID model should be reviewed. Given that BIDs are place makers, perhaps residential occupiers should be co-opted onto BID Boards and make a financial contribution towards BIDs. All of the above would require a root and branch review of BIDs (and possibly legislative changes), not least the ballot process/fund-raising process and accountability (what and to whom). The potential of Community Improvement Districts, first mooted nearly 10 years ago which are back on the agenda, is likely to receive further interest from places looking to "build back better" by empowering community energies seemingly unleashed by the response to Covid-19.

BID terms

There is a strong sense among the BIDs that five years is insufficient to make a robust and strategic impact upon the quality of a place and that consideration should be given to extending the term. There is a requirement, however, to balance ability to complete delivery and embed strategic initiatives with the need to safeguard the democratic process (the ballot and safeguarding business choice) and a danger that BIDs become complacent or stale. Ten years was generally considered too long, albeit a mechanism could be introduced for a mid-term check. Seven to eight years seemed to be considered about right. It might be appropriate to consider different time frames for BIDs in different stages of evolution, giving BIDs the option to ballot for longer terms, with growing maturity – say five years for a first term, seven for a second and so on.

Property BIDs

There needs to be a much more robust process for identifying and registering property owners. Generally, a visit will swiftly reveal the identity of property tenants, but BIDs experience real difficulties in identifying absentee landlords. This is a real obstruction to fostering true collaborative action to curate vital places and strategies for bringing vacant units back into use, which are often unsightly and undermine commercial confidence in locations. Local government should have powers to compel absentee landlords to bring vacant sites and buildings into use. Given the current economic crisis, there is a real danger that they could remain vacant for the next decade. It would be helpful for national government to issue regulations or guidance in order to prevent, or at least discourage short-sighted landlords holding occupiers to ransom by maintaining rents at unrealistically high levels during difficult trading periods.

BID levy

Given that local authorities have discretion to provide Business Rate holidays in order to respond to local circumstances, some BIDs felt strongly that BIDs should be given equivalent discretion to be flexible. This would enable BIDs to help sustain business and, importantly, be seen by members to be reasonable. Insisting upon full payment of the levy makes them appear self-interested and prioritising their own sustainability over that of their members. They feel this flexibility would offer real medium to long term productive business engagement benefits, particularly with large chains.

Government should be encouraged to match BID levy payments for four to five years to support the recovery. This could encourage businesses to invest and increase the ballot success rate.

The role of BID representative agencies

We asked BIDs to tell us how British BIDs and other BID representative agencies should focus their efforts to help BIDs in the short, medium and longer term. There is a notable difference in priorities contingent upon the relative scale of the BID. Larger, and to a lesser extent the longer-established BIDs felt that greatest value could be provided through lobbying, particularly national government and the business head offices on key strategic issues. These BIDs tend to be more confident in the robustness of their BID operations and processes and the level and scale of in-house expertise at their disposal. Small to medium sized BIDs tend to agree that lobbying is important but were keener to have access to a variety of bite-size support and training and a voice at the end of the telephone around day-to-day management, right through from appointing and supporting Boards and strategic planning to day-to-day operations.

Represent and lobby on behalf of BIDs with national government

A coherent, representative voice is crucial, particularly around lobbying national government. The suite of aspirations for policy and regulatory shifts in section 3 above provides a long list of areas that could provide a basis for lobbying activity. The pandemic has shone a light upon the need for BIDs to be able, robustly, to demonstrate value for money to local authorities and members (and their head offices). There is a need to tease out national government expectations of BIDs and translate this into contemporary BID practice, recalibrating BIDs in the process if necessary.

Advocacy

There was a clear need to advocate on behalf of BIDs, to convey their worth and value to the statutory sector and to the wider economy. This involves the need to generate, collate and disseminate the wealth of examples of how BIDs have already supported the curation of places, driven up the performance of businesses and been invaluable partners during lockdown and recovery, in order to increase the general understanding of the role and potential of BIDs. Generate a clear narrative that can be deployed by BIDs, which would be very helpful in the approach to ballots. Demonstrating value for money needs to be at the heart of this. Actively engage with the general and business press, to promote the benefits of BIDs and include effective press engagement in the portfolio of support to business. This included the anti-BID lobby; currently, lobbies are dispersed and small but there was a need to provide support to individual BIDs that are being targeted to counter negative attitudes; clearly BIDs must clearly demonstrate value for money.



General Data Protection Regulation

Within the context of the desire to reverse the tendency of national government to over-emphasise in their guidance 'what can't be done' and focus far more upon how instruments can be used productively, there was a need from some BIDs to tackle the paralysis and culture of fear of prosecution and heavy fines that has dominated GDPR compliance. GDPR regulation makes no reference to CCTV use, but it has all but stifled its application in tackling crime in a timely way. One BID has attempted to gain clear guidance from the Information Commissioner's Office, but the advice that businesses and enforcers need to interpret the rules as they see fit (and potentially risk prosecution) is inadequate. BIDs were keen that BID representative agencies engage in productive discussions with national business head offices on their behalf, but would welcome this approach to include exploration to speed the ability of local managers to respond to information requests: establish their interpretation of GDPR rules and regulations; if they feel unable to supply certain information to support tackling local crime issues, determine the reasons for this and the rationale behind them; and explore how head offices and local stores can work better together moving forward e.g. enable local managers to supply/share CCTV images swiftly.

Head offices of national businesses

Given that National Government has allowed BIDs to postpone ballots from this year to Spring 2021, some 45 BID business plans will be hitting the desks of business head offices at approximately the same time, with a further 40 during the rest of the year. There is a need to think through how best to mitigate potential negativity/apathy that could be generated by this overloading. How can BIDs make their business plans visible and compelling? What are the key three or four things that will capture the imagination of big businesses and tip the balance in BIDs favour? Now, more than ever, it is important that BID representative agencies extol the value of BIDs and the benefits to be gained from their continuing to support continued local branch engagement with BIDs. BIDs widely quoted, as an example, the production of the template letter, provided by BID representative agencies to support BIDs to tackle non-payment of the levy by large nationals during the pandemic.

BID representative agencies coordination

Some respondents felt that there are too many BID representative agencies currently: it would be helpful to have fewer, or at least, existing agencies should co-ordinate their activity; segment the market in some way. The co-ordination of actions and support by British BIDs, The BID Foundation, the Institute of Place Management and Association of Town Centre Management during the pandemic was very much welcomed and there is a clear aspiration for this to continue. There was a need to recognise that different types of BIDs experience different challenges and requirements, and some have unique and very specific issues: There was a need to consider how a wide portfolio of services for BIDs could be designed and adapted to support BIDs of different sizes and types. Within this context, the establishment of a new support stream for industrial BIDs was welcomed. If BID representative agencies were willing to collaborate around this, perhaps they could identify intervention areas for each based upon strengths, geography, BID sizes, types or other method. e.g. the research and trends analysis expertise of the Institute of Place Management was highlighted as a particular strength of that organisation. In the absence of collaboration between representative agencies, all should be represented on the Future High Street Taskforce.

Smaller BIDs

The fact that BIDs can call British BIDs at any time to talk through and gain immediate practical advice to tackle immediate problems – big and small – is seen as an enormous benefit and there is a strong aspiration for this to continue. This is particularly important in BIDs with very small staff teams. Small BID support teams feel isolated in times of crisis and can feel overwhelmed on occasions when they are seemingly surrounded by critical or highly demanding Boards, members and local authorities.

Leadership and governance

There was a need to embed leadership within the BID industry, and an interest whether BIDs should have a formal governing body akin to Revo's role in the retail property market. Other governance models may offer pointers and sources of inspiration, including the CBI, British Chambers of Commerce, Federation of Small Business.

Case studies and good practice

There is much interest in an online repository of successful practice and guidance for BIDs on how to demonstrate value for money. This would include the development of resources around what brakes on income generation and associated cash crises look like for businesses, and how BIDs can best overcome them. More effective use of data will be crucial going forward and resources demonstrating approaches to great data collection and going well beyond what is traditionally measured by BIDs, would be very valuable – what is collected, how, why and the benefits. There was an interest in more business networking and opportunities to share experience. e.g. Organising mentor relationships; BID to BID visits; and provision of short, sharp networking meetings providing access to experts. The provision of policy and other templates would not only save BIDs considerable time and effort but would support the maintenance of high-quality processes and materials. Equally, examples of good BID operational and recovery plans would be invaluable. Additionally, BIDs were keen that insights are shared into how BIDs are approaching renewal in the current conditions – what struggles they are encountering and insights into how BIDs should be crafting their proposals and business plans in these uncertain times. Should business plans be shorter? Should they contain caveats to avoid making commitments they may not be able to deliver due to income uncertainties? A 'how to' guide to dealing with local authorities and tackling intransigent and unhelpful attitudes would be valuable. Building upon the BID barometer, it is helpful for BIDs to review and benchmark their own performance against others, particularly in times of crisis. A timely example is the need for a check on different BIDs' approaches to attracting the BID levy – the percentage of projected income received in comparison to normal; are BIDs being aggressive in their collection methods or more conciliatory, given the difficult times? What are BIDs predicting for next year? When do they typically invoice? There is a real concern that whilst BID income generation remains essential, there is significant risk of adverse publicity from 'BIDs sending in the bailiffs'.

Events and conferences

Events and conferences are valuable, but they need to feature high profile, inspirational speakers. The value of high-profile speakers on contemporary issues was stressed (this being quoted as a strong consideration for a BID located at some distance from likely conference locations as to whether they enrolled as a member) as was potential to network and gain contacts. There seems to be an increasing reticence to apply resource to connecting with colleagues and pondering the past. There is a need to balance formal discussion on case studies and examples of what has been done, with providing space for debate for forward thinking on contemporary challenges, possibly focusing on a few examples of very good practice. Locations need to be as accessible as possible and avoid an overly London-centric approach. The February 2020 Belfast Forward conference organised by the Chamber of Commerce was quoted as a really productive example. Speakers included New York-based architect, Vishaan Chakrabarti, focusing upon sustainability, communities and connectedness; Robert Walsh, Commissioner of New York's Department of Small Business Services; and Maria Vassilakou, the first Green Party Mayor of Vienna.

Support members in the "here and now"

Whilst there is a clear need to contribute to thinking and visioning around the re-purposing of cities and town centres; they need to be great places to live, not just entertainment and retail hubs; BIDs are very conscious that they are judged on what they achieve in real time and how business bottom lines can be transformed right now and sufficient resource needs to be allocated to supporting BIDs in these efforts.

Advice

There is a tendency for BID representative bodies to encourage BIDs, on the one hand, to be bold and embrace pragmatism and flexibility in their actions, whilst warning BIDs against creating unwelcome precedents. There is a need for more scenario building, plotting out potential consequences for different courses of action. e.g. the relative risk of being accused of inequitable practice by some, in attempts to help individual businesses by being flexible around BID levy payments and enforcement.

Regional or more local BID collaborations

There is unanimous support for BID collaborations. Some are concerned that their sustainability is dependent upon one or two individuals, and they are vulnerable to personnel changes. Although some felt that there could be a role for BID representative agencies in helping to sustain the networks, generally this seems an area where the role of agencies should more appropriately be restricted to promoting the concept whilst leaving their functioning to the BIDs themselves. There is a difference of opinion around whether there is a potential role for BID representative agencies in facilitating or supporting the regional or more local BID collaborations.

Conclusions

There is much to digest in this piece of work, and we thank Rocket Science and the New Economic Foundation Consultancy for their enormous input.

The Advisory Board of British BIDs received the report on December 7th and agreed that it should be published, to allow the many BIDs that took apart, and their various representative bodies to absorb and respond to the content.

British BIDs is developing its new business plan and is using the key elements of this "Shaping the Future" report to underpin the new business plan.





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