

## Future of towns and small businesses intertwined

### Small businesses need their towns behind them now more than ever, Dun Laoghaire's DigitalHQ urges in its latest Impact Report.

DigitalHQ clg, the [digital growth hub](#) based in Dún Laoghaire, has released its impact report for 2020. The mission of the social enterprise is best summarised in a quote from DigitalHQ's Digital Champion for Small Businesses, [Eoin Costello](#), who poses the question: "What's the collective noun for a cluster of small businesses? A town!"

DigitalHQ sees the future of towns and our largest unit of business formations in Ireland, small businesses of between 5 and 20 staff, as deeply interlinked.

In his recent TEDx talk [Reinventing Town Centres: Do what you can with what you've got](#) Costello argues that that arising from the pandemic our towns have a unique opportunity to become providers of hyper local ecosystems of support to grow and sustain both traditional local businesses and innovation driven businesses thereby keeping jobs local.

### Repurpose empty spaces

DigitalHQ, he says, believes the fuel for this transformation is digital. Their model is straightforward. Repurpose empty space in the heart of towns to remote working hubs for digital businesses and upskill the digital capabilities of our traditional businesses in what they term the Digital Growth Mindset. They believe this will enable our small businesses, and the communities they support in towns across Ireland, to thrive.

Their approach to this mission is quite unique, DigitalHQ use the hub's income to help future proof the local small business population through digital promotion campaigns and digital capability development.

The full report 2020 Impact Report is available [online here](#).

Operating from its first location provided by Bank of Ireland, Dún Laoghaire, the headline figures DigitalHQ delivered included:

- **Incubation** - Under the name '[Dún Laoghaire Enterprise Centre](#)' 9 businesses were incubated in the enterprise centre operated by DigitalHQ. Despite COVID 19 meaning the centre was closed during Level 5 the members still benefited from networking and other supports/services provided by the centre.
- **Business promotion campaigns** - Under the name '[Love Dún Laoghaire](#)' 61 local

businesses were supported through 7 digital promotion campaigns. These campaigns focussed on the online offerings of local small businesses at key events in the calendar such as Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, January Sales as well as sector specific promotions. 936 social media posts were issued which received over 26,000 engagements from the public.

- **Business Networking events** - Under the name [@DigitalDunLaoghaire](#) 4 events were delivered with over 180 attendees in total. Two were pre COVID 19 but the experience of the two events delivered online was very positive. The Cathaoirleach of DLR County Council spoke at the 'Going Green for business growth' to an audience of over 60 online attendees.

In launching the impact report Honorary Patron to DigitalHQ, Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, TD, commented that this past year has completely changed the way we live and work.

"DigitalHQ has guided Dún Laoghaire businesses through these unprecedented changes, working with many businesses old and new to adapt and grow. We now have many of our local shops available online and it's amazing to see businesses overcome the challenges presented by Covid-19, turning them into opportunities."

DigitalHQ found that the local business community received a real benefit from their work.

## Digital growth mindset

Local business owner, and chair of Dún Laoghaire Town Team Martin O'Byrne said: "As a bricks and mortar retailer of exclusive high-end menswear, Digital HQ has helped bring our story to life via social media. This has resulted in new customers to our store and their work has helped create a sense of community amongst retailers and residents. Digital HQ has ensured Dún Laoghaire is not left behind in the online world we currently live in."

Meanwhile owner of national coffee company JJ Darboven, Graham Mongey, commented: "The thing I liked most about the Love Dun Laoghaire campaign was the fact that it was so inclusive. A large number of local businesses were mentioned which helps to demonstrate the number of wonderful businesses in our locality. Sometimes I feel there is a perception that there are no nice shops in Dun Laoghaire and this is simply not true. I feel the Love Dun Laoghaire campaign raised the profile of the town as a whole, which benefits all of us."

Something unique about the [@DigitalDunLaoghaire](#) initiative which DigitalHQ delivery is that the content and resources from each event are uploaded online to provide a repository of resources for small businesses. Previous [@DigitalDunLaoghaire](#) speaker Marc O'Dwyer, CEO of Big Red Cloud, commented that being part of the community in Dún Laoghaire is extremely important for many reasons. "But mainly it gives you the ability to network with like-minded entrepreneurs in the area and it helps the regeneration of business. The work that the DigitalHQ is doing is priceless

and will ensure that Dún Laoghaire thrives once again like it has done for many years.”

Commenting on the value of the @DigitalDunLaoghaire network local councillor Lorraine Hall said Digital Dún Laoghaire’s business network is more relevant and important than ever. “Especially during these challenging Covid-19 times. It enables businesspeople to stay connected, stay informed and to learn from very best practice. This network is key to growth and success for our town and is a vital resource for many businesses.”

Commenting on the impact of the not-for-profit in 2020 chair of Digital HQ Chad Gilmer said that digital has never been as important now as we have seen a huge rise in businesses getting online, with Covid-19 being the catalyst that has accelerated the pace of take up. “An exciting goal for DigitalHQ in 2021 will be to help businesses realise the benefits of going online but at the same time ensure that what businesses and retailers do online can be supported with high-quality promotion and support, that will drive more traffic and ultimately more revenue, in these difficult times.”

Eoin Costello has a strong conviction that rather than being on their last legs towns and villages across Ireland are on the threshold of a resurgence. He grounds this prediction on unfolding recent events where house prices are rising in towns across Ireland and the national broadband strategy is starting to have an impact.

“When we met with Minister Damien English his view was that the work DigitalHQ clg are doing in Dun Laoghaire is absolutely aligned with what they want to do as a Government and a Department, he was very supportive of what we’re doing and believed that DigitalHQ is a model that could be replicated around the country,” said Costello.

In the current year DigitalHQ will continue to provide its current services (apart from physical events) but also intend to activate another key part of its mission, to help create culture change in small business owners to what Eoin Costello terms the ‘Digital Growth Mindset’.

The recent .IE Domain Profile Report reveals an unprecedented mass mobilisation of digital across every part of Irish society and economy. Businesses migrated online, many for the first time, in direct response to the lockdowns. The challenge now is to ensure that these small businesses get the most value possible from this investment by making those digital assets an integral part of the running of their businesses.

***Main image at top, participants in DigitalHQ’s Love Dun Laoghaire campaigns include (from left) Row 1: Fred Georges, owner, Le Chocolat de Fred; Ruth Adams, owner, Florence Lingerie; Marty O’Byrne, owner, Frewen & Aylward; and Emma Griffin, owner, Blush Beauty. Row 2: Betty Stuart, owner, Lulabelle Flowers; Michael Gibbons, owner, Grandstand Sports, Dun Laoghaire; Paula Keegan, manager, Ecco Shoes Dun Laoghaire; and Eddie Rowe, owner, Mike’s Bikes***

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