

# Written Ministerial Statement

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## Department for the Economy

### HIGH STREET SCHEME

*Published on Thursday 9 December 2021.*

**Mr Lyons (The Minister for the Economy):** I would like to update Members on the High Street Scheme as it enters its final days.

Firstly, and most importantly, I am delighted to say that the scheme is working very well. The benefits are clearly flowing through to our retail, hospitality and services sectors. Businesses across all sections of our high street and from every part of Northern Ireland are now witnessing a return of customers.

So far, the High Street Scheme has injected over £118m into our economy with more to come. And it is making a significant impact.

Recent figures published by the Northern Ireland Retail Consortium (NIRC) revealed that Northern Ireland's shop visits last month were 10 percentage points higher than the UK average and almost 15 percentage points higher than Scotland. Belfast alone, had an unprecedented growth of over 11.5 percentage points, bringing it into positive territory for the first time in almost two years. This is Northern Ireland's highest point so far compared to the pre-pandemic level.

Retail NI, which represents independent retailers across all of Northern Ireland, said it received very positive feedback from its members that the Spend Local card is being widely used with them. It said it was clear that shoppers have responded in droves to the calls to support small traders and that the Spend Local card is an invaluable short term boost for thousands of local independent retailers. The body which represents cafes, pubs and restaurants across Northern Ireland, Hospitality Ulster, has said the Spend Local card can make a real difference, not just to businesses, but also to the people that work in them, helping to secure their jobs.

From the North West, the Londonderry Chamber of Commerce said that the High Street Scheme is providing a much-needed boost to the North West economy and its hard-hit local retailers. It called the scheme a welcome initiative from the Department for the Economy.

These are just some of the many positive stories and testimonies on the importance and the success of the High Street Scheme that we have received from representative groups and individual businesses across all parts of Northern Ireland.

However, as I have said all along, it is so important that every penny on every card is spent in order to maximise the impact. This is the best way to ensure we support those businesses which were impacted hardest by the pandemic.

The scale of the task of delivering the High Street Scheme has been unprecedented. In a matter of months we put in place a system to accept, verify and process applications from every eligible adult in Northern Ireland – that is over 1.4 million people. We implemented a process to manufacture, dispatch and deliver cards which were unique to every applicant. And we worked with traders to ensure their understanding of the scheme and to incentivise sales into local businesses.

There were just under 1.4 million successful applications to the scheme. We have delivered cards to 99% those applicants at this point. The delay in dispatching some cards is due to a number of

reasons. These include applicants submitting evidence late; errors in applications; late submissions and some applications identified as duplicates before being verified.

While the vast majority have received and used their card, not everyone received their card as early as we would have wished.

Therefore in order to offer these applicants more time and to maximise the support for our high street businesses, I am extending the deadline to use the Spend Local cards to midnight on 19 December. I feel it only fair to those card holders – and to the businesses they will patronise - that they get an appropriate amount of time to use their Spend Local card.

There is now an extra five days to use Spend Local cards and I want to urge members to encourage their constituents to make the most of this extension to support their local retail, hospitality and service sectors.

Spend it now, spend it all and spend it local.