



WATERFRONT  
HALL  
ULSTER  
HALL

# Leadership in uncertain times

How the BWUH Ltd. Executive  
Leadership Team built back better



# Executive Summary

ICC Belfast, Waterfront Hall and Ulster Hall are three world-class venues that drive economic activity and enhance the night-time economy of Belfast, a resurgent city steeped in heritage and culture.

In 2016 the venues' one shareholder, Belfast City Council, transitioned the venues' operating model from public sector bodies to a commercial entity through the creation of BWUH Ltd., a council owned company with the autonomy to act as a commercial entity. The approach was designed to enable the organisation to focus on the commercial opportunity of driving national and international conference business whilst leveraging their iconic status for live entertainment - to positively impact the city as a whole.

At the close of 2019 ICC Belfast, Waterfront Hall and Ulster Hall's star was certainly on the rise having met or exceeded many of the original five-year goals including a £100M economic impact target. Then, when faced with a global pandemic and a mandate to close in March 2020, the future of BWUH Ltd. was left hanging in the balance.

Despite all of the uncertainty, the Executive Leadership Team came together and focused on the people, innovative solutions and business preparedness. There were huge challenges faced that at times seemed insurmountable. However, guided by the Board, this team was empowered to take bold decisions, resulting in a reimagined business that is ready to build back better to benefit all of Belfast and Northern Ireland.

# Contents

<b>Background</b>	<b>04</b>
Built to transform Belfast	04
<b>Challenge</b>	<b>06</b>
From the unexpected to the inevitable	06
<b>Actions</b>	<b>08</b>
Our people	08
Business preparedness	10
Innovative solutions	12
<b>Outcomes</b>	<b>16</b>
Leadership style	16
Qualitative employee engagement feedback	17
Authoritative industry leaders	18
Qualitative external stakeholder feedback	18
<b>Future focus</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Key learnings</b>	<b>22</b>

# Background

## Built to transform Belfast

ICC Belfast, Waterfront Hall and Ulster Hall are three world-class venues that drive economic activity and enhance the night-time economy of Belfast, a resurgent city steeped in heritage and culture.

ICC Belfast is Northern Ireland's only purpose-built international convention centre. This iconic venue, which originally opened as the Waterfront Hall in 1997, is a symbol of Belfast's prosperity. A £29.5M redevelopment funded by Belfast City Council, Tourism Northern Ireland and the European Regional Development Fund expanded the facilities to over 7,000sqm in 2016. Two years later in 2018, the new ICC Belfast brand identity was launched to be reflective of its status as one of Europe's leading business event venues. Prior to the pandemic, ICC Belfast hosted an average of 52 National and International conferences each year, attracting around 50,000 out-of-state delegates to the city.

Waterfront Hall is synonymous to this day with the city's landmark entertainment events, welcoming over 300,000 patrons annually to a diverse programme of entertainment concerts and live cultural performances.

Ulster Hall which first opened in 1862 is one of the oldest purpose-built concert halls in the UK and Ireland. This grand Victorian building has survived two World Wars and welcomed names as famous and diverse as Charles Dickens and Snow Patrol. Events across the genres of music, comedy, sport and family are held in the Grand Hall which, like the Waterfront Hall, remains at the pulse of Belfast's live entertainment scene.

In 2016, Belfast City Council made the decision to transition the operating models of the venues from public sector bodies to a commercial entity through the creation of Belfast Waterfront

and Ulster Hall Limited (BWUH Ltd.), a council owned company that reports to a Shareholders Committee, comprising elected Council members. The approach was designed to enable the new business to focus on the commercial opportunity of driving national and international conference business whilst leveraging the venues' iconic status for live entertainment - to positively impact the city as a whole.

The creation of BWUH Ltd. in 2016 marked the beginning of a comprehensive transition programme in which public sector employees of Belfast City Council transferred to the privately owned 'start-up' commercial business with immediate effect. This was a bold move, particularly given the fact employees, many of whom had over 20 years of service and one of whom had twice this, were now required to adjust to a highly competitive commercial environment.

From its inception, BWUH Ltd. had ambitious targets to fulfil. The commercialisation was kick-started with the appointment of a non-executive Board of Directors who have responsibility for setting the overall strategic direction as well as company governance. The Board guided the Senior Management Team (SMT - comprising three departmental heads and the Chief Executive), advising on all major decisions to ensure they could successfully execute the transition programme. A new vision, mission and values were introduced to guide the business and its people on this new and exciting journey.



Success was neither immediate nor linear, despite having clear objectives to work towards. However, over a three year period the culture of the organisation went through a paradigm shift which facilitated major business success and at the close of 2019, ICC Belfast, Waterfront Hall and Ulster Hall's star was certainly on the rise. A five-year £100M economic impact target was on course to be exceeded with 49 conferences already scheduled to be hosted in 2020 alone, over 90,000 tickets had been sold for entertainment events being held between January and March, and a record-breaking November saw online revenue from ticket sales surpass £1M. This was replicated in December and it appeared that we were on course to deliver our ambitious plan.

# Belfast



# Challenge

## From the unexpected to the inevitable

Everyone was excited to continue the positive momentum as we entered 2020 but the reality could not have been further from the truth. The new year heralded many unforeseen challenges, beginning with the resignation of the then Chief Executive in January. Whilst the pathway to success remained clear from the perspective of the Board and SMT, consideration had to be given to the wider workforce, comprising 60 employees and a network of over 150 event team members. The departure of the organisation's Chief Executive was unsettling and was in danger of derailing the understanding, acceptance and embedding of our new ways of working.

In addition, the existing vision, mission, and values, whilst embedded throughout the organisation, was nevertheless associated with the outgoing Chief Executive who had played a key part in launching them via a programme of internal communication events.

Pending the identification and appointment of a new Chief Executive, the Board appointed the Director of Finance, Risk and Corporate Services as interim Chief Executive and they, together with the other members of the SMT, were tasked with leading the company forward.

The reconstituted SMT were just getting into their stride when the global pandemic hit and the uncertainty already being felt across the organisation went off the scale. The time elapsed between COVID-19 first appearing on the BWUH Ltd. strategic risk register and the venues being mandated shut was a few short weeks.



Source: Twitter, Belfast Telegraph



Source: Belfast Live

Days before the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed on the island of Ireland, plans were discussed for a campaign to target conferences scheduled for Asia and Italy, where the virus was spreading rapidly. An unprecedented situation was unfolding in real time and new information was being assessed daily by the SMT in an attempt to forecast and mitigate against the potential consequences for BWUH Ltd. Clients began raising queries around force majeure contract clauses, an already under-resourced box office were fielding customer queries around refunds and venues such as ours, built to host thousands, were seen as 'no go areas' across the globe.

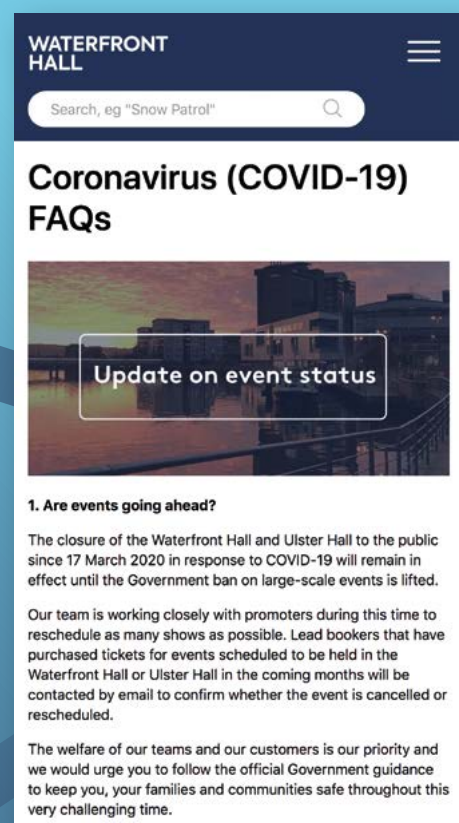
Although we were operating in a vacuum with no real guidance or clarity coming from the authorities, one glaringly obvious fact was recognised by the SMT - our industry was going to be the first to shut down and the last to reopen.

Despite four years of hard work and positive change at BWUH Ltd, our industry was decimated overnight and our future left hanging in the balance.

On Monday 16 March 2020 Belfast City Council, the one shareholder of BWUH Ltd., announced its decision to 'temporarily' close ICC Belfast, Waterfront Hall and Ulster Hall via Twitter. Despite all the uncertainty and recognising that solutions for our situation would have to come from within, the SMT came together and formulated a plan which they presented to the Board that focused on addressing three key areas: our people, business preparedness and innovative solutions.



Source: Twitter, ICC Belfast



Source: waterfront.co.uk

# Actions

## Our people

The success of BWUH Ltd. is wholly predicated on our people. Given they are at the heart of everything we do, swift action was taken to focus on the immediate priority of staying connected to them. Following the exit of the Chief Executive, work had already been undertaken by the Board and SMT to review the vision, mission, and values. This was accelerated due to COVID-19 and an interim mission statement was introduced to recognise the extraordinary circumstances faced.

The existing mission statement placed an emphasis on team members playing their part in growing profit margins. However, faced with the pandemic and uncertainty of the business this was felt to be unrealistic and no longer appropriate and was replaced by the expectation that everyone would play their part in 'keeping themselves, their families and their communities safe'. The focus was on clear and transparent communication and business preparedness to deliver for Belfast and Northern

Ireland, socially, culturally and economically. Conversely, the eight company values remained completely valid and were used as guiding principles for decision making by the SMT and the Board. Whilst the values did not diminish the magnitude of difficult decisions forced upon the SMT, in tandem with the revised mission statement they became an important compass to guide all of our actions going forward.

Together with Belfast City Council, one such action that was introduced in April 2020, was the repurposing of the Ulster Hall as a food distribution centre from which essential supplies were delivered free of charge to those in need. This community outreach helped to greatly alleviate the negative societal impact on the most vulnerable, many of whom were terrified to leave their homes.

" My 84-year-old mum and 80-year-old aunt received their parcels yesterday and were delighted. They have been in lockdown for more than four weeks, don't have internet and are both very anxious. It was lovely to hear them laugh yesterday on the phone when recounting their delivery, it gave them a great lift."

We aim to be world-class and create an environment in which we remain connected to our people and in which they and their families along with our communities are safe. **Communication is key** and we are committed to providing regular, clear and transparent communication to our team, clients and customers. We are dedicating this time to **business preparedness**. When the time comes, we will be galvanised to play our part in kickstarting business again across Belfast and Northern Ireland. We do this to benefit everyone – **socially, culturally and economically**.

## INTERIM MISSION STATEMENT



## OUR VALUES

At the height of the pandemic, over 90% of all team members were furloughed under the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. This created a complex landscape for effective communication given the makeup of a fractured workforce comprising those on furlough and those still working in the organisation. It was during this period the SMT evolved into an Executive Leadership Team (ELT), buoying spirits and projecting a positive long-term outlook of the organisation in the weekly newsletters, virtual town halls, social events and daily stand-up calls. Balancing the engagement levels of furloughed team members while avoiding the burnout of team members that were working throughout proved challenging. The ELT were determined to avoid the emergence of a fractured workforce and meticulous reinduction processes were devised to affirm belief in the one team value through positive personal experience.

The incoming Chief Executive was also integral to creating a cohesive workforce. After taking up the post in July, every member of the team was given the opportunity to connect with her on a one-to-one or group basis. All interactions were bilateral and sincere gratitude was expressed by both parties for the candid insights shared about the future direction of the company and how the team felt this could be achieved.

Regular, clear and transparent: these were the hallmarks of all communications activity. Despite frequent limitations on the information available and indeed misinformation and uncertainty in the public domain, the ELT were resolute in keeping the team updated on the significant changes and progress. This forced the ELT into a position of vulnerability as they simply did not have all of the answers to the questions being asked of them. However, instead of making impulsive decisions or issuing misleading communications the ELT embraced this challenge and gave the team oversight of the clear timelines that they had set themselves to revert by with a comprehensive and considered update.

The ELT also recognised the importance of staying connected with the Board to ensure they were up to date on progress. Virtual meetings were held with the various Board sub committees and the Board itself which proved invaluable and facilitated rapid decision making. In addition, contact was also maintained with our shareholder and other supporting organisations in Northern Ireland. Although partnership working was by no means a new phenomenon for BWUH Ltd., our unfaltering belief in our own ability to successfully fast track creative solutions from ideation to implementation elevated our status as pioneers who bolstered our peers, many of whom were frozen, unable to respond beyond the immediate crisis.



## Business preparedness

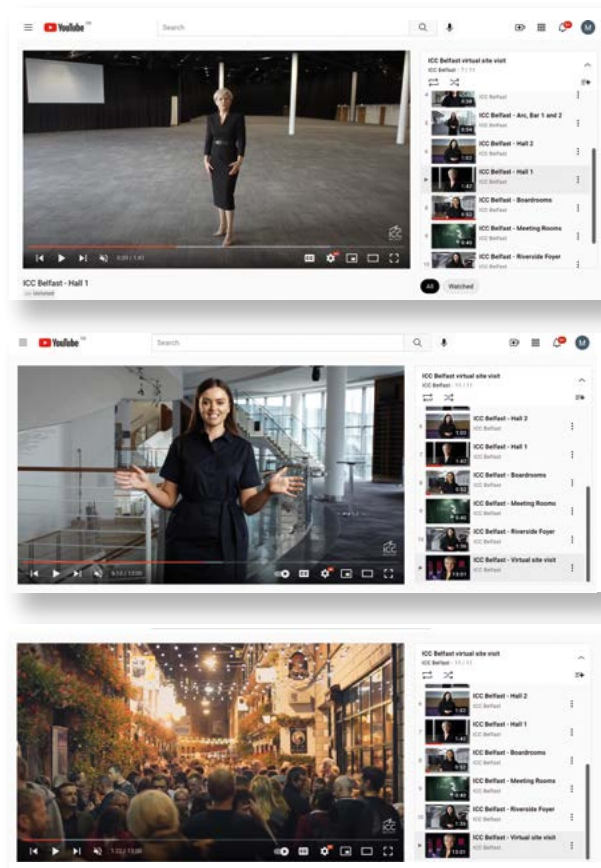
As a beacon of hope for Belfast, the team remained agile and creative when responding to clients' evolving needs and soon realized that despite all the challenges and uncertainty they had the in-house capability to generate demand and leverage booked business to secure multi-year deals that delivered mutually beneficial commercial outcomes.

Prior to the pandemic, there had been a clear market demand for the venues' in-house digital marketing capabilities. This spurred the team to identify other areas in which they could innovate and utilise their subject matter expertise. By April 2020 when it became clear a short, snap lockdown wasn't going to be enough to overcome the pandemic, the SMT and staff created multi-disciplined teams that responded to client concerns with bespoke 'Survival Kits' being introduced.

The objective of the survival kit was to adopt a solution-based client management methodology to safeguard the revenue and economic impact from these events. Inheriting client KPIs as our own was key and fully embracing and understanding the key conference objectives and taking a leadership role, the ICC Belfast team were able to provide expert advice and practical support in the areas of logistics, technical production and marketing communications. This innovative and proactive approach resulted in retaining over 95% of bookings with clients choosing to defer their events to future dates. A total of four multi-year deals were also secured, totalling £8.4M in economic impact for the city as far out as 2028. All of this against a backdrop of the global pandemic and not knowing when we would be able to open for business again.

Concurrently with ICC Belfast's extensive client retention programme, a robust market engagement strategy was devised to convert high intent prospects. Analysis undertaken prior to COVID-19 showed that toughening conditions in the global business events market was forcing venues to continually find ways to differentiate their proposition. The venues that were most successful focus on understanding the needs of the customer and the factors that influence their decision-making process when researching, selecting and shortlisting destinations and venues. Digital technology has also radically changed the behaviour of these customers and the market leaders have built digital tools and assets that fulfil their compelling value propositions through a focus on making their offering as attractive as possible.

Whilst others were in limbo waiting for the storm to pass, we knew we had to be agile and creative if we were to survive. ICC Belfast had a strong track record in converting high intent clients that had shortlisted the city. However, based on the results of research commissioned by Tourism Ireland, in partnership with Tourism Northern Ireland and Failte Ireland whereby 500 telephone interviews with event buyers were completed, the conversion from consideration to shortlist had considerable room for improvement. Prior to COVID-19 citywide site visits proved exceptionally powerful in educating this market segment and in 2019 the city showcased its potential to hundreds of influential decision makers by hosting multiple industry events. Regression was not an option and as soon as flights were grounded and in-person site visits became obsolete, the ICC Belfast team developed a virtual version to give organisers a flavour of what to expect from the destination. This virtual site visit went live in July 2020 and was a touchpoint to communicate usefully with over 11 key accounts. These clients had grown weary of webinars and zoom happy hours. Instead, the virtual site visit was a useful and practical tool to have in our arsenal, ensuring we stayed at the forefront of industry news for the right reasons.



ICC Belfast virtual site visit

No commercial business was immune to the effects of COVID-19. Amidst the innovation and emotional growth of BWUH Ltd, the ELT were faced with the daunting prospect of ensuring income generation to cover costs and avoid redundancies, which were widespread across the events industry and beyond.

We therefore needed to explore opportunities that could generate income from sources outside of our industry. As a result, in January 2021, to ensure the long-term sustainability of BWUH Ltd., the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) took up a nine-month tenancy at ICC Belfast, which became a COVID-Secure nightingale venue. An immense amount of gratitude was felt by the Minister for Justice and the NICTS team for the part BWUH Ltd. played in reducing the backlog of courts and tribunals cases built up prior to and during the pandemic. Hundreds of hearings, small claims court sittings and appeals were facilitated safely, a remarkable achievement in an ever-changing situation. The families of the 10 victims of the Ballymurphy massacre, one of the highest profile atrocities of Northern Ireland's Troubles, were also able to attend the Coroner's Inquest in person. In May 2021, after almost 40 years, their deceased relatives were found "entirely innocent", a momentous day for Northern Ireland and we are proud that we and our venues were able to play a small part in this process.



Socially distanced set up at the Nightingale Lagan facility



Charlie McCloskey, Director of Events and Customer Experience ICC Belfast | Waterfront Hall | Ulster Hall; Julia Corkey, CEO ICC Belfast | Waterfront Hall | Ulster Hall; Mark Goodfellow, NICTS Chief Operating Officer; Anthony Harbinson, NICTS Director

“ I am delighted such an important asset, as the ICC Belfast undoubtedly is, has been put to use in this way and I am grateful to its leadership team and staff who have not only provided the venue but who have worked very closely and effectively with NICTS, the judiciary and the legal profession to provide a safe space for courts and tribunals users. ”

Naomi Long, Minister for Justice



Families of the Ballymurphy victims, May 2021

## Innovative solutions

The need to meet, network, collaborate and create didn't go away during the pandemic – it became greater than ever. So too did the demand for hybrid solutions that allow organisers to harness emotional connections and sensory motivators to deliver maximum impact in a notoriously competitive industry. In order to realise success as the industry took tentative steps towards recovery, ELT knew that first-mover advantage was crucial. With this in mind, they pitched to the Board for sizeable capital funding towards an HD LED wall. At a time when little to no income was being generated, securing return on investment was non-negotiable.

In June 2020 the first post pandemic hybrid event was successfully delivered on behalf of a longstanding client, Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry, opening the door to a previously untapped revenue stream that promised vast potential.

Significant investment in hardware and software fulfilled the burgeoning demand for the 35+ broadcast conferences, product launches and award ceremonies that have since taken place. The transition to hybrid was no mean feat for venues that previously outsourced anything beyond basic plug and play tech, and which were not equipped to stream from one exhibition hall to another.

Technological enhancements made at ICC Belfast included everything from the HD LED Wall to Glisser, a hybrid delegate platform allowing remote and in-person delegates to have the same influence on events via Q&A, polls and gamification.

As the demand for digital events grew, so too did the team's ambitions. A successful application to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's Organisation Emergency Programme led to the launch of 'Live from the Ulster Hall' in December 2020, catapulting a 158-year-old concert hall into a new era of streaming and on-demand content. This project brought music back to the Ulster Hall providing home-grown talent the opportunity to engage their audiences via digital platforms and earn an income through the introduction of a paywall.

The team's passion and sense of pride when creating live experiences was unwavering and whilst the venues remained mandated shut, these events were its vessels. In partnership with our ticketing provider Tessitura, when forced to create a 'new normal' we developed the functionality of gated content through our websites that transported customers from their living room to standing in the middle of the Ulster Hall. What was achieved in six weeks would have ordinarily taken 12 months. The hunger to cultivate a sense of normalcy and provide hope and joy at the end of a truly terrible year was what drove this project forward at such speed.



Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry, June 2020



PCMA Destination Webinar, February 2021

The following feedback is testimony to the success of Live from the Ulster Hall.

Live from the Ulster Hall viewer feedback.

// Watching from Nova Scotia Canada! Have many happy memories of performing with New Irish up until 2014. This is the first time I have been able to attend a concert in 5 years! Hi mum. //

// It really feels nearly like we're live in the audience. //

// Viewing from Haymarket, Virginia USA we visited in person 2 years ago and are delighted to watch from our living room this year and see dear friends singing and playing - miss you all - xoxo.//

// Can't wait...the highlight of our Christmas celebrations is happening even this year. Thank you! //



The learnings gained from ICC Belfast's pivot to virtual solutions were invaluable and provided a solid foundation from which further developments could be made that were tailored to the venues' entertainment offering. The Waterfront Hall and Ulster Hall are now fully hybrid and an enhanced ticketing platform with a provision for digital events that has been specifically designed to ensure a straightforward customer journey.

The evolution of three hybrid-by-design venues provides event organisers with a platform to keep audiences engaged whilst staying apart in the short-term and expand the reach of future events by recruiting virtual attendees based globally. For some clients, this aligned perfectly with their goals.

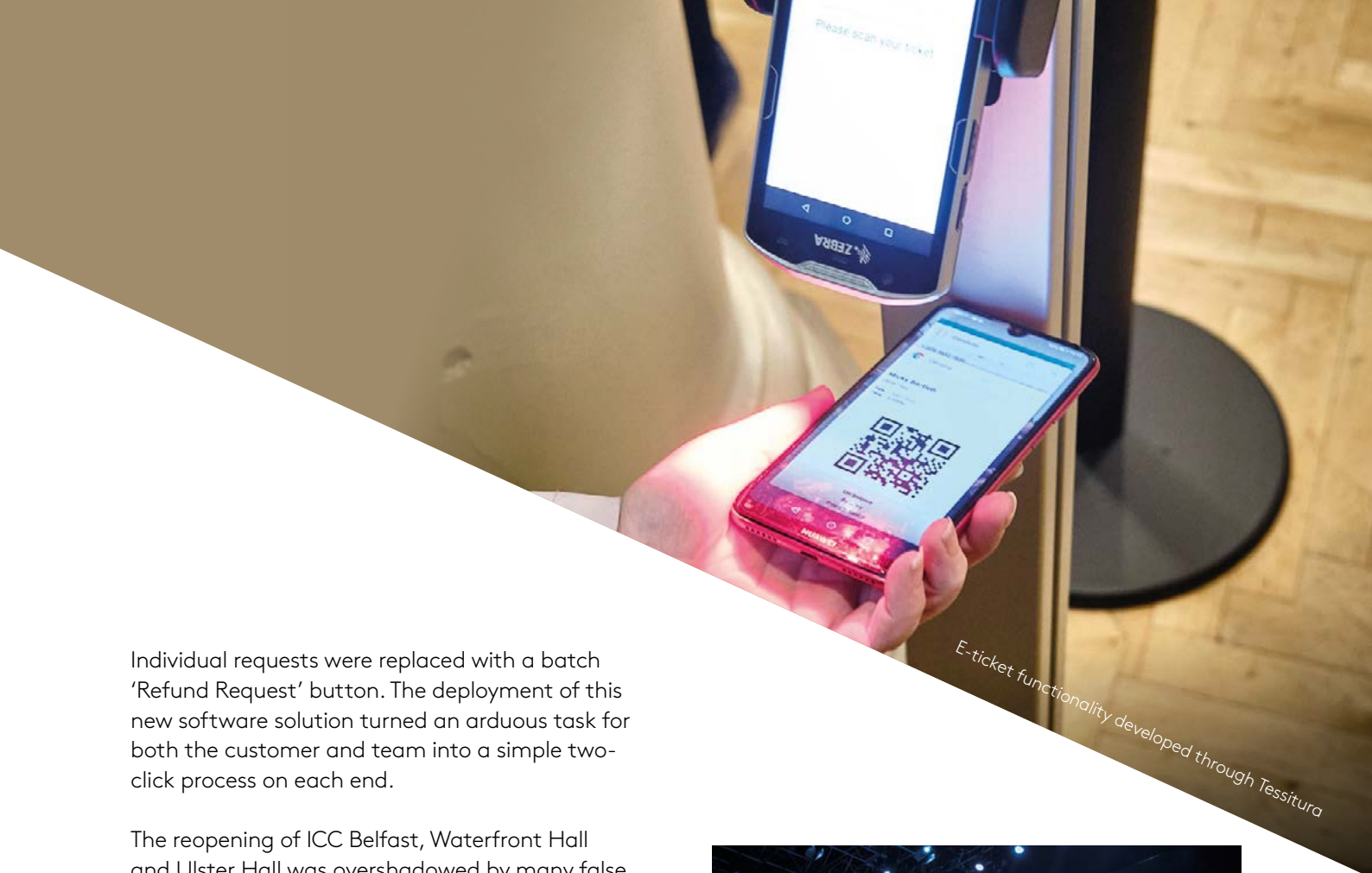
In August 2020 ICC Belfast partnered with elite sports tracking provider STATSports on the delivery of a professional, virtual production that oozed energy and stamina to launch their latest product suite. The launch was broadcast to sports practitioners in over 90 countries. The highlights, which were seen over 45,000 times through the company's social channels in the first 72 hours, generated a plethora of sales leads for STATSports.

This positive sentiment towards hybrid was not felt by all clients, particularly those whose core purpose is to facilitate knowledge sharing through the medium of face-to-face meetings and events. However, regardless of organisers tolerance of hybrid meetings, the fact that a digital-first approach allows organisers to be more dynamic cannot be contested.

Just when our innovative hybrid approach was bearing fruit, the introduction of a circuit breaker lockdown and enhanced coronavirus restrictions in Northern Ireland two days before the Soroptimist International Great Britain and Ireland (SIGBI) annual conference in October 2020 was one of many challenges the team had to overcome instantaneously. The resilience shone through as individuals worked as one to remotely guide organisers based in England through a seamless transition from a hybrid to fully virtual delivery format.

The resilience and innovation of the team did not stop at the installation of state-of-the-art equipment in every event space. Although the venues had shut their doors, the public had not stopped buying tickets to gigs and concerts. Ticket purchases were made every single day of the closure, which lasted 563 days in total. Waterfront Hall and Ulster Hall had gone from hosting over 400 events per year with over 350,000 customers to an onslaught of enquiries from these customers, many of whom were understandably irate, about the status of their upcoming show or how they could get a refund as the threat of an economic crisis loomed on the horizon.

Under the move to a digital-first marketing strategy in 2018, the entertainments team had appointed a brand-new ticketing partner, Tessitura in the summer of 2019, which was responsible for processing over £10M of ticket sales per year. The newly appointed Digital Manager who started in February 2020 was the one working team member with knowledge of the system and worked hand in hand with Tessitura on the deployment of multiple new functionalities to prepare for the 200+ entertainment event reschedules that multiplied with each extension of the closure mandate.



E-ticket functionality developed through Tessitura

Individual requests were replaced with a batch 'Refund Request' button. The deployment of this new software solution turned an arduous task for both the customer and team into a simple two-click process on each end.

The reopening of ICC Belfast, Waterfront Hall and Ulster Hall was overshadowed by many false dawns and uncertainties. When faced with the prospect of reopening with a requirement for physical distancing still in place between patrons, the team looked again to the technological advancements offered by Tessitura to sell tickets in 'bubbles'. The ability to offer this functionality greatly assisted lobbying efforts for a full reopening. In demonstrating the mitigations and COVID-Secure measures in place, the ELT once again ensured all stakeholders, internal and external, could look upon the venues as a catalyst for growth as the entire city began to rebuild.



STATSports, August 2020



Tourism Northern Ireland, June 2021

# Outcomes

Rather than be consumed by the pandemic, the BWUH Ltd. team chose to co-exist alongside it and use it as a catalyst to drive change, reinvent the business and embed the company values. We were determined to emerge from the pandemic as a stronger business with a reputation for innovation that led by example. Whilst hindsight affords us the opportunity to choose what we could have done differently, the results achieved, and feedback garnered supports the actions the ELT took and their foresight to ensure a long-term, sustainable business.

As a people-orientated business, in line with the commitment set out in the interim mission statement the ELT chose to go beyond carrying out an employee engagement survey in April 2021 by engaging external consultants, Cognisense. Employees were interviewed one-on-one to examine how they perceived the leadership team had handled the pandemic.

Cognisense was familiar with BWUH Ltd. having been commissioned to complete research on behalf of the organisation in 2019. This confidential forum was used to explore satisfaction with team members' roles in general, as well as how efficient they felt current policies and procedures were. Stark contrasts were noted between the 2019 and 2021 findings. Despite the adverse times employees were living through, they are now much more engaged and more positive. Job satisfaction has increased significantly, silos are no longer an issue and even though pressures have not reduced, teams working together have made workloads much more manageable.

## Leadership style

A team meeting held every day at 9.30am facilitated opportunities for the expression of gratitude or frustration to ensure problems were solved quickly and success was still celebrated together to strengthen the emotional connections between the team. A sense of openness and transparency was instilled as team members felt they were able to ask anything, and it would be answered to the best of the knowledge of the leadership team.

The unprecedented nature of the pandemic equalised the experience for all team members, regardless of seniority or length of service. A reduced working team also meant that individuals had to take on additional duties outside their role. Whereas the culture previously may have led to employees feeling overwhelmed and afraid to ask for help, there was now a reassurance that if mistakes were made, they would be supported to find solutions rather than blamed. This contributed to an improved work-life balance and a truly positive attitude being fostered among the team whose ownership of a shared goal allowed them to bond beyond a superficial level.

## Qualitative employee engagement feedback

“ Because SMT were on the daily catch call you felt more in the loop. Management was very open. ”

“ Having the Leadership Team on the calls made staff feel valued and made the Leadership Team more accessible. It broke down the ‘them and us’ view, further reducing the silos. ”

“ We adapted and I knew we’d be ok. ”

“ This sounds awful, but I started to like some people I didn’t think I’d get on with. ”

## Quantitative employee engagement feedback

Question/Statement	2019 Score	2021 Score
I feel a strong personal attachment to BWUH Ltd.	61%	70%
I feel valued for the work I do	48%	64%
My opinion is listened to and feel I can contribute to new ideas	45%	54%

**86% of team members felt the ELT managed the impact of the pandemic well**

## Authoritative industry leaders

We worked shoulder to shoulder with our stakeholders from the Department for the Economy to the Department for Communities and our one shareholder, Belfast City Council, whose financial and operational support enabled the leadership team and Board to make uninhibited strategic decisions.

We assumed authoritative positions in Tourism Recovery Groups and secured £500k additional funding and support at an Executive level for the Meetings, Incentives and Conferences and Events industry.

To corroborate the research findings of our research with internal stakeholders, we surveyed external stakeholders in June 2021. The results were overwhelmingly positive, with 94% claiming there was absolutely nothing more we could have done and every single one of them providing positive responses when probed on how we responded to the pandemic and worked in partnership with them.

## Qualitative external stakeholder feedback

"ICC Belfast was one of the first venues to put an infrastructure in place to show clients how hybrid events can take place safely. As a client, this made me feel confident to book my events at ICC Belfast. They have strived to provide solutions to their clients regardless of size and budget."

94% of  
stakeholders  
surveyed stated the  
organisation could not  
have done any more in  
response to the pandemic



**Belfast**  
City Council

**visitBelfast**

tessitura  
NETWORK

nita  
northern ireland  
tourism alliance



Department for the  
**Economy**  
[www.economy-ni.gov.uk](http://www.economy-ni.gov.uk)



**tourism**  
northernireland



Department for  
**Communities**  
[www.communities-ni.gov.uk](http://www.communities-ni.gov.uk)



**Northern Ireland**  
**Executive**  
[www.northernireland.gov.uk](http://www.northernireland.gov.uk)

**Hospitality**  
**Ulster**



**ULSTER**  
**ORCHESTRA**  
*Let's Play*

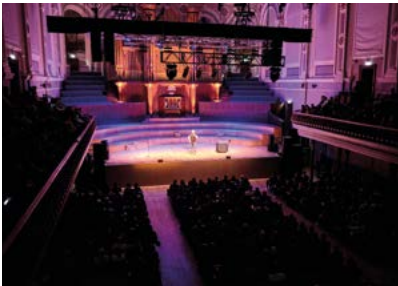
# Future focus

The learnings since the beginning of the pandemic will shape the short, medium and long-term direction of travel for BWUH Ltd. In October 2021, over 18 months since the initial closure in March 2020, the ban on full capacity events at ICC Belfast, Waterfront Hall and Ulster Hall was finally lifted. Whilst certain restrictions remain in place, the sense of excitement throughout the organisation about being able to return to doing what we do best is palpable.

Where there was once a gaping chasm between the leadership team and the wider BWUH Ltd. cohort, there is now “real unity”. We are proudly heralded as industry disruptors, ready to challenge the status quo and evolve through self-reflection to reach new goals.

Fewer than 100 hours elapsed between the Northern Ireland Executive granting the venues permission to reopen without social distancing and the first act taking to the Ulster Hall stage. Then, less than a week later, local legends Snow Patrol played to a sold-out crowd at the Waterfront Hall; a performance that encapsulated the exhilaration felt across the city that life in Belfast was back and it was better than ever.

Rebuilding what was lost during the pandemic isn't the plan. The Executive Leadership Team has reimagined this business and what its people can achieve. In the darkest of times, everyone banded together. Now, the possibilities are endless, and the future looks bright for a city that stands on the precipice of brilliance as the entire team demonstrates their commitment to building back better.



Micky Bartlett, Ulster Hall October 2021



Highly Commended  
- Best Venue



Finalist - Best  
Pivot/Reinvention



Most Innovative and  
Tech-Friendly Venue



Best Venue offering  
Digital Event Facilities

The possibilities are endless, and the future looks bright for a city that stands on the precipice of brilliance.



Invent Awards, ICC Belfast September 2021



Source: Twitter, Snow Patrol



Innovation Award

Snow Patrol, Waterfront Hall October 2021

# Key learnings



## Trust based leadership

Despite the constantly changing landscape, the ELT had complete confidence in one another and worked as a cohesive team ensuring that our individual and collective behaviour was totally aligned with our organisational values. These values were more than a poster in the staff room, they provided universal accountability for all of our actions and decisions.



## Regular, clear and transparent communication

Although we never had all the answers, maintaining contact with our people and all key stakeholders using a variety of communication channels was vital. We never 'sugar coated' the situation but always projected the confidence we had that our plan would see us emerge as a stronger business.



## Investment in our people

We put our people front and centre in our approach and successfully avoided a fractured workforce. It was vital that our people had faith that the leadership team had a plan that would see us through. From the moment the doors closed, there was a focus on how we could upskill our team and re-induct them upon reopening so that we would be 'match fit' to welcome back our clients and patrons.



## Stay close to our clients

Throughout the pandemic we stayed in constant touch with our existing and potential clients and ensured that we worked with them to find solutions. We inherited their goals as our own, developing an emotional connection that will last long beyond us hosting their event.



## Bold ambitions

Being in an industry that was first to close and last to open could have sent us into a downward spiral. However, throughout the pandemic we constantly reimagined the business and recognised that our business model would have to change in order to survive.



## Bias towards action

We intentionally had a bias towards action. We didn't have all the answers, but the ELT agreed that the best way to learn and adapt was to take action.



## Resilience

Faced with wave after wave of changes in direction from the authorities and a total lack of clarity it would have been easy to lose faith and falter. Indeed, there were times when workloads and challenges were overwhelming, but the team demonstrated outstanding resilience to build back better.



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