

# Surviving the pandemic as a family business – carving out opportunities

**A**ROUND this time last year, Harbinson Mulholland ran our 'Not Accounted For' campaign, where we spoke to many clients and family business contacts about the immediate effects of the Covid pandemic on their firms.

A year on, we are revisiting these businesses with a series of podcasts to hear how life, and business, has been for them.

Our first podcast shares the story of Environmental Street Furniture, a nine-year-old home-grown business founded by Alan Lowry, which has become one of only four companies in Northern Ireland to have recently been awarded the Queen's Award for Enterprise.

The immediate impact of Covid-19 devastated ESF's local and export business. They saw the effects much earlier than most other local businesses due to their work in the Far East, Middle East and Europe.

By mid-March 2020 they were in contract negotiations with staff to make redundancies, with the intro-

## FAMILY BUSINESSES

Darren McDowell



duction of the job retention furlough scheme ultimately saving all jobs across the business.

Despite having met Alan many times at our family business events, I was struck by his optimism, so typical of entrepreneurs in this part of the world.

The word we used most in our chat was "opportunity" and Alan shared with me how they have been able to create business in markets they previously hadn't focused on. As an export business, they faced much com-



**READY TO ANSWER: Opportunity can still knock despite the pandemic**

petition in home markets, especially in the Republic of Ireland.

But since his job involves getting on a plane and selling their products around the world, the business was forced to look for sales closer to home.

As a result, even though their ex-

port revenue dropped from 78 per cent to six per cent, they have been able to increase their turnover this year, based on new markets and diversifying into Covid response products.

In addition, Alan has taken the opportunity to pursue a more long-

term strategic view on a company rebrand which they have just completed.

You can listen to Alan's Podcast where he also discusses:

- What business has been like for ESF over the past 12 months, in five words;
- His "business wish list" if he had 10 minutes with our political leaders;
- What good he believes will come of this immense interruption to business; and
- The one piece of advice he would share with other home-grown business leaders.

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