

THE FACES OF FAMILY BUSINESS

When Belfast accountants and business advisers Harbinson Mulholland first looked at their client list and decided that a forum for family businesses here in Northern Ireland might be a good idea, they probably didn't imagine that it would become an integral - and important - part of the fabric of business life here.

"Family businesses don't just dominate our own client list," says Harbinson Mulholland's Senior Partner, Darren McDowell. "They also dominate the Northern Ireland economy. What the Family Business Forum has done is to provide exactly what its name suggests - a forum for like-minded business people."

"The Forum might represent an extraordinary range of family-owned enterprises from every sector and every region, but what we've discovered is that they have a heck of a lot in common with each other."

Since its inception eight years ago, the Northern Ireland Family Business Forum, a partnership between Harbinson Mulholland and Ulster University's Business School, has involved more than 300 local businesses and delivered 24 business events.

Its latest venture is one of its most ambitious to date. Last year, the Forum staged a Faces

Of Family Business exhibition at Ulster University's new Belfast Campus. A number of local businesses were asked to display images and artefacts reflecting the history of their companies.

"The businesses who took part loved working through old photographs and telling their business stories in such a visible way," adds Treena Clarke, Harbinson Mulholland's Head of Marketing and the driving force behind the Forum and its events. "The exhibition, in a lot of ways, captured the essence of being a family business."

The exhibition got Harbinson Mulholland and Ulster University's Dr. Ian Smyth thinking. Ian Smyth is Senior Lecturer/Manager of the brand new UU Business School Centre for Sustainable Family Enterprise.

More important than that, though, he's an academic from a family business background and a man understands, and empathises with, what makes family enterprises





tick....and what makes them different from other businesses.

"We listened to the business owners talking at the exhibition and we realised that we needed to get what they were saying on the record," he says. "So the idea for a Faces Of Family Business television interview series was born.

Ian Smyth talks passionately about enterprises as 'living companies'. "There's an academic phrase that we use. We talk about an organisation's socio-economic wealth. These companies are more than just companies. They all have a culture, a value and an essence."

By way of example, one of the companies exhibiting at Ulster University, North Coast ice cream makers Morelli's invited fellow family businesses to their Portstewart shop recently to hear from 92-year old Nino Morelli, the elder of the family during a visit from Italy.

But there are many other inspirational stories to family dedication, of doggedness in the face of challenges, of succession

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through the generations and of an enduring passion for a business.

"The Forum has adopted a theme in the past year," says Darren McDowell. "It's Family Business As A Force For Good, and there is no doubt that Northern Ireland's family businesses are a force for good. They may be different shapes and sizes and involved in a lot of different sectors. But they contribute a lot to the local economy, they create jobs, they create wealth and they are very much part of the communities they are based in."

The forthcoming television series will be produced alongside NVTv, the community television channel based in Belfast city

centre. A planned series of six interviews will see Darren McDowell and Dr. Ian Smyth chatting with businesses owners from a series of local enterprises.

Lined up to appear so far are hospitality business The McKeever Hotel Group, Magherafelt-based construction company Henry Brothers, local retailers Menarys and Co. Armagh apple growers turned cider producers Long Meadow.

The interviews are due to be recorded at NVTv in April and broadcast in June. They will be available on NVTv's Freeview channels and also on demand.

"What we've found over the years of the Forum is that business owners might be bit reticent

at first, but once they start talking about their businesses, they really enjoy it. It almost becomes a cathartic experience for them," says Dr. Ian Smyth.

"But they also draw inspiration from other family business owners. A few years back, a lot of our members were really inspired listening to the late Norman Lynas and his son Andrew telling the story of building the Lynas Foodservice Group. That's just one example. There are plenty of others."

The Forum has also brought in inspirational speakers from businesses outside of Northern Ireland. Back in September, members heard from Darren Burns from the UK-wide Timpson Group, a unique family enterprise with impressive CSR credentials.

Ulster University has been tied in to the Family Business Forum from the start. But the university has just taken its commitment to family enterprises a stage further with the establishment of its Centre for Sustainable Family Enterprise, headed up by Dr. Ian Smyth.

"Our work sets out to help local firms to connect and grow," he says. "Like Harbinson Mulholland, we want to see family enterprise grow from micro to small, on to SMEs and upwards from there. We want to be a catalyst, a centre for new ideas and fresh thinking.

"There is an awareness of the importance of family business within our student body," he adds. "When we introduced a new family business module for our Business Studies students recently, we had 50 of them signed up almost immediately."

Darren McDowell, meanwhile, emphasises the importance of forging connections with like-minded businesses and the power of positivity.

"In some ways, the Forum is a bit like a family business itself. It has developed, grown and matured over the years since it was formed. And it has helped local businesses to grow, but also to transition and to face up to common problems and hurdles like succession."

To find out more about the work of the forum visit www.harbinson-mulholland.com . If you would like to be invited to future events please email Treena@tclarke@harbinson-mulholland.com

Ulster Bank backs crucial NI infrastructure firm with £70 million loan

Ulster Bank is the only local bank to participate in a major refinancing of one of Northern Ireland's most important infrastructure businesses that has just been completed.

The bank has provided almost £70 million in lending to Antrim-based firmus energy, which operates the largest gas supply business in Northern Ireland, and the second-largest gas distribution network. firmus energy is critical to Northern Ireland's energy infrastructure as one of only three gas distribution networks here.

Ulster Bank was one of four lenders to participate in the refinancing deal, alongside Deka Bank, Credit Agricole and Helaba. The total funding package across the syndicate of banks is worth £285 million.

Damien Long, corporate banking relationship director at Ulster Bank, said: "Ulster Bank has managed firmus

energy's day-to-day banking for many years and we are very pleased to now also support the business's lending requirements. This is a major deal that is very important to Northern Ireland's gas energy infrastructure."

"Firmus energy plays a pivotal role in Northern Ireland's pathway to net zero by 2050 in a region where more than 60 per cent of households still use oil heating. Firmus energy enables consumers to move away from oil to gas heating which reduces their heating carbon footprint by more than 50 per cent.

"In line with Net Zero 2050 targets, firmus energy plans to reduce the carbon impact of the business by injecting biomethane and hydrogen blends into the network. Their movement toward sustainable fuel aligns well with Ulster Bank's purpose and ESG targets. So, we are very pleased to provide this support," Damien adds.



Denise Curran, Finance Director from firmus energy, welcomed the funding, saying: "This funding package will allow us to continue our investment as we seek to deliver sustainable gas through our network and continue our journey towards a net zero carbon future. We are grateful to Ulster Bank and the other lenders for their support."

Henderson Group And bp Pulse Roll Out NI Vehicle Charging Network

Henderson Group and bp pulse, bp's electric vehicle charging business, have signed an agreement to work together to install up to 200 electric vehicle (EV) charge points at around 100 Henderson Retail sites across Northern Ireland within the next two years, including at 30 bp branded Henderson Retail locations.

"The demand for ultra-fast charging points in Northern Ireland is high. Current figures from the Department for Transport show there are currently around 18,762 ultra-low emission vehicles registered in the region, an increase of 55% in the past two years alone. This steep trajectory of the volume of electric vehicles on the road is only going to continue, yet Northern Ireland has just 60 ultra-fast charge points in operation," says Ron Whitten, Chief Financial Officer at Henderson Group.

With this roll-out bp pulse aspires to create one of the region's largest networks of ultra-fast and rapid EV charging, aiming to add up to 15,000 kW of charging capacity.

bp pulse charge points are already live and charging EVs at 17 bp SPAR sites across Northern Ireland as well as at another four Henderson Retail SPAR sites. The full roll-out is planned to be finished by end 2025.

Whitten continues, "Henderson

Retail operates over 100 busy stores, 81 of which have fuel forecourts in Northern Ireland, used frequently by those on the go throughout the day.

"We are making considered, positive steps in line with consumer behaviour and working with bp pulse to install ultra-fast chargers at our sites which will give EV drivers the opportunity to charge at a location that is convenient to their journey."

bp pulse is installing charging units which have an innovative integrated battery storage system. They are installed with a connection to a standard voltage power grid. This overcomes a significant barrier to the roll-out of EV charging infrastructure and removes the need for construction of a dedicated high-voltage substation, considerably reducing installation cost and time. Each charger has two charge points - one ultra-fast (150kW) and one rapid (100kW) - delivering a combined power of up to 250kW.

Akira Kirton CEO, bp pulse UK added; "Fast, reliable charging in convenient locations is essential to give drivers the confidence to switch to electric vehicles. Working with Henderson Group, a retail network that dominates the market in Northern Ireland, we have the opportunity and aspiration to create one of the



largest networks of ultra-fast and rapid charging points - meeting the rise in demand for now and in the future."

Mark McCall co-founder of the Electric Vehicle Association NI said "The Electric Vehicle Association NI welcomes today's announcement from Henderson Group and bp pulse. This significant investment aims to bring over 200 direct current ultra-fast and rapid chargers to retail destinations across NI, making it easier and more convenient to drive an electric vehicle in Northern Ireland."

bp pulse is one of the largest electric vehicle charging operators in the UK. It has ambitious plans to deliver on-the-go and destination charging infrastructure.

bp plans to invest up to £18 billion in the UK energy system by

2030. This includes up to £1 billion for EV charging infrastructure.

Whitten finished; "This is a significant step in Henderson Group's commitment towards more sustainable business practices as part of our Tomorrow Matters strategy, focusing on People, Place, Planet and aims to develop the business in a way that is beneficial to both staff and customers while having a positive impact on society.

"We have a strong belief in reinvesting in our business and continually giving back to the Northern Ireland community. This rollout builds on the long-standing cooperation between bp and our Henderson Retail SPAR and EUROSPAR sites as the largest operator of bp branded forecourts in Northern Ireland."