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Carving a Place for UK BIDs Through COVID

Introduction

The COVID pandemic and its subsequent restrictions on public life have led to rapid transformations worldwide that have had grave consequences on places, entities, and organisations. COVID resurrected discussions regarding urban density and vulnerability, reinforcing the importance of the resilient and effective planning strategies that are necessary to tackle challenges brought on by the pandemic (Afrin et al., 2021). In this regard, the pandemic spearheaded a change in towns and cities' strategic action plans. The inclusion of pandemics, health emergencies and protocols are now considered paramount for the livelihood of urban areas (Allam and Jones, 2020), which calls for a collaborative approach of fostering resilient behaviours that affect urbanism (retail, hospitality and tourism, government, citizenship, etc.) (Casado-Aranda et al., 2021; Jasiński, 2022; Leta and Chan, 2021; Ritchie and Jiang, 2021).

From the onset of the pandemic, UK High Streets underwent three national lockdowns which required social distancing, extra hygienic measures, and limited operations to ensure staff and shopper safety (Aydinli *et al.*, 2021; Ntounis *et al.*, 2020). In this context, place-based organisations that support High Streets navigated a "super crisis" (Wexler and Oberlander, 2021) which altered basic routines and shared understandings of how day-to-day life is lived, such as changes to working patterns, or the sense of containment and dislocation from visiting the High Street (Low and Smart, 2020). In these unprecedented circumstances, the need to build the necessary adaptive capacity for dealing with COVID was of utmost importance and took shape through a series of preparedness, response and recovery measures, requiring place-based organisations to act swiftly in implementing changes to their practices which then adhered to these rules. During this time, Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) across the UK were one type of place-based organisation responsible for providing guidance, support and resources to businesses in their districts.

BIDs are business-led organisations that provide business support in defined areas, with a mandate to improve a locality, represent the local business voice, market a location, and promote inward investment (Hoyt, 2004; Morçöl *et al.*, 2008; Steel and Symes, 2005). The BID model is a flexible form of urban management, suitable for place revitalisation (Briffault, 2010; Levy, 2001; Silva and Cachinho, 2021; Ward, 2007), and is considered by many a "best practice" vehicle for public realm improvements and commercial corridor management (Silva et

al., 2022; Valli and Hammami, 2021). As the COVID crisis evoked a need for continuous adaptability (Wexler and Oberlander, 2021), UK BIDs were also at the forefront of designing practices and strategies for High Street recovery by using their breadth of local knowledge, access to local businesses and connections with area stakeholders to set up planning groups and/or task forces for an impending restart (Turner et al., 2020). These activities bore similarities to risk management, disaster reduction and disaster management frameworks (DMFs) (Djalante *et al.*, 2020). DMFs are commonplace in the tourism and hospitality industry wherever unprecedented events of great complexity and gravity occur frequently (Wut et al, 2021). However, the magnitude of COVID and its impact on the structures, operations and possibilities of survival of all industries warrants an investigation of disaster strategies, activities, and contingency plans (Faulkner, 2001; Hao et al., 2020) developed by UK BIDs during this 'no-escape' disaster (Huan et al., 2004) from the perspective of disaster management literature.

The purpose of this paper is to explore UK BIDs' overall responses to COVID and to evaluate how these responses influenced UK BID identity during the pandemic through the modification of business practices. Interview data from five BID managers' responses and level of preparedness from previous disasters were used to design a DMF-focused survey that laid the foundation to explore BID practices during the pandemic. The study provides useful insights on how COVID is impacting the evolution of the UK BID industry with regard to High Street management, place leadership, and policy influence. We start with a brief overview of common BID activities, albeit these do tend to range marginally from one country to the next. We utilise established DMF theories to exemplify shifts in standard BID operations and practices, and how these may become a staple in future BID definitions. A mixed-methods, exploratory, sequential approach is employed to draw insights from BID managers across the UK, with the main themes and subthemes which arose based on BIDs' interactions with businesses and other place stakeholders during the pandemic then presented. Overall, we argue that the COVID crisis and response has provided a platform for BIDs to reframe their current identity of a mobile policy paradigmatic of regulatory, market-driven urban governance (Kudla, 2021; Stein et al., 2017) to one of a more locally-bound, strategic, place-based body with a more direct role in place management decisions.

Theoretical Background: Business Improvement Districts
BIDs are commonly understood as a flexible form of urban management, suitable for revitalising dwindling High Streets, and providing solutions to issues related to suburbanisation, increased

car usage, public realm improvements, commercial corridor management, etc. (Briffault, 2010; Levy, 2001; Silva and Cachinho, 2021; Silva *et al.*, 2022; Valli and Hammami, 2021; Ward, 2007). All BIDs share some agreed characteristics relative to their delineated spatial remit, their *modus operandi* between public-private sector actors, and the mechanism in which all eligible property/business owners elect to make a mandatory, time-limited contribution that will be earmarked for spend on projects in a designated area (Ward, 2007). Such projects broadly fall into three categories of place management (see table 1) - cleaning and maintenance, safety and security and neighbourhood marketing - which combine with the goal of improving the streetscape, trading environment, and overall attractiveness of an area as a response to competitive forces (Briffault, 2010; Cook, 2008; Meltzer, 2012; Steel and Symes, 2005). There is thus a common understanding of BIDs as place management organisations that ensure an attractive, clean, and safe High Street environment (Bookman and Woolford, 2013; Kudla, 2022; Lippert and Sleiman, 2012). BIDs then populate these aforementioned categories of place management with activities, such as those listed in the table below.

Categories	Associated Activities
Cleaning & Maintenance	Neighbourhood cleaning, looking after greenery and other environmental improvements, working in partnership on larger scale projects (public realm, active transport), graffiti removal, jet washing
Safety & Security	Area wardens, Security personnel, liaising with local law enforcement, CCTV, Connecting with security personnel from local businesses, Taxi marshals
Neighbourhood Marketing & Events	Social media, destination websites, B2B networking, B2C promotions, improving trading environment, neighbourhood beautification initiatives (wayfinding, public art), festivals, festive lighting

Table 1: Typical BID activities (authors' conceptualisation, based on Grail et al, 2020; Steel and Symes, 2005; Ward, 2007)

BIDs in the UK
In the UK, the BID industry consists of more than 350 active and developing BIDs (British BIDs, 2022), and – notwithstanding the COVID crisis – is arguably in its maturity stage (Grail *et al.*, 2020), with BID growth slowing down for the last five years as of 2020. Whereas "the story of the development of BIDs in the UK is generally one of success," (Grail *et al.,* 2020, p. 85) scepticism of their role as place management organisations remains. De Magalhães (2012, p.

148) stated that BID legislation in the UK was implemented in a "period of sustained economic growth and relative abundance of public sector-funded urban regeneration and economic development programmes," which swiftly gave way to the recession and public spending cuts, thus leading to BIDs facing deeper structural problems that could not be dealt with in small scale interventions. As such, today's BIDs remain tightly-knit to their respective local authority, which brings their meaningfulness and importance under question. Furthermore, as BIDs must be attentive to the differing needs of their locations, they must also adhere to legislative requirements that require a certain geographical homogeneity that covers the businesses' common interests and objectives (Guimarães, 2021). This has resulted in the proliferation of town centre BIDs (Cotterill *et al.,* 2019), with other types of sectoral BIDs (commercial, industrial, leisure, retail, tourism, property owner) gaining traction recently to facilitate the main stakeholder agenda of a specified area. However, it can be argued that this flexibility of BID legislation limits some BIDs' potential contributions towards a place's transition to a multifunctional, place-based economy (Cotterill *et al.*, 2019; Millington *et al.*, 2015).

Such inconsistencies can hinder BIDs' evolution towards becoming more well-rounded place management bodies that contribute to effective governance structures within their respective areas (Grail *et al.*, 2020). BIDs with a limited scope and funding are unlikely to lead a locality's place management agenda, and the reality that BIDs have not historically had a seat at the table of coordinated disaster management efforts is not surprising. However, securing the survival of people and places during COVID introduced a new, rich repertoire of solutions requiring preparation, response and adaptive measures based on continuous knowledge production on pandemic patterns (Connolly *et al.*, 2020; Ibert *et al.*, 2022). UK BIDs, as integral facilitators of place management initiatives, can naturally be in the forefront of such changes, despite their limitations in terms of managing the public realm (De Magalhães, 2014). Consequently, In order to explore how BIDs managed to navigate their way through the initial stages of the pandemic, it is important to frame their actions and practices within established frameworks that resembled similar crises. We now explore how BID activities are associated with those found in DMFs.

Disaster Management Frameworks (DMFs) and BID activities
Crises, disasters, and pandemics require strategic, coordinated, and methodical responses from surrounding stakeholders that come together as disaster management consortiums and typically include representatives from government, Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs), and

media (Olshansky et al., 2006; Ritchie and Blackman, 2008; Scott et al., 2007; Yeoman et al., 2005). If not properly dealt with, these unexpected occurrences will result in grave, long-lasting consequences for places and entities. Typically, mitigating the effects of a crisis requires coordination, positive stakeholder cooperation, and strategies that will stabilise a vulnerable ecosystem and adapt to current and future risks (Sharma et al., 2021). Disaster management consortiums historically create plans for crisis communications and tactical responses by drafting and implementing DMFs that are broken down by timing (*Proactive Prevention & Planning*, *Crisis & Emergency Response*, etc.) and include activities for consortium members to implement (Becken and Hughey, 2013; Faulkner, 2001; Page *et al.*, 2006; Ritchie, 2004; Ritchie and Jiang, 2019).

In this respect, DMFs emphasise the collaborative, multi-sector effort of members to minimise harm in the broader environment and mitigate risks of overwhelming specific communities and sectors (Coppola, 2015; Tori et al, 2023). In the wake of an impending disaster or crisis, BIDs may appear as an ideal disaster-mitigating organisation that has established mechanisms to coordinate and mobilise resources swiftly, and facilitate collaboration between its levy members and the local authorities (Brettmo and Browne, 2020; Stein et al, 2017). As *Table 2* illustrates, it would not be a grave programmatic departure for BIDs to either take action on or support many of these DMF activities since several already fall within typical BID portfolios.

Phase	Associated Activities	Relevant BID Activities
1. Proactive Prevention & Planning – *Advanced planning when disaster is looming*	- Scenario planning - Collaborative proactive planning - Strategic forecasting - Risk Analysis/Assessments - Contingency/emergency planning	- Working in partnership - Representing the business voice in proactive planning
2. Prodromal – *Crisis has become inevitable*	- Activate warning systems - Establish disaster management command centre - Secure facilities - Launch contingency planning	- Working in partnership to launch plans created in the previous phase

	- Draft response programmes for public and emergency services	- Act as a communication conduit between emergency services and businesses
3. Crisis, Emergency & Response – *Immediate action is required*	- Crisis management and recovery planning - Market segmentation - Recovery promotion - Recovery collaboration - Personnel management - Accessibility increases - Government provides direct business support - Emergency rescue/ evacuation/ accommodation/ food supplies/ medical services - Monitoring/ communications	- Helping businesses apply for government grants - Continue to deliver information through BID communication channels - Lead or work in partnership with the DMO on recovery promotion
4. Pre-Recovery – *New programmes to suit new parameters*	- Damage/audit monitoring systems - Clean-up/restoration - Media communications strategy - Service restoration	- Re-launch previously paused services (i.e., neighbourhood cleaning, etc.) - Prepare the area to welcome visitors back - Media and communications
5. Recovery – *Reinstate normality*	- Infrastructure repair - Reinvestment strategies - Disaster management debriefing - Restoration of consumer confidence - Investment plan development - Recovery marketing through deals/incentives	- Implementing recovery marketing plans - Creating or subsidising deals/incentives from BID businesses - Collaboration on de-briefing and future planning

| 6. Evaluation & Feedback – *Review effectiveness* | - Knowledge management and resilience
- Resilience building
- Adaptability
- Routine restored
- New and improved state
- Long-term contingency planning | - Surveying businesses for feedback on the BID's approach to disaster management
- Internal review |

Table 2: DMF phases and how BIDs can fit in (authors' conceptualisation, based on Becken and Hughey, 2013; Faulkner, 2001; Page et al., 2006; Ritchie, 2004; Ritchie and Jiang, 2019)

However, even with all this crossover present between DMF and typical BID activities, BID involvement in disaster management is still limited in the literature. Olshansky et al. (2006) mention how the Hollywood Improvement District responded to the 1994 Northridge Earthquake in Los Angeles, California by cleaning up retail areas, while Ikeda and Gordon (2007) suggest BID involvement with devolution projects during the post-Hurricane Katrina rebuilding in New Orleans, Louisiana. In South Africa, the 2010 World Cup preparation involved proactive collaboration of Cape Town's CID (City Improvement District) with central government in order to bolster security and policing in anticipation of a possible disaster (Cornelissen, 2011). Other examples include BID involvement in community resilience programmes such as the Main Street programme during the post-disaster recovery of historic preservation areas in Colorado, Iowa and Vermont (Rumbach and Appler, 2019), and their facilitating role in New York City's Open Streets programme during the first wave of the COVID pandemic (Finn, 2020).

What these aforementioned studies lack is an exploration on how BIDs expanded their business practices in response to both anticipating and responding to disasters, considering the pandemic's impact on social sustainability and the need for High Streets to be planned, designed, and curated according to post-pandemic criteria (Carmona, 2022; Guimarães, 2021). This study examines these shifts, by highlighting crossovers between historical DMF activities and BID-based DMF activities that took place during COVID to illustrate the more established role that BIDs played in coordinated disaster management as part of their COVID-era place management responsibilities. Consequently, the study aims to explore the effect of the pandemic on typical UK BID activities, and by extension, to their identity.

Methodology

Our starting point is BIDs' responses to COVID during the first stages of the pandemic, which was spearheaded by strategic work from industry trade organisations - British BIDs (BB), Institute of Place Management (IPM), The BID Foundation (TBF) - and recognition from the UK central government as BIDs being part of the coordinated recovery through the allocation of BID funding within the Coronavirus Act package of 2020. During this period, individual BIDs launched numerous initiatives that focused on business support and provided businesses with guidance on how to navigate measures related to COVID (Gov.uk, 2020). BIDs also provided key intelligence to the national government on the impact of the pandemic on local economies (MHCLG, 2020). Parallel to all of this, BIDs utilised toolkits and guidance from the above trade organisations in order to focus on DMF phase selection.

For this, a mixed-methods, exploratory, sequential approach (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011) was employed to draw insights from key informants (UK BID managers), determine the role of BIDs in managing the COVID disaster, and establish whether COVID has set a precedent to increase future BID involvement in these instances. The study incorporated qualitative (semi-structured interviews) and quantitative (survey) data collection techniques in two distinct phases between October to December 2020, throughout the duration of the first tier-system and the second lockdown in England.

The first phase of data collection consisted of five semi-structured interviews with UK BID managers that had experienced previous instances of crisis/disaster in their areas in the form of terrorist attacks. Full organisation and BID manager names cannot be included due to ethical requirements, however, summaries of the organisations - and the subsequent crises experienced - are included below (*Table 3*).

The interviews focused on examining the level of post-disaster preparedness and planning preparation, and how that then influenced the way that BIDs' activities during the pandemic were altered and thus, perceived by levy payers and other stakeholders. Upon their completion, interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically using NVivo prior to the development of the survey questions. Furthermore, all interview subjects then went on to also participate in the second phase of data collection which consisted of an online survey for UK BID managers.

Year Established	Subject	BID Type	Term Year when interviewed	Disaster type	Approximate annual income
2005	Chief Executive	Commercial	5th year, 3rd term	Terrorist attack	£1,600,000
2005	Chief Executive Officer	Leisure	1st year, 4th term	Terrorist attack	£1,950,000
2013	Chief Executive	Town Centre	3rd year, 2nd term	Terrorist attack	£1,300,000
2014	Chief Executive	Leisure	2nd year, 2nd term	Terrorist attack	£958,000
2014	Chief Executive	Town Centre	2nd year, 2nd term	Terrorist attack	£414,000

Table 3: BID Demographic data on interviewed BIDs

For this, data from the IPM's Map of BIDs (IPM, 2020) was utilised to compile BID manager contact information, which at the time of compiling (June – September 2020) included 316 BIDs. Through this, 289 BID contacts were found and sent survey invites, resulting in 145 BID participants. After data cleaning, 128 surveys were deemed usable. The survey was broken down into the following categories:

Demographic – BID staff size, BID term/year and BID self-definition.

How COVID affected your programmes and services – Asking respondents for how business practices had changed, including what had been launched and cancelled; what worked and what didn't work.

Your Organisational Response to COVID Mitigation – This looked specifically at risk-related documentation and approaches.

BID Industry Future – Here asked about governmental relationships and thoughts on the industry evolution.

Administrative

The survey was primarily quantitative, but also included 378 open-ended qualitative responses that were considered during the iteration of the main themes. These open-ended questions

were analysed thematically via coding. For this, a series of categorical tags were created (such as *Engagement, Communications*, etc.) which is how the data was separated and then assessed. If the responses fell into multiple categories then the response was tagged with all appropriate options. SurveyMonkey was used for the design, distribution, and descriptive analysis of the data. After the completion of both phases, data were triangulated, and themes were refined based on discussions between the authors and the emergent framework that was being developed to explain the enhanced role of BIDs during the pandemic. In this instance, greater emphasis was placed to the qualitative elements of the study (*Creswell et al*., 2003), as the main themes included in the BID-based DMF instrument were also measured and tested based on survey responses, thus allowing for an in-depth understanding of the main themes that catalysed change in BIDs' operations and subsequent roles within the place management field. It is in this context that we utilised phases from place management DMF frameworks (HSTF, 2020) (*Crisis, Pre-Recovery, Recovery and Growth*), to build out a BID-based DMF, however, *Growth* was swapped for *Transformation* after noticing its prevalence in other BID DMFs. The ensuing BID DMF also includes *Proactive Planning*, since this was emphasised as important in both the literature review (Becken and Hughey, 2013; Faulkner, 2001; Ritchie, 2008; Ritchie and Jiang, 2019) and the data. The resulting BID DMF phases are: *Proactive Planning, Crisis, Pre-Recovery, Recovery and Transformation*.

Analysis & Findings

In terms of UK BID industry characteristics, the survey reflected previous evidence (see Grail *et al.,* 2020); the majority of respondents oversaw a town centre BID (80.5%), and most BIDs were operating with a staff of less than five employees (61.7%), followed by a staff of no more than 10 (26.6%). Additionally, the number of BIDs in their first (40.6%) and second (32.8%) 5-year term corresponds to the relative increase in the number of BIDs since 2012 (Cotterill *et al.*, 2019). Almost half of respondents (45.3%) answered that their BID was either on the final (23.4%) or penultimate (21.9%) year of their then current term, highlighting the added pressure on BIDs to deliver services within the COVID pandemic and plan for a ballot vote that would ensure their survival.

With COVID, business needs changed immensely, which had a knock-on effect for BID programmes and services. The data revealed that 93% of BIDs cancelled their pre-existing programmes, with events (90.6%), festivals (62.5%), and networking activities (56.3%) taking the biggest hit. Due to the pandemic, 106 BIDs (82.8%) launched new programmes, focusing

mostly on online events for businesses (53.1%), personal protective equipment (PPE) support and distribution (44.5%), and other activities (40.6%, *n*=52) such as establishing loyalty programmes to shop locally, support with online ordering and distribution of goods, improving the public realm and keeping the public safe, etc. The drastic shift in programme delivery during COVID-19 meant that BID managers perceived levy payer communications (6.54) as the most important activity on a scale from 1-7, with 7 as most important, followed by lobbying with local council/government (4.65), partnership work (4.44) and safety and security (3.85). Conversely, activities such as long-term budgeting (3.23), procuring and distribution of BID-related signage (2.77) and public space maintenance (2.52) were deemed as least important due to the uncertain and disruptive nature of COVID.

These COVID-related business practices brought a renewed focus on relationship building and rethinking on long-term planning. Additionally, 106 respondents (82.8%) rated their organisations' responses to COVID as effective, very effective or extremely effective, and this optimism was also evident in evaluations on the future of the industry, with 108 (84.4%) respondents believing that BIDs will evolve from the pandemic response, mainly by prioritising new services (75%), and strengthening partnerships with local authorities and place-based organisations (68.8%).

In terms of presence of DMF activities and processes prior to the pandemic, 75 respondents (58.6%) noted that a risk assessment was in place, while 53 (41.4%) stated that a business continuity plan existed. However, 61.7% of BID managers created a response document to navigate through the crisis, with 27.3% that did not create a detailed document, but did put processes into place. Interestingly, 38.3% of BID managers did not follow any frameworks but responded in real time to the problems that arose during the crisis. This is also highlighted in respondents' evaluation of the importance of DMF stages, as 69.6% ranked the *Crisis, Emergency & Response* stage as either the most (38.3%) or the second (31.3%) most important in managing the COVID pandemic.

Assessing changes in BID operations and identity
Whereas changes in operations and activities resembled what was happening in the majority of High Street industries during the initial lockdown period, the place management-centric role of BIDs necessitated further actions that warranted a review of their internal practices. The nuanced role of BIDs as both external-facing place management bodies and business support

conduits, which also faced their own internal challenges due to COVID uncertainty, was evident in our free-text qualitative data. This section highlights how often certain themes appeared in open-ended questions on BIDs' achievements, challenges, and outcome/impact measurements of their COVID responses.

Table 4 presents the achievements, challenges, and impact of BIDs during COVID. Respondents acknowledged that communications (43.38%), engagement (26.68%) and lobbying (26.47%) with levy payers and other partners were amongst their biggest achievements, which highlights the effectiveness of BID mechanisms in relation to mitigating risk and offering support for businesses during lockdown periods. Specifically, BIDs communicated vital information about business survival in a way that aligned with governmental intentions, resulting in a BID-led "clear and well-articulated representation of business interests" (De Magalhães, 2014, p. 170) during this period.

"We can digitally measure the number of businesses signing up to be involved via our City app, signing up via social media and website subscriptions, personal phone calls to over 90 businesses to sign up for grants (8 businesses did not know they could apply) £10,000 x 8 = Total £80,000 awarded to these individual businesses because of direct phone calls from Ops Manager - (All other staff Furloughed in Lockdown 1)." - Survey Respondent #50

Despite the urgency of the COVID response, the complexities of communicating information regarding funding and business measures were also evident, particularly in businesses that were hard to reach (21.32%), and in articulating the context in which government policy U-turns (16.91%) took place. Unsurprisingly, levy collection (33.09%) in a time of grave financial uncertainty posed a severe challenge to BID viability, since there was no guarantee of a commercial income for businesses that had to prioritise other day-to-day requirements. However, BIDs' COVID response programmes led to an increased interest in what BIDs do from levy payers, as showcased in the right column of *Table 4* (impact measurement). Respondents noted that an uplift in engagement (44.85%) was welcomed by levy payers, as indicated by their increasing online engagement in terms of metrics (25.74%) (e.g. reading newsletters, visiting websites, participating in online events). Additionally, proactive measures such as the distribution of PPE and safety-related material (26.47%), as well as providing added support during grant application processes (25%) were deemed as the best ways for BIDs to measure their impact.

Achievements		Challenges		Impact Measurement	
Theme	Respondent %	Theme	Respondent %	Theme	Respondent %
Communications	43.38%	Levy delay/collection	33.09%	Engagement	44.85%
Engagement	26.68%	Hard-to-reach businesses	21.32%	Safety Supply Distribution	26.47%
Lobbying/Partnerships	26.47%	Government policy U-turns	16.91%	Communication metrics	25.74%
Grant support	16.91%	BID staff bandwidth	15.44%	Supporting business to obtain grants	25%
Reopening support	15.44%	Pivoting BID offer	14.71%	Event Attendance	16.18%
New BID services	13.24%	Local Authority Issues	10.29%	Survey	11.76%
Response Speed	11.76%	Safety & Security	5.15%	Collaboration w/ Government	6.62%
Public Realm	11.03%	Re-opening Support	2.94%	BID sponsored grants	4.41%
Safety Supply Distribution	8.09%	Remote Working	1.47%	Funding for the BID	3.68%
Sourcing Funding	8.09%				
Security	6.62%				

Table 4: Achievements, Challenges and Impact measurement themes from BIDs' responses to COVID

"We supported over 100 businesses to apply for both the original Covid grant, and the new grant after the fire-break lockdown in [redacted]. Businesses were incredibly grateful, we've also asked the Council's rates department for regular updates and progress on individual cases as businesses were struggling to get in contact with the local authority. I believe we could have invested more in PPE as I noticed the impact it had in other BIDs in [redacted], we did purchase 750 floor stickers which were very popular and businesses have returned to the BID to collect more once they have been washed away/damaged giving them a regular supply and ensuring customers feel safe in the town centre." - Survey respondent #34

"1000 distancing floor stickers distributed. 200 webinar and training session attendees. 2 businesses assisted with Crowdfunding. 50 levy payers assisted with grant applications. Approximately 600 people reached per day through e-comms. 2 empty units filled." - Survey Respondent #51

An exploration of the open-ended qualitative survey responses combined with the interview data highlighted the existence of four prevalent themes - with associated subthemes - that regularly arose in the data. The data also included associated activities which articulated each theme. All of these are demonstrated in *Table 5* and analysed further in this section.

Themes	Subthemes	Associated BID Activities Derived from the Data
Communications	Frequency, Maintaining Contact Databases, Tone shift, Engagement, Trust building	● Shop local campaigns & apps ● B2B Business webinars ● Recovery marketing campaigns ● Business communications on grants ● Interpretation and dissemination of COVID guidance and regulations for businesses
Partnerships & Place Leadership	Lobbying, High stakes arenas, Relationship building, Local law enforcement,	● Working more closely in partnership with the local authority in obtaining grants for businesses ● Lobbying for supportive streams of funding ● Spearheading the creation of COVID action groups

	Government, Stakeholders	● Restructuring delivery plans to play a role in tourism recovery
Public Safety & Public Realm	Partnerships, Risk-related Documentation, Neighbourhood Maintenance, Partnership lead change	● Licencing and execution support for outdoor seating & furniture ● Street art and vacant shop front vinyls to showcase a looked after area ● Onboarding of new safety personnel ● Working in partnership to implement movement interventions such as road closures ● Providing PPE and supplies to businesses
Resilience & Identity	Pivoting, Role of the BID, Proactive planning, Funding, Uncertainty, Bouncing back	● Support for distribution of food parcels, delivery services and contactless ordering ● Employee training and assistance programmes ● Securing funding for the BID and member businesses ● BID staff pivoting to design fit for purpose programmes

Table 5: Themes and subthemes highlighting BIDs' COVID response

Communications

Communications are cornerstone to BID activities, with BIDs typically being responsible for sharing internal information to levy payers and external communications to the public (Cook, 2008; Hoyt, 2004). COVID required a change in tone wherein BIDs had to act as essential conduits between levy payers and government by unlocking access to vital information and repackaging and redistributing this information to levy payers, resulting in deeper levels of engagement with 95 BIDs (74.2%) ranking Levy Payer Communications as the #1 most important part of their BID programme during COVID. By BIDs having played this trusted role, they were seen as more than just neighbourhood marketing organisations and instead, as reliable connectors between business and government. While communications may have already been an essential tenet to BID practices (Hemphill *et al.*, 2014), it was the changing nature of communications that contributed to a shift in BID identity during COVID.

"I think [with] COVID, actually, they've [levy payers] come to us far more than ever. Our engagement has been better than it's ever been. And particularly, businesses that have always been very quiet for years, have suddenly come out of the woodwork, asking for help. And that they did in 2017 and 2019 [during terrorist attacks], but to a much lesser extent, I think." – Subject D, Study 1, Interview data

"The communications strategy was key. Businesses were in panic mode and came to us for support and signposting, much more than going to, say, the city council. We became a go-to place for businesses during the lockdowns." – Survey Respondent #122

<u>Partnerships & Place Leadership</u>

The importance of partnerships and their formation rose in prominence during COVID, helping establish BIDs as trusted arbiters of place leadership. For example, 38.3% of BIDs (*n*=49) reported launching Business Lobbying campaigns during COVID with 60.2% of BIDs describing relationships with the local authority as strengthening during COVID, showing that BIDs took the lead in representing business voices during COVID. BIDs also relied on partnerships by selecting contractors with added value – such as the Council for cleaning or local law enforcement for public safety – which increased BID access to high stakes forums. BID partnerships leaned in both directions, with BIDs acting as essential to government as government was to BIDs. Furthermore, during COVID, BIDs also represented levy payers through new groups, such as the London Tourism Recovery Board, which helped secure £6m in London Mayoral support for the *Let's Do London* domestic tourism campaign (Mayor of London, 2021). Also, both Croydon BID-lead *#RaiseTheBar* and *#BounceBackBetter* (Croydon BID, 2020) campaigns called on government to increase business access to funding. Overall, BID partnerships provided BIDs with elevated opportunities to represent levy payer interests, yielding increased trust between levy payers and BIDs; thus, augmenting BID identity towards that of place leaders.

"We were able to take some pressure off the local authority and let them do their job i.e. processing grants, while we remained available for support with grants, guidance throughout lock down." - Survey Respondent #34

" [Our biggest achievement was] the levels of buy-in, support and collaboration for our recovery planning within the business and wider communities[…] the fact that the [town name] Positive Engagement Plan as it is called, has been adopted as a best practice template by our unitary authority to aid and support numerous towns and areas across the region." – Survey Respondent #47

Public Safety & Public Realm

During previous crises, BIDs utilised partnerships to obtain intelligence about the cordon areas or patrol reports. During COVID, BIDs launched new public safety and PPE initiatives – such as hiring patrols to look after empty neighbourhoods . Through their experiences of previous crises, interview subjects saw public safety as beginning at an internal, strategic level through proactively creating risk registers or business continuity plans. These sentiments were supported by survey data such as the presence of COVID response documentation for the majority of BIDs, which shows a behavioural change and investment into proactive planning, placing safety at the forefront of BID identity. COVID also gave BIDs an opportunity to influence the public realm by assisting businesses with tables and chairs licences or by working with local authorities to implement changes to traffic patterns that encourage walking and cycling. Alternatively, some BIDs reduced public realm responsibilities through the suspension of projects with 27.3% (n=35) cancelling neighbourhood beautification and 14.1% (n=18) cancelling neighbourhood cleansing, highlighting some uncertainty surrounding funding as levy invoices were either delayed or cancelled during the pandemic.

"In partnership with [local authorities], we successfully applied for £1.3 million […] to support the 'Spaces for People' strategy […] working with businesses we looked to increase pedestrian space to allow us to open up [sic] the city centre safely. Moreover, this allowed us to maximise business opportunities with an expansion of our cafe culture (outside seating/dining) - even in the far flung north of the country." - Survey Respondent #134

"You know, we are at like absolute red, highest level of impact on the risk register, therefore, we've got to do something about it. This is our plan to do, this is what it's going to cost, you know, can we sign it off? And then you'd then expect that to have a positive impact, you know, either in terms of reducing the risk or the impact, rather." – Subject B, Study 1, interview data

For interview subjects, the combination of previous instances of crisis with COVID exacerbated their need to begin mapping out long-term planning strategies. Prior to COVID, the BID model itself had proven to be resilient during previous periods of economic downturn (De Magalhães, 2012)**.** However, there is worry surrounding how the BID model will continue to remain viable. COVID saw BIDs taking on entirely different project portfolios while at the same time, fearing for their own survival by knowing first-hand the financial difficulties felt by levy payers, who are the main funding source for BIDs. BIDs must adapt to lessons learned from both previous crises and from COVID by building in strategic plans for resiliency and thinking beyond typical five-year BID terms. A way that this had already begun taking place is through organisational introspection, as evidenced by interview subjects during the aftermath of their original crises, resulting in a shift in approach towards prioritising long-term planning and public safety initiatives. This shows that the BID industry is seeing itself change, requiring industry-wide reflection on how to move this forward successfully. For those thinking that services and priorities will change, it is a question of exactly how they will change and furthermore, what this then will mean for BID identity, altogether.

"But I think we are now moving into a place where we're much more explicitly talking about it [resilience], as almost our mission statement. You know, yes, the events, the vibrant stuff, it's still gonna be there if the funding is there. But actually, that maintaining the resilience of the city centre, its ability to continue to evolve and to move, and all those things, is going to be much more explicit in what we do." – Subject A, Study 1, interview data

"And I think one of the big things that BIDs…We said it in 2017 and we continue to say now, what we need to understand and know is: What is our role? We are not, you know, you can be pulled down into and think, you know, but you have to be very…particularly, in terms of the, you know, the 2017 attacks, we are NOT the emergency services. And there are people that are completely…that is how…we needed to be at the table but definitely, you know, we're not, we're not the lead. And we shouldn't be and we should be helping, in no way hindering. So, I think that's something, it's one of the things I'd even…spoken up to." – Subject D, Study 1, interview data

Discussion & Conclusion

In this paper, we explored the responses of UK BIDs during the COVID pandemic, with a focus on understanding the different range of activities and processes that BIDs incorporated during COVID, and how these may have impacted the evolution of the industry. From a DMF perspective, the thematic synergies suggest that BIDs could realistically play a role in coordinated disaster management since the industry's response to COVID has shown a general sense of alignment to what has historically taken place (*Table 2*). This is an important finding that further accentuates the importance of inserting BIDs into the strategic trajectory of post-pandemic recovery; our analysis brought forward BIDs' coordinated attempts to provide levy payers with constant communications, business support, business lobbying, alternative sales channels, and funding stream opportunities, as well as promoting the safe, clean, and secure mantra, with help from local authorities, to reinstill a sense of normality in the public realm.

There is clear merit here in enhancing the partnerships that most BIDs have in place with their levy payers, public, local authorities and even with central government. Busch and Givens (2013) contend that partnerships in times of crisis can strengthen resilience in multiple ways. Firstly, at the strategic level, the role of BIDs during the pandemic permitted local authorities to focus on more administrative priorities and leave certain actions (e.g., business support and communications about grants) to BIDs. Similarly at the operational level, being able to approach levy payments with flexibility and focus on the changing business and wider community needs was paramount to industry resilience, as well as working in partnership to obtain financial gain and support via PPE and other safety measures. Finally, at the tactical level, most BIDs facilitated the process of delivering goods and services from local businesses to their wider community in new and unconventional ways, a sign of adapting swiftly and alleviating the financial hardship of many businesses. It can be argued that the change in practices and business operations constitutes a different shift for BIDs towards more inward-looking activities and longer-term strategizing, which can strongly influence BIDs' willingness and likelihood to prepare proactively for future emergencies (Djalante *et al.,* 2020).

BID-based Disaster Management Framework
PROACTIVE PLANNING   **Public Safety & Public Realm**

- o Dedicate time to creating risk related documentation

Partnerships & Place Leadership

- o Seek partner support on risk related documentation templates or advice
- o Explore opportunities for BID contracts that offer added value, such as outsourcing public safety to the local law enforcement arm

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CRISIS

Communications

- o Establish a set plan for tone, frequency and mode (i.e., phone calls, newsletters, social media, website, etc.) of outgoing communications
- o Review and update contact database for accuracy and expediency
- o Maintain consistent communication, delineating with levy payers what you do and do not know

Resilience & Identity

- o Review BID programme, cancelling or reimagining activities which are no longer viable
- o Keeping bandwidth in mind, review and redistribute staff responsibilities
- o Audit and halt auxiliary services and contracts

Partnerships & Place Leadership

- o Establish open dialogue with local authority on shared goal of supporting levy payers
- o Tap into regional or industry-specific networks (tourism, public safety) for lobbying support

Public Safety & Public Realm

- o Activate in-house risk related documentation
- o Explore bulk buying of safety-relevant equipment for levy payers

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PRE-RECOVERY

Communications

- o Continue regularly established engagement
- o Strategize neighbourhood reopening support
- o Survey levy payers to inform BID programme pivots
- o Establish a system to monitor engagement (CRM tracking, etc.)
- o Explore digital opportunities to replace live ones (online ordering systems, online training, etc.)

Resilience & Identity

- o Review internal funding capabilities (grants, etc.) for potential levy payer support
- o Explore external opportunities to support the BID
- o Remain aware and attuned to capacity of internal capabilities

Partnerships & Place Leadership

- o Lobby for levy payer needs (i.e., licensing, funding) with decision making bodies
- o Monitor the national conversation, including what role the BID industry plays in shaping it

Public Safety & Public Realm

- o Determine neighbourhood dressing strategy in preparation for re-opening
- o Review historical data trends (footfall) to inform future KPIs

RECOVERY

Communications

- o Continue regularly established engagement
- o Launch new neighbourhood promotion campaign (i.e., 'Welcome Back')

Partnerships & Place Leadership

- o Capitalise on future funding opportunities from regional/national sources

Resilience & Identity

- o Launch modified, reimagined programmes that are contextually appropriate
- o Review and respond to internal changes caused by BID levy cash flow

Public Safety & Public Realm

- o Re-launch tabled services, such as neighbourhood maintenance

TRANSFORMATION

Communications

- o Maintain consistent dialogue, continuing to remind levy payers of support received during previous phases

Partnerships & Place Leadership

- o Maintain and foster newly established relationships formed during the crisis

Resilience & Identity

- o Capacity building: Commit to an in-house repository of risk related documentation
- o Big picture thinking: Strategize and plan for how this experience has affected the BID's role in the neighbourhood's overall future
- o Review internal changes to the BID programme; establish what has staying power

Table 6: BID-based DMF, based on authors' elaboration of a BID's enhanced identity

Furthermore, a communications shift took place through BIDs modifying their tone and frequency while increasing signposting to vital and timely, official information. Communications-related programmes such as neighbourhood marketing and events were replaced with alternatives such as online events or locally based online shopping platforms. Additionally, intra-industry communications also increased, through TBF's *COVID-19 toolkit, Planning for the recovery: Guidance for BIDS* (The BID Foundation, 2020) and British BIDs' support papers such as *Supporting our High Streets after COVID-19* (British BIDs, 2020) and *Business Improvement Districts and the 'New Normal': Their Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020* (British BIDs, 2021) all of which were made available to members and non-members. This enhancement in communication channels - mainly due to necessity – may help tackle the operational difficulty of communication between BIDs and businesses and could subsequently allow for continuous stakeholder involvement in the implementation of future BID business and/or emergency plans (De Magalhães, 2012).

Partnership work strengthened during COVID with BIDs more often in communication with local authorities and decision makers and by lobbying for levy payers in these newly created forums. BIDs also acted as place leaders when TBF and British BIDs - amongst other place management organisations - were asked to provide written evidence to *The House of Commons: Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee* (Institute of Place Management, 2021) for their inquiry, *Supporting our High Streets during COVID-19* (House of Commons, 2021)*.* The resulting inquiry praised BIDs for their place-based work during COVID which protected commercial areas and public health (House of Commons, 2021). Here BIDs are receiving public praise in an arena of high-level peers, supporting the proposition that BID identity has elevated during COVID.

Overall, our research contends that the COVID disaster gave an opportunity to BIDs to strengthen their identity as place leaders, responsible for maintaining order during times of disaster and disruption. The coordinated response that most BIDs followed acted largely as a catalyst for enhanced partnership-working and proactive and continuous communication. The

practical implications of this work show a shift in BID business practices, programmes, and services. With BIDs now moving towards this newly expanded role, a pressing need is now shown for the BIDs industry to establish a set of industry standards and best practices that can be based on a combination of what was in place before, during and after COVID.

Moving forwards, BIDs are likely to have a more direct role in coordinated disaster management by influencing the type of support programmes designed by the government to uplift local economies during times of disaster. This could translate into having more BID representation in high stakes forums (Mayor of London, 2021), however, approaching this in practice will come with its own set of challenges since there are more than one UK BID industry trade body to consider for this type of representation. Moreover, our study suggests that UK BIDs may have increased their social control on the regulation of their delimited areas based on the development of context-specific DMFs (Kudla, 2022). Further research could include exploring exactly how BIDs have utilised their DMF expertise in practice once the COVID pandemic has subsided, by looking at COVID's tangible influence on the industry's evolution, as well as understanding if BIDs have legitimised their post-COVID identity, and in what ways (e.g. lobbying for more control) (Kudla, 2021).

Understandably, the following study has limitations associated with providing a snapshot of a UK BID industry navigating through an enduring crisis. An additional direction for future research could be to examine this topic in other countries, notably those that have longer histories of BIDs, such as Canada or the United States. If these other locations prove that BIDs have played a more impactful role in disaster management, such as during New York's 9/11 incident, then lessons learned from these examples may help continue to pave the way for the UK BID industry's future role as a more integral part of coordinated disaster management. Additionally, further investigation in the nuances of the themes that were presented here can potentially help BID researchers and practitioners to identify similarities and differences in other BID types that are currently under development, such as neighbourhood-based BIDs in residential areas (Kusevski *et al.*, 2022) or Community Improvement Districts (CIDs) (Plumb, 2021). Furthermore, our proposed BID-based DMF is one tool that BID managers can add to their future business plans and strategies, as it also highlights the enhanced leadership responsibilities of BIDs versus entities typically responsible for disaster management, such as government.

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