

BELFAST REGION CITY DEAL



Annual Report
2024-25



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SECTION

1

PROGRAMME OVERVIEW

Purpose and ambition

As early as 2017, when the idea of a City Deal was first mooted, it was already apparent that the Belfast Region offered substantial economic, business, and employment opportunities. However it was also clear that there remained untapped potential within the local economy.

At the same time, barriers to participation in the workforce and physical and other connectivity barriers - compounded by increasing misalignment in the skills landscape - were continuing to hamper economic growth.

The Belfast Region was born out of the shared ambitions of a range of partners who understood that a collaborative, cross-organisational approach would be required if they were to successfully address the challenges - and maximise the strengths - of the many economic and social issues that straddled their geographic and organisational boundaries.

In recognising these things, this City Deal for the Belfast Region focused its attention on delivering a collective programme of activity designed to support innovation, deliver more and better quality jobs, improve physical and digital connectivity, increase tourism, regenerate major urban spaces and ultimately leverage further private sector investment to make a significant positive impact on the economic landscape.

Impact of the Belfast Region City Deal (BRCD)

It is estimated that over the lifetime of the programme the Belfast Region City Deal will:

-  support the creation of up to **20,000 jobs**
-  **connect local people to new and better jobs**
-  place the region at the **top table of digital innovation**
-  deliver **£400 million in GVA** directly on-site and within the region
-  target delivery of almost **£1 billion of private sector leverage**
-  create compelling **world-class visitor attractions**
-  help to **regenerate major towns and cities**
-  foster **collaborative working**

Having secured a funding package of £850m, the overall ambition of this Deal is to drive:

// Inclusive economic growth that delivers more and better jobs, a positive impact on the most deprived communities and a balanced spread of benefits across the region. //

Profile of the region

Understanding the economic and social profile of this region allowed the partners to agree a Deal that would respond to both engrained challenges and prepare for future opportunities. The development of the 2018 Industrial Framework laid the groundwork for defining the City Deal's investment priorities and the 2025 refresh of that Framework shows that many of the challenges identified at that stage remain relevant.

With a population of 1.1 million, more than half of whom are under the age of 40, Belfast City Region accounts for almost 60% of Northern Ireland's total population and generates approximately £32.6 billion in GVA - 65.2% of Northern Ireland's total (ONS, 2024).

Stretching across six council areas, encompassing a unique blend of cities, towns, villages, rural landscapes and coastal areas, it is no surprise that the tourism potential of the area is high. Also included among the diverse range of sectors contributing to the local economy are digital, creative industries, financial services, advanced manufacturing, life and health sciences and engineering. Given the profile of business operations and the types of workplace jobs supported, it is also unsurprising that the region produces such a significant level of economic output.

Despite a number of lingering challenges, which reflect the challenges facing Northern Ireland more generally, recent economic indicators record an increase in economic output and a boost in the region's attractiveness to tourists and businesses over the last number of years. Significant progress to enhance digital connectivity and improve infrastructure development over recent years have also further strengthened the region's appeal.

Both the economic landscape and the social and political context have changed significantly since the inception of this City Deal process in 2018.

The Covid-19 pandemic threw society and the economy into turmoil - from which we are continuing to recover. On the political level, we now have a new government at Stormont and new political leadership at Westminster. There are indications from the new Westminster administration that the government is keen to further promote more devolved decision making; *"a permanent shift of power ... into the hands of those who know their communities best... efficient and accountable local and regional government, with local champions who understand their local places, their identities and strengths, and how to harness them."*

The NI Executive's draft Programme for Government also offers a changing local context since 2018. Through its ambition to "Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy", the Executive seeks to address issues including infrastructure, innovation, and productivity. This ambition is supported by an economic vision from the Economy Minister that centres on regional balance, good jobs, productivity, and climate, all of which the BRCD supports and enhances.

Identifying the opportunity

The challenges facing the region - such as economic inactivity, relatively low productivity, labour force shortages, physical and connectivity infrastructure issues, deprivation and misalignment between skills and job opportunities - and the strengths it boasts, have together helped to inform the economic and investment priorities of the Deal.

As we move through delivery stage we will remain aware of our strengths which allow us to focus on continuing to promote high growth sectors, to explore whatever benefits dual market access may bring, to drive our tourism sector and improve our towns and cities with concerted regenerative efforts, to promote innovation and to remain on the front foot in areas such as advanced manufacturing and healthcare in order to create funding pathways that will allow us to implement future digital solutions. And we will do all this with a lens turned to the net zero agenda.

To make this work, we are continuing to explore the employability and skills opportunities that will be created by this Deal and to encourage our delivery agents to develop skills solutions and realign resources so that local people are well positioned to avail of those opportunities.

Observing further changes since the outset of the Deal process allows us to continue to adjust and tailor our investment efforts where they will add greatest value.

Inclusive and sustainable growth

Delivering economic growth that is both inclusive and sustainable, and which benefits all parts of the region, remains a central objective of this investment.

It is clear that inclusive growth and social value are essential to sustainable economic growth because they ensure that the benefits of prosperity are shared fairly across all communities and regions.

Actions to incorporate inclusive, sustainable growth are baked into the ambition of the Deal which commits itself to balancing social and environmental needs with economic improvements. The BRCD will deliver its vision for inclusive and sustainable economic growth through:

- an underpinning employability and skills programme in preparation for the emerging job opportunities,
- integration of social value commitments into project design, development and delivery; and
- use of additional policy levers to promote inclusive growth where possible.

To ensure social value is integrated within BRCD projects in a consistent way, the BRCD Executive Board has agreed that projects should apply the Social Value Points Based approach developed by the Strategic Investment Board Social Value Unit.

By focusing not only on financial outcomes but also on social and environmental impacts, inclusive growth helps to reduce inequality, improve wellbeing, and build stronger, more resilient communities. Integrating social value into economic planning supports long-term sustainability by considering future generations and promoting climate resilience alongside economic progress. These goals remain central to this programme of investment.

SECTION 2

DELIVERING THE BRCD INVESTMENT PROGRAMME

The BRCD aims to deliver 20,000 new and better jobs over its lifetime.

These jobs will span key sectors including digital innovation, advanced manufacturing, creative industries, tourism, and life and health sciences, reflecting the programme's emphasis on economic transformation and regional growth.

Over the three years since the signing of the Deal in December 2021, the programme of investment is now delivering clear results. At the overall Programme level, 2024-25 was a highly encouraging year as we began to witness some very tangible progress.

Specific progress since last year has included:

- an additional four projects – **i4C Innovation & Cleantech Centre, Destination Royal Hillsborough, the Gobbins Phase 2 and Mourne Mountains Gateway**, with Contracts for Funding and Funding Agreements in place,
- three full business cases now approved with the addition of **iREACH Health** this year,
- an increase of five projects – including two projects within the **Bangor Waterfront programme, i4C, Mourne Mountain Gateway** and **CDHT** - to design stage,
- another project, **iREACH Health** at construction; and
- one further project, **Studio Ulster**, now operational.

Two additional Skills Assessments have been completed for the Virtual Production and Digital Sectors and an additional 4,700 social value points, bringing to 10,935 the total number of social value points¹ now committed through the various contracts associated with the BRCD projects.

The most advanced projects are now recruiting and upskilling staff, constructing new premises, co-designing projects with industry, procuring next generation technology and equipment, and moving fully into operation.

By the end of March 2025 - with 16 Outline Business Cases and three Full Business Cases approved (at a combined project value of £620m) 13 Contracts for Funding signed, two projects already operational, two in construction or fit-out stage, 13 projects at design phase, five with planning approvals, and four skills assessments completed - it is clear that the programme of investment is firmly in delivery phase, reflecting significant momentum over the last year.

16

OBC approved



13

CfF and FA signed



3

FBC approved



2

FBC drafting



+£620m

Value of projects with signed CfFs



+£41m

Claims paid to partners



3

ICT Procurement ongoing



13

Design stage



3

Planning Submitted



5

Planning approved



4

IST Procurement ongoing



21

No. of contracts awarded with SV included



10,000+

No of SV points committed in SIB portal



3,000+

No of SV points delivered in SIB portal



2

Construction/ Fit-out



2

Operational



4

Skills Assessments complete



1

Skills Assessments drafting



CfF - Contract for Funding

FA - Funding Agreement

FBC - Full Business Case

ICT- Integrated Consultancy Team

IST - Integrated Supply Team

OBC - Outline Business Case

SIB - Strategic Investment Board

SV - Social Value

¹ Social Value indicators from PPN 01/21 are broken down into subsequent initiatives each of which has been allocated a number of social value points. Suppliers must deliver a minimum of 100 social value points per £1m of contract value. These points help to ensure that social value outcomes are delivered through public sector contracts.

DELIVERING THE PILLARS OF INVESTMENT

Innovation

BRCD investment in innovation will create new Centres of Excellence spanning the advanced manufacturing, health and life sciences and digital and creative sectors, bringing together great minds and creative thinking to solve some of the biggest global challenges, while also creating real-world impact through connected, purpose-driven innovation.

A high performing innovation system is a critical success factor for strong economic performance, particularly within small economies such as Northern Ireland ².

In addition to unlocking private sector investment, the City Deal Centres of Excellence will enable access to an estimated £250m of R&D funding which Northern Ireland has previously been unable to benefit from³.

The projects will support businesses as they attempt to access major funding opportunities from outside the region to reap the benefits of distinctive, long-term sectoral strengths.



AMIC - Advanced Manufacturing Innovation Centre

An industry-led, open access manufacturing and engineering innovation centre with state-of-the-art facilities and an expert engineering team.

Funding:
BRCD contribution £78.7 million.

Status update:
Construction of 'Factory of the Future' at Global Point, Newtownabbey commenced March 2024.



iREACH Health

iREACH Health will accelerate clinical trial delivery, strengthen industry partnerships and improve patient access to high-quality research.

Funding:
BRCD contribution £39.7 million.

Status update:
Construction commenced December 2024.

² The strategic integration of skills & innovation policy in Northern Ireland: An international small economy perspective, David Skilling, July 2019
³ The Missing £4 Billion Making R&D work for the whole UK, NESTA, May 2020



Momentum One Zero

A business-led innovation centre creating commercial value for companies at the convergence of data, cyber security, Artificial Intelligence and wireless technologies.

Funding:
BRCD contribution £52.4 million.

Status update:
Planning approved November 2024.
Contractor procurement ongoing.



CDHT - Centre for Digital Healthcare Technology

Accelerating a dynamic, productive, open innovation ecosystem for the development of innovative medical technology devices and diagnostics.

Funding:
BRCD contribution £34.0 million.

Status update:
Contract for Funding signed December 2024.
Planning application submitted March 2025.



Studio Ulster

The world's most advanced virtual production facility at Belfast's Giant's Park.

Funding:
BRCD contribution £25.2 million.

Status update:
Operational with official launch June 2025.

Digital

A successful digital innovation ecosystem has a key role to play in contributing to economic inclusion and sustainable growth for the region. The BRCD's £120m long-term, challenge-led, flexible programme has been developed to enable partners to keep pace with the rate of technological and societal change.

The programme of digital investment will help to address key areas of challenge such as artificial intelligence and data, health and wellbeing and sustainability and resilience - and will complement the investments being made by the Deal in Centres of Excellence in innovation, research and development, with a consistent focus on areas where the region can be distinctive and competitive.

The Digital Programme is at an earlier stage of development and is divided into three distinct areas of investment.

- 1. Innovation Challenge Fund**
A £55m investment designed to help address the agreed regional Grand Challenges of Artificial Intelligence & Data, Health & Wellbeing and Sustainability & Resilience, utilising agile financial instruments which could include R&D grant funding, risk finance and an SBRI-style programme.
- 2. Enabling Infrastructure**
A £25m investment in 'Enabling Infrastructure' to support the investment in advanced wireless infrastructure and other enabling infrastructure to support digital innovation across the region.
- 3. Regional Innovation Hubs**
A £40m investment in 'Regional Innovation Hubs' to ensure diffusion of innovation and skills throughout the region, building further on sub-regional strengths including the creative sector, digital twin technologies and cleantech.

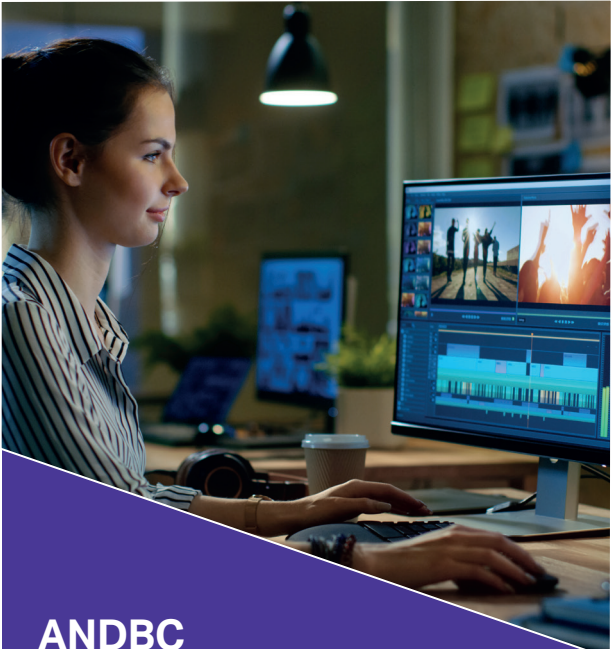


Augment the City

Enabling innovators to develop ideas, using immersive technologies, to support the future proofing of visitor attractions in the region.

Funding:
BRCD contribution £0.9 million.

Status update:
6 companies have progressed to Phase 2 of the Challenge Competition ⁴.



ANDBC Innovation Hub

State-of-the art innovation space for the creative industries, based in Hollywood.

Funding:
BRCD contribution £8.9 million.

Status update:
OBC approved December 2024.
Contract for Funding drafted.

⁴ A Small Business Research Initiative challenge call, and a pilot project to test the planned innovation for the Societal Impact Challenge Fund in early real-world learning



i4C Innovation & Cleantech Centre

An innovation and clean technology centre of significant scale in Ballymena for SMEs, encouraging open innovation, collaboration, and support.

Funding:

BRCD contribution £20.5 million.

Status update:

Contract for Funding drafted, detailed design ongoing.



UK Digital Twin Centre

Providing common, shared physical and digital infrastructure to support the development of digital twins, focusing initially on sectors which include aerospace and maritime.

Funding:

BRCD contribution £15.0 million.

Status update:

Centre launch May 2025.

Tourism and Regeneration

The BRCD investment in Tourism and Regeneration aims to create regional, sustainable, year-round tourism products that will provide standout offers in international markets and create spill over benefits for local economies, including delivery of a range of employment opportunities across all skill levels.

The proposed Tourism and Regeneration projects will help to address a legacy of under investment, building on key areas of economic strength and creating resilience to future shocks and stresses.

Alongside new tourism products, investment is being directed towards towns that have suffered from industrial decline and economic restructuring, so that they have the opportunity to play a full part in the region's growth.

The regenerative outturn of this investment will see transformational improvements in the quality of the environment that will benefit local economies and communities, promote public wellbeing and serve as a catalyst for investment from, and collaboration with, private sector businesses.



Bangor Waterfront

This redevelopment will make the city a 'destination of choice' once again, reflecting the location's individuality and shared heritage and culture.

Funding:
BRCD contribution £40.0 million.

Status update:
Detailed design ongoing for Ballyholme Yacht Club and Pickie Park.



Belfast Stories

A landmark £100 million visitor destination, public space and creative hub close to Cathedral Quarter, which will speak to the essence of Belfast and its people.

Funding:
BRCD contribution £65.0 million.

Status update:
OBC prepared, detailed design ongoing.



Destination Royal Hillsborough

Establishing a high quality, leading visitor experience, while regenerating the village with an enhanced, sustainable cultural and heritage offer.

Funding:
BRCD contribution £20.0 million.

Status update:
Contract for Funding signed June 2024.
Design team procurements ongoing.



Carrickfergus Regeneration

Regeneration as an authentic heritage-led tourism hub; the 'must-visit' starting point of the internationally recognised Causeway Coastal Route.

Funding:
BRCD contribution £26.4 million.

Status update:
Detailed design and stakeholder engagement ongoing.



The Gobbins Phase 2

An iconic staircase structure will link existing cliff top and cliff face paths, to create a must see visitor attraction on the Antrim coast.

Funding: BRCD contribution £12.6 million.

Status update: Contract for Funding signed May 2024. Detailed design ongoing.



Mourne Mountains Gateway Project⁵

Redefining the majestic Mourne Mountains visitor experience, establishing a visitor centre and creating a mountainside Gondola experience.

Funding:

BRCD contribution £30.0 million.

Status update:

Contract for Funding signed May 2024.
Detailed design ongoing.



Newry City Centre Regeneration

This investment will deliver a civic and regional hub, theatre/conferencing facilities, public realm improvements and Grade A office provision.

Funding:

BRCD contribution £8.0 million.

Status update:

Planning application submitted.
Contractor procurement ongoing.

⁵ Since this report was prepared, The National Trust has confirmed that it is unwilling to provide a lease for the MMGP and NMDDC is considering next steps.

Infrastructure

Modern, world-class infrastructure enables economic growth, builds connections to markets and opportunities, gets people to jobs in a sustainable way, and is a key consideration for inward investors.

However the Belfast Region continues to wrestle with the consequences of under-investment in transport infrastructure, particularly public transport, and the resulting high levels of car use, pollution and congestion.

Improvements to inter-regional and intra-regional transport are vital to facilitate continued economic growth. Connectivity will be key to providing access to jobs and increasing the talent pool for business recruitment.

The BRCD infrastructure projects will help prime the region to support these efforts.



Belfast Rapid Transit Phase 2

Developing the system to the north and south of the city and extending the existing CITI route to serve Queen's University and City Hospital.

Funding: BRCD contribution £35.0 million.

Status update:

Following Minister Kimmins' announcement in February confirming preferred routes, and an additional £13m committed by the Department for Infrastructure for Phase 1 Delivery, the next steps will include finalisation of the OBC.



Lagan Pedestrian and Cycle Bridge

This iconic pedestrian and cycle bridge over the River Lagan will connect south and east Belfast to the city centre, further activating our waterfront.

Funding: BRCD contribution £12.1 million.

Status update:

Preliminary works started, contractor procurement ongoing.



Newry Southern Relief Road

High standard relief road to improve traffic flow and connectivity.

Funding: BRCD contribution £93.4 million.

Status update: Draft Statutory Orders and EIAR published January 2025.

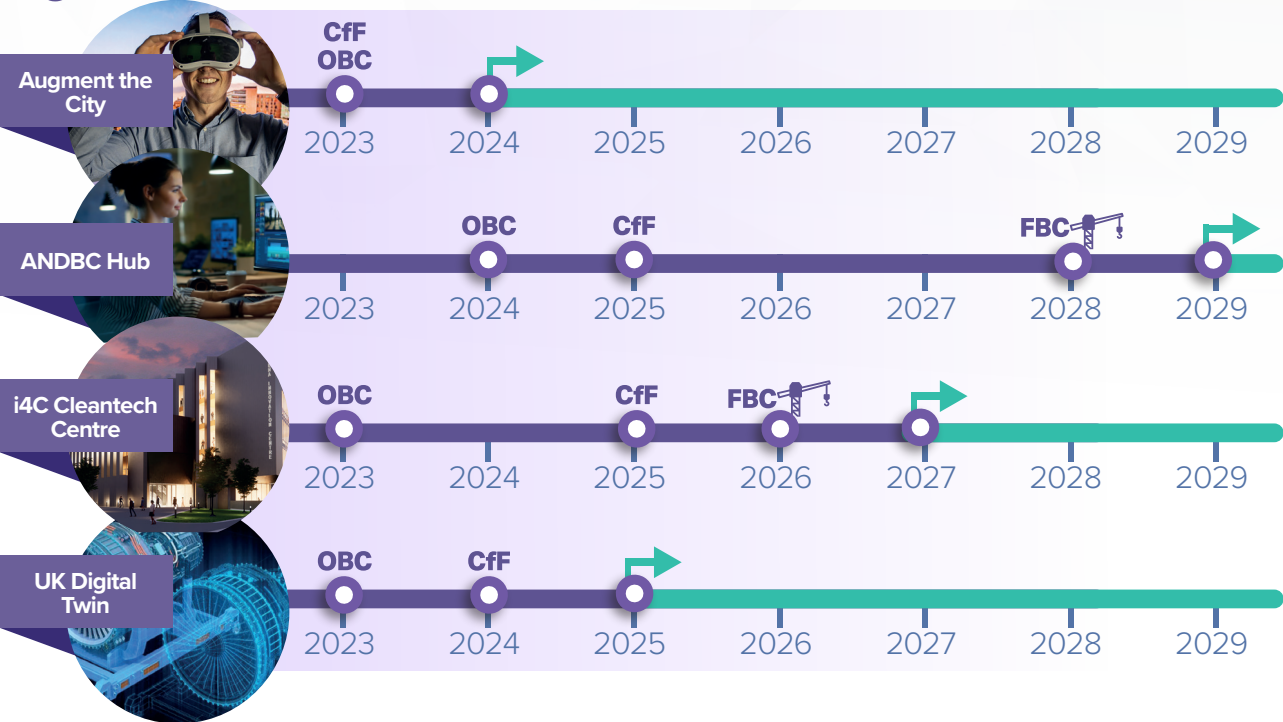
PROJECT TIMELINES

OBC: Outline Business Case approved **CfF:** Contract for Funding approved **FBC:** Full Business Case approved
🏗️ Construction commences ➡️ Project operational * Currently open for business ** Phased operational

Innovation

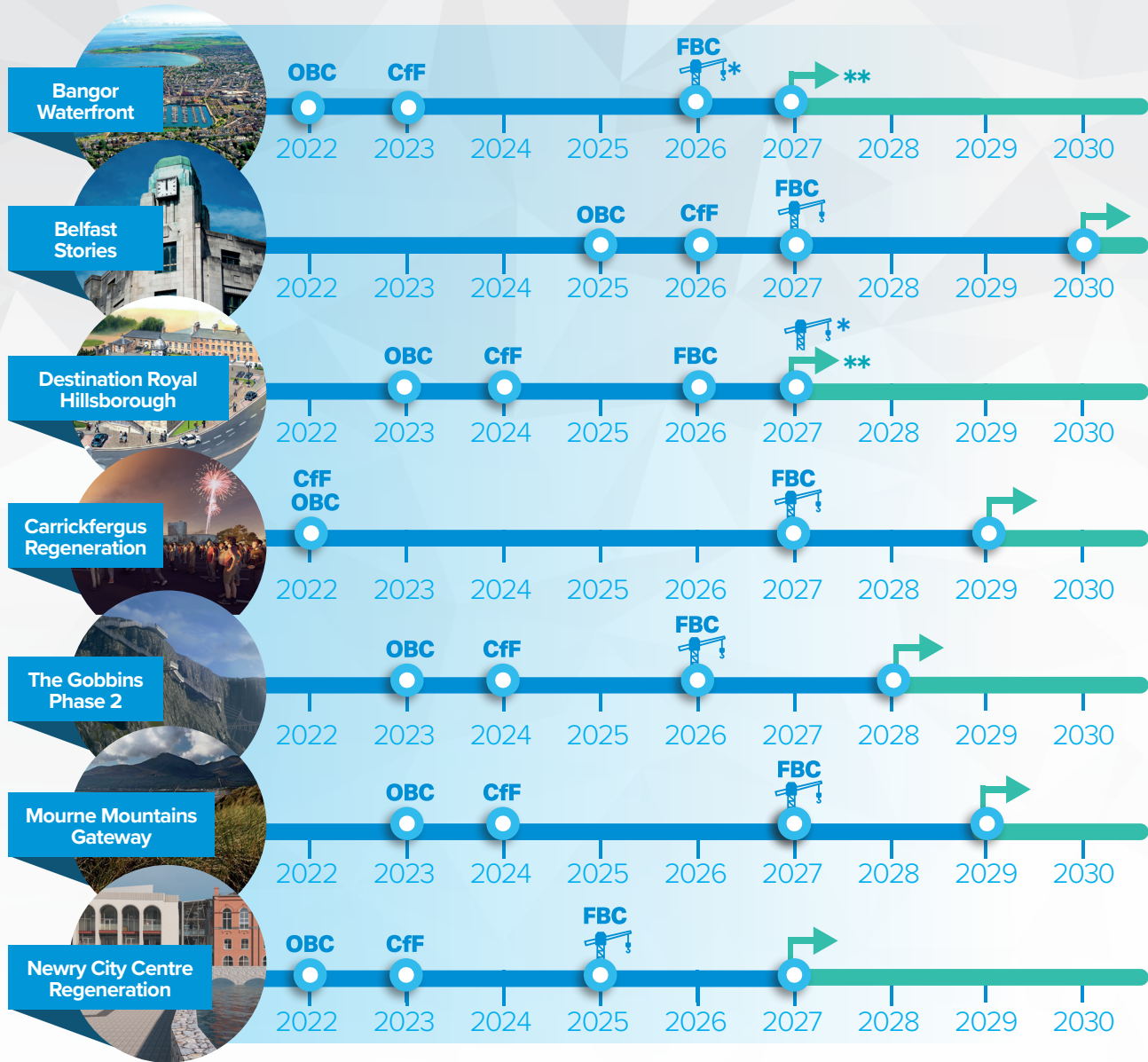


Digital

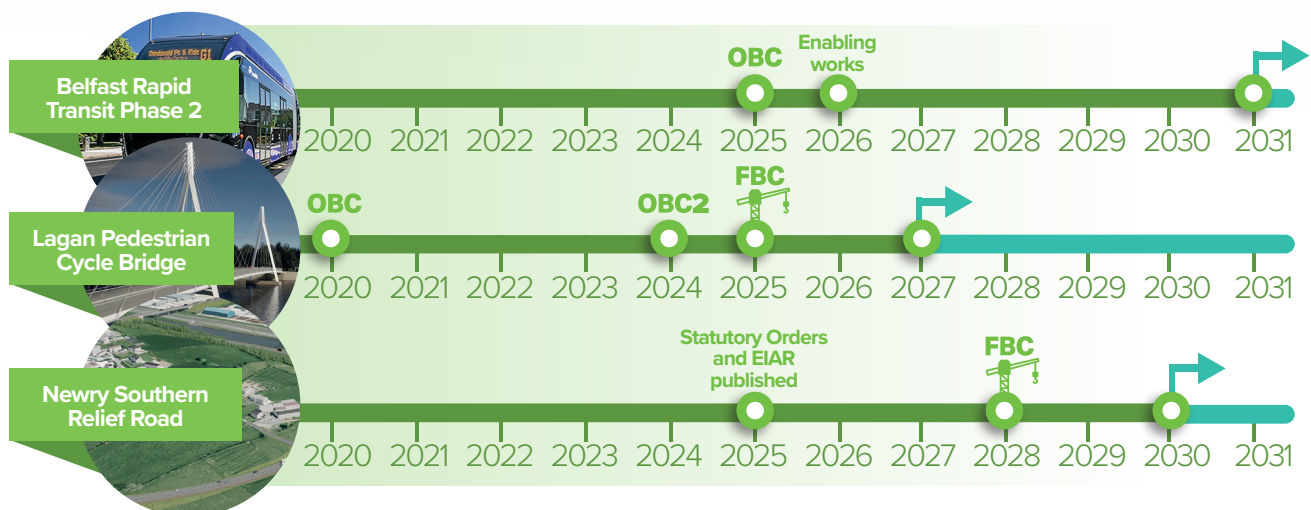


Tourism and Regeneration

OBC: Outline Business Case approved **CfF:** Contract for Funding approved **FBC:** Full Business Case approved
 Construction commences Project operational * Phased construction ** Phased operational



Infrastructure



UNDERPINNING EMPLOYABILITY AND SKILLS ACTIVITY

Although there is no distinct funding available to develop specific employability and skills interventions, preparation for the emerging opportunities will be critical to the achievement of our inclusive growth outcomes, which are a fundamental ambition of City and Growth Deals.

The BRCD investment is intended to help rebalance the local economy by building on our competitive strengths, increasing productivity and supporting the creation of more and better jobs. However if we are to drive inclusive growth, the right skills will need to be in place to enable as wide a range of people as possible to avail of the opportunities arising from this investment.

The partners involved in the BRCD, and indeed in the other local Deals, recognise the need to find more efficient and collaborative ways to tackle some of the region's most entrenched skills challenges and to consider appropriate supports and interventions that will allow local people to experience some of the benefits of these programmes of investment.

To support the delivery of planned investment projects across Northern Ireland, over the past year the E&S Pillar has continued to conduct in-depth sectoral skills assessments, the primary purpose of which is to identify gaps in skills provision and to make evidence-based recommendations that will help ensure the development of an appropriately qualified workforce, aligned to the anticipated

growth in key sectors. Based on both existing intelligence and direct engagement with employers and representative organisations, each assessment involves a detailed analysis of current and projected skills challenges impacting the sector.

Carried out on a cross-Deal basis in collaboration with key stakeholders, these assessments bring valuable insight into the skills-related challenges and opportunities arising from the programme of City and Growth Deal investments.

They also include comprehensive mapping of current employability and skills provision, focusing on skills development in key sectors, and offer an evaluation of how well existing skills interventions are positioned to meet current and future sectoral demands.

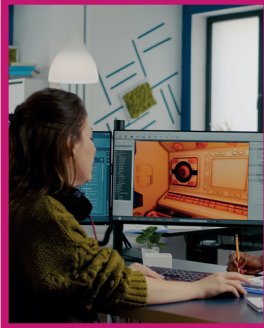
To date, four skills assessments have been completed, including, during 2024/25, those for the Creative Industries and Digital sectors. Work on the Life and Health Sciences sector is currently underway and is expected to conclude in the year ahead.

Recommendations emerging from these assessments are now being shared with government partners and skills delivery bodies, with the aim of redirecting funding and resources toward areas where they can have the greatest impact.



Skills interventions

Beyond Skills Assessments, BRCD Innovation Centres of Excellence – as the most advanced projects – are now engaging in skills development activity.



Studio Ulster, CoSTAR and Future Screens NI have collaborated to develop 'social-facing' programmes offering the opportunity to build a skills programme which is future focused, but crucially, also to support those from disadvantaged communities.

Studio Ulster is also delivering The Skills for Urban and Rural Futures Project which is designed to address the lack of opportunity many young people face in gaining high level skills. The project allows young people to access training in Epic's Unreal Engine, a software which has become the key structural element in the creation of games, animation and virtual production (VP).

Aligned to iREACH Health, a new training module: Clinical Trials – From Protocol to Patient, was developed and welcomed its first intake of 15 students in April 2024 at Queen's University, Belfast. Following this success, a second intake of 19 students joined in January 2025 and a third intake of 20 in March 2025 (supported by DfE).



AMIC has implemented actions designed to support and enhance the development of a skills pathway for Advanced Manufacturing. This has included providing work experience and opportunities for learners. This has included:

- providing work experience, placement opportunities and internships
- supporting the delivery of an All-Island Industry 4.0 Future Skills Report
- contributing to a Workforce Foresighting cycle to determine future workforce requirements for the design and use of cryogenic hydrogen storage for aircraft by 2035.



BENEFITS AND REAL WORLD IMPACT

As we move further into delivery, the BRCD Partnership is committed to achieving the benefits and outcomes that the Deal is designed to deliver. This will include a focus on the benefits not only of the Deal itself and those arising directly from individual projects, but also from the wider partnership to the region.

This BRCD investment will strengthen the region's offer in growth sectors such as life and health sciences, tourism, the digital and creative industries, and advanced manufacturing.

Collectively, it will:

- foster collaborative working
- regenerate major towns and cities
- create world-class visitor attractions
- leverage additional private sector investment
- place the region at the top table of digital innovation
- increase GVA within the Belfast Region
- connect local people to better jobs

Project benefits were initially identified within Benefits Realisation Plans and will be captured in project benefits registers in line with the Full Business Case development. Realising these benefits will become increasingly meaningful as we move more deeply into the delivery phase where each project will be responsible for reporting progress both to their own project boards and to government partners through the standard quarterly reporting process.

The BRCD Partnership also recognises the importance of identifying and reporting on extraneous benefits whether planned for, or resulting more organically from the partnership. To this end, and in addition to reporting project benefits, a Programme Level Benefits Realisation Framework is now in development which will not only set out how we intend to collate and report on project benefits, but will also identify partners' plans to work collaboratively – including through better alignment with government partners - to maximise the impact of the Deal.

Benefits

Positive Social Impact

Given the stage of delivery of the BRCD programme, the majority of initial benefits are emerging through the construction sector. Many skills development initiatives have focused on construction qualifications and a number of construction careers and skills presentations have been delivered to our local schools and colleges. In particular, BRCD projects have made significant inroads towards achieving programme benefits through social value procurement activity.

Engagement with contractors on BRCD construction projects has provided opportunities for:

- upskilling and employment;
- building sustainable supply chains;
- supporting efforts for delivering environmental sustainability; and
- promoting health and wellbeing in local communities.

By volunteering time, sharing skills, and supporting community-led initiatives, contractors have helped improve local environments, supported vulnerable individuals, promoted mental health, and enhanced educational and employment opportunities. These collaborations demonstrate how the construction sector can positively impact communities beyond the building site to foster inclusion, wellbeing, and long-term social benefit.

52

**training and
work experience
placements**
through 10 contracts to date



Skills Support through Contracts

Upskilling

Working with local councils, Labour Market Partnerships, Further Education Colleges, schools and community groups to support employability and upskilling for those facing barriers to employment.

Mentoring

Supporting mentoring programmes, careers fairs, 'meet the employer events' and career pathway showcasing.

Community

Engagement with a wide range of local charities and community organisations.⁶

Students

Offering site visits to projects which have given local students the opportunity to see first-hand the construction process while also learning about the wider BRCD programme of investment.



⁶ Such as the Simon Community, Ulster Wildlife, Horatio's Garden, Women's Tec, East Belfast Mission, Extern, Cooperation Ireland, social enterprise cafés, Awareness NI, foodbanks, and Cancer Focus.

BRCD INVESTMENT - DRIVING ADDITIONAL BENEFITS

Case Studies

Big Bridge - Mid and East Antrim Borough Council

The Big Bridge is an interactive, travelling workshop to schools delivered with contributions from Belfast Region City Deal projects including Carrickfergus Regeneration, Gobbins Phase II and the i4C Innovation centre. Designed to captivate, challenge, and inspire, the workshop brings the excitement of engineering to students, encouraging them to explore STEM in a completely hands-on way.



New ventures – AMIC

In October 2024, a new NI Space Enterprise Lab (SEL) was launched at the AMIC Harbour site to provide users with access to the latest collaborative technology, resources and expertise.

A dedicated facility for space innovation, this SEL represents the latest addition to the Satellite Application's Catapult's UK-wide network. As part of a linked network of 14 such facilities around the UK, the Lab enables access to a range of space data, technologies and equipment and greater opportunity for collaborative working.

Sectoral Promotion for Advanced Manufacturing – AMIC

Together with the Advanced Manufacturing Training Centre of Excellence in Dundalk, AMIC is promoting advanced manufacturing careers by offering students and teachers hands-on experience with cutting edge technologies in their own schools.

Pupils from Counties Louth and Meath joined local students to participate in a project⁷ which provided demonstrations of cutting-edge technologies, including 3D printing and composites and other high-end manufacturing equipment. The initiative aims to equip both students and educators with the skills needed for the future of manufacturing and technology.



⁷ As part of the Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre's Advanced Manufacturing Pathways School Project, funded by the International Fund for Ireland.

Momentum One Zero: Early Launch Projects

Momentum One Zero works to address business and societal challenges by bringing together expertise and problem-solving capabilities through deep tech and AI engineering in key sectors, including: cyber security, digital health, agri-food, space and wireless. Through Queen's University pump-prime funding and the EPSRC⁸ Impact Acceleration Accounts (IAA) funding, researchers can better share their knowledge to help find innovative solutions to real-world problems.

Examples include:

Agri-Food

A project to detect ear biting in pigs, this aims to tackle disease outbreaks in pigs which impacts production, estimated to cost the UK pig herd more than £850m a year.

It is hoped that early detection of ear biting through automated monitoring can allow intervention to improve animal welfare and prevent disease, avoiding the need for potentially harmful antimicrobials to be used.

Digital Health

This project will see a team of software engineers from Momentum One Zero develop a proof-of-concept mobile application - the Digital Dementia Hub - to support people living with dementia in the community.

Through provision of a series of secure tablet devices the app will run in busy public locations such as supermarkets, transport hubs, coffee shops or libraries. In the event that someone living with dementia becomes disorientated or requires assistance, staff or members of the public can use the app, which utilises facial recognition to identify registered members of the Hub and connect them to their support network.

Community

Smart City-zens aims to support underserved communities in building their own capabilities to use data to tackle urban challenges such as pollution, biodiversity, climate change or future food production.

Using low-cost sensor technologies to gather data on wellbeing issues that are important to residents, participants co-create and carry out a programme of 'community sensing' across local sites of economic and social value.

Given its location within the footprint of Smart Belfast, this project has now been piloted with young people in the Market community.



Research and development opportunity - Studio Ulster

The CoSTAR Screen Lab, based in Studio Ulster at Belfast Harbour Studios, is a £75.6m state-of-the-art research and development facility, funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) through the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

With an additional £63m of new industry investment supporting the programme -

which brings together key stakeholders from across the UK’s creative industries - this now forms the largest virtual production research and development network in Europe.

By developing next-generation technologies to cement the region’s position as a world leader in gaming, TV, film and performance, this project marks a major milestone in Northern Ireland’s growing reputation as a leader in creative screen technologies and innovation.



Digital Innovation and Technology – FE and HE partners

With the support of the BRCD Employability & Skills Board, Queen’s University Belfast (QUB) and Belfast Metropolitan College (Belfast Met) have established a Centre for Digital Innovation and Technology (CDIT) which evolved into a formal partnership between Belfast Met, QUB, and Stranmillis University College, to focus on advancing digital innovation and skills development.



190

Students enrolled in programmes under the CDIT umbrella since June 2024.

The academies cover areas such as software fundamentals, data analytics, cybersecurity, business administration and digital skills for the creative industries.

SECTION 5

FINANCIAL STATEMENT

Pillar	Project	BRCD capital investment £'000	Partner capital investment £'000
Innovation	AMIC	78,700	9,300
	Momentum 1.0	52,400	21,200
	iREACH Health	39,700	19,000
	CDHT	34,000	4,100
	Studio Ulster	25,200	3,600
Digital	Challenge Fund Programme	55,000	-
	Enabling Infrastructure	25,000	-
	Regional Innovation Hubs	40,000	5,000
	Augment the City *included in the Challenge Fund Programme above	930	110
	UK Digital Twin Centre *included in Regional Innovation Hubs above	15,000	-
	Ards & North Down Council Digital Hub *included in Regional Innovation Hubs above	8,920	1,100
	i4C *£13.5m contribution included in Regional Innovation Hubs above and additional £7m contribution from T&R Pillar below	20,500	3,570
Tourism & Regeneration	Bangor Waterfront	40,000	20,000
	Carrickfergus Regeneration	26,400	14,400
	Newry City Centre Regeneration	8,000	40,000
	Belfast Stories	65,000	35,000
	Destination Royal Hillsborough	20,000	4,250
	The Gobbins Phase 2	12,600	1,000
	Mourne Mountain Gateway	30,000	14,600
Infrastructure	Lagan Pedestrian & Cycle Bridge	12,100	12,850
	Newry Southern Relief Road	93,400	27,940
	Belfast Rapid Transport Phase 2	35,000	109,900
Totals		699,500	342,140

Other capital investment £'000	Total planned capital investment £'000	Contract for Funding and Funding Agreement signed	BRCD Spend Prior Years £'000	BRCD Spend FY24-25 £'000	Total BRCD Spend to Date £'000
10,000	98,000	Jan 2023	2,112	11,444	13,556
-	73,600	Mar 2023	1,234	670	1,904
5,700	64,400	Mar 2023	1,303	4,426	5,729
-	38,100	Dec 2024	-	-	-
2,900	31,700	Jul 2022	-	15,685	15,685
-	55,000	N/A	-	-	-
-	25,000	N/A	-	-	-
-	45,000	N/A	-	-	-
-	1,040	Dec 2023	-	343	343
22,600	37,600	Mar 2024	214	2,005	2,219
370	10,390		-	-	-
-	24,070		-	-	-
12,800	72,800	Jan 2023	-	56	56
1,400	42,200	Nov 2022	140	718	858
-	48,000	Jan 2023	190	-	190
-	100,000		-	-	-
1,725	25,975	Jun 2024	-	-	-
-	13,600	May 2024	-	162	162
-	44,600	May 2024	-	295	295
-	24,950		350	428	778
-	121,340		-	1,220	1,220
-	144,900		-	-	-
34,525	1,076,165		5,543	37,452	42,995

SECTION 6

WHAT'S NEXT FOR DELIVERY?

As the programme progresses over the next year, the BRCD Partnership continues to focus on delivery and on maximising the benefits of this transformative investment.

In the coming months we will celebrate the launch of two of our flagship projects, Studio Ulster and UK Digital Twin. The opening of these facilities marks an important milestone in the delivery of the BRCD programme and will help to drive momentum across the other projects and pillars of investment.

Construction will be completed on AMIC and continues at pace on iREACH Health, with contractors also expected to commence on site at Momentum One Zero, Newry City Centre Regeneration and the Lagan Pedestrian and Cycle Bridge.

Progress is also expected across our tourism and regeneration projects with:

- design development ongoing for Bangor Waterfront, Carrickfergus Regeneration and The Gobbins Phase 2,
- consultancy teams appointed for Destination Royal Hillsborough and Bangor Waterfront; and
- the approval of the OBC and signing of the Contract for Funding for the Belfast Stories project.

Following the Minister's announcement in January, we are also expecting submission of the OBC for Phase 1 of BRT 2 and development of designs to progress the first phase of this important transport project.

The past year saw a renewed focus on progressing projects within the Digital Pillar and Contracts for Funding for both the i4C Cleantech Innovation Hub and the Ards and North Down Innovation Hub are expected to be signed in the early part of 2025-26.

A number of business cases are also expected to be submitted during 2025-26 with the aim of unlocking funding for a range of initiatives. These initiatives will utilise cutting-edge innovation to support inclusive innovation helping to address challenges in areas such as net zero, and supporting the adoption of Artificial Intelligence and advanced wireless connectivity to improve productivity across the Belfast Region.

However, challenges in delivering such a large scale, complex investment programme particularly in the current economic context, persist. Partners have already committed additional resources to deal with the escalating costs and delays associated with access to utilities, planning permission approvals and operational costs. Robust monitoring and reporting arrangements are in place at project and programme level with regular reporting on progress, finance and risk to the Executive Board.

One of the overarching objectives of the BRCD is the creation of more and better jobs and we have already seen a number of the projects beginning to deliver on this. Work has continued with projects to agree benefits realisation plans and to ensure projects deliver social value within their contracts.



Benefits delivered through social value will become more evident as more projects commence delivery. This combined effort will make a significant impact on the overall benefits realised within the programme. A planned workshop for contractors, project leads, and contract managers in June 2025 will allow those new to the process to gain an insight to the approaches employed to date.

Projects such as Studio Ulster, Belfast Rapid Transit Phase 2, i4C Innovation and Cleantech Centre and the Lagan Pedestrian and Cycle Bridge are helping to evidence the 'net zero' ambitions of the Deal, while AMIC is being recognised for its capability and commitment to sustainable manufacturing.

Projects will continue to balance the environmental impact of these capital investments - through carbon assessment analyses and by seeking to minimise the embodied and operational carbon impact where possible - as they progress through their design development and delivery stages.

In terms of its ongoing work, the Partnership will review its governance structures to ensure they reflect and meet the needs of the delivery phase of the Deal, while also supporting partners' future ambitions for the city region.



APPENDIX 1

COUNCIL PANEL 2024/25

Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council



Councillor
Matthew Magill



Alderman
Mark Cosgrove



Councillor
Jay Burbank



Councillor
Michael Goodman

Ards and North Down Borough Council



Alderman
Alan McDowell



Councillor
Alistair Cathcart



Councillor
Ray McKimm



Councillor
Craig Blaney

Belfast City Council



Belfast
City Council



Councillor
Sarah Bunting



Councillor
Ronan McLaughlin



Councillor
Emmet McDonough-
Brown



Councillor
Séamas de Faoite

Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council



Alderman
Allan Ewart MBE



Alderman
Amanda Grehan



Councillor
Tim Mitchell



Councillor
John Laverty BEM

Mid and East Antrim Borough Council



Alderman
Billy Ashe MBE



Alderman
Robert Logan



Councillor
Matthew Warwick



Councillor
Robin Stewart

Newry Mourne and Down District Council



Councillor
Oonagh Hanlon



Councillor
Declan Murphy



Councillor
Pete Byrne



Councillor
Henry Reilly

APPENDIX 2

SUPPORTING ARRANGEMENTS PARTNERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

The governance arrangements in place for BRCD ensure that decisions are taken in an open and transparent way, while remaining in step with the individual decision-making processes of our partner organisations.

The BRCD operates under a set of governance arrangements which includes:

- a Council Panel with representatives from all six councils, providing political oversight to help ensure that the Deal continues to align to the vision of inclusive economic growth and ambitions across the region,
- an Executive Board, responsible for driving the delivery of the BRCD Programme in accordance with the requirements of the Deal document,
- a number of Boards with responsibility for overseeing each of the pillars of investment, programme finances and programme communication.

These arrangements align fully with the NI wide arrangements for City and Growth Deals which are overseen by the Northern Ireland City/Growth Deals Delivery Board on behalf of the UK Government (UKG) and the NI Executive.

A review of the governance arrangements is currently underway to ensure that the structures and roles of all contributing aspects continue to be appropriate and relevant. It is expected that this work will be completed during 2025 and that governance will be refined to meet the needs of this new stage of the Deal and in preparation for what may come next.

Role of the accountable body

Belfast City Council is the accountable body for the Deal. This means that it is responsible for ensuring that partners make decisions that comply with all legal, financial and administrative requirements.

For the most part, grant funding to projects is channelled through Belfast City Council as the accountable body, ensuring that the Deal remains within the overall funding envelope.

As accountable body, Belfast City Council also prepares detailed quarterly finance and performance reports for consideration at relevant departmental Boards, in line with conditions set out in contracts and funding agreements.



APPENDIX 3

GLOSSARY OF SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

The BRCD has a number of frameworks and plans that sit behind the main Deal document agreed in December 2021 and help describe the arrangements in place to ensure we deliver an effective Programme.

Document	Purpose
Deal document	Document that confirms the joint partner commitment to full implementation of the BRCD. The Deal document represents the statement of commitment to support and deliver the Deal.
Financial agreement	Outlines the collective financial commitment of all partners over the lifetime of the Deal to deliver the project outcomes as detailed in each approved business case.
Financial and implementation plan	Outlines detailed funding profiles for each project and programme and the appropriate financial stewardship, protocols and controls to ensure accountable delivery.
Employability and skills proposition	Outlines how partners can maximise the benefit of the investment by identifying the skills needs and opportunities it will create and by addressing barriers to employment that might hinder inclusion.
Governance and assurance framework	Outlines the procedures that BRCD partners will follow in relation to decision making and delivery of the Deal.
Communication protocol	Sets out an agreed framework for communication protocols around the BRCD to ensure areas of responsibility and working practices are clearly defined.
Inclusive and sustainable growth framework	Demonstrates the commitment of BRCD partners to improving inclusivity across society in the implementation of projects while also strengthening the sustainability focus of the Deal by considering opportunities to support climate resilience.
Risk and issue management framework and registers	Outlines partners' commitment to good corporate governance and helping to improve decision making, enhance outcomes and strengthen accountability.

APPENDIX 4

BRCD KEY CONTACTS

Job Role	Name	Email
Senior Responsible Officer	Sharon McNicholl	Sharon.mcnicholl@belfastcity.gov.uk
Head of Regional Programmes	Emer Husbands	husbandse@belfastcity.gov.uk
Programme Manager	Stephen Wallace	wallaces@belfastcity.gov.uk
Programme Manager	Theresa Slevin	slevint@belfastcity.gov.uk
Programme Manager	Carrie Duffy	duffyc@belfastcity.gov.uk

Images courtesy of Tourism Northern Ireland and partners.

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**Belfast
City Council**



**Antrim and
Newtownabbey
BOROUGH COUNCIL**



**Ards and
North Down
Borough Council**

LCCC
Lisburn &
Castlereagh
City Council



**Mid & East
Antrim
Borough Council**



Comhairle Ceantair
**an Iúir, Mhúrn
agus an Dúin**
**Newry, Mourne
and Down
District Council**



**QUEEN'S
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