

# Public Document Pack

**Democratic Services Section  
Legal and Civic Services Department  
Belfast City Council  
City Hall  
Belfast  
BT1 5GS**



**Belfast  
City Council**

9th June, 2026

## **MEETING OF THE CITY GROWTH AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE**

Dear Alderman/Councillor,

As previously notified to you, I enclose a copy of the report for the following item to be considered at the meeting to be held on Wednesday, 10th June, 2026 at 5.15 pm.

Yours faithfully,

John Walsh

Chief Executive

### **AGENDA:**

6. **Regenerating Places and Improving Infrastructure**
  - (a) Local Growth Fund Consultation Response (Pages 1 - 28)

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<b>Subject:</b>	Local Growth Fund – draft consultation response
<b>Date:</b>	10 June 2026
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	Damien Martin, Strategic Director, Place and Economy
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Lisa Toland, Senior Manager, Economy Sean Dolan, Senior Development Manager

Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
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<b>1.0</b>	<b>Purpose of Report</b>
1.1	The purpose of the report is to update the Committee on the consultation on the UK Government’s Local Growth Fund – the successor to Shared Prosperity Fund and to seek committee approval of a draft response to the consultation.
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
2.1	The Committee is asked to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider and approve the draft response and agree that this is submitted to NIO</li> <li>• Note the update on the “Belfast Trailblazer” that had been referenced in the June 2025 budget statement and agree to issue correspondence to NIO to seek clarity on their plans for this fund.</li> </ul>
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main Report</b>
3.1	The Committee has previously received an update on the Local Growth Fund (LGF) – the successor to the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF). The report noted that there were a number of significant changes from SPF to LGF namely: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Management of the fund was to involve “collaborative working” between the regional government departments, NIO and MHCLG (previously no involvement from regional government departments or NIO)</li> <li>• Funding was to move from a predominantly revenue-based budget to heavily capital-focused one (indicative split 66% capital; 34% revenue funding).</li> </ul>

3.2	<p>In December 2025, Belfast City Council lead officers on Go Succeed were advised by MHCLG that there was to be an allocation of £2.53million revenue funding from the Local Growth Fund for one year, representing an overall reduction of around 60% on the previous revenue allocation. At the same time, all delivery partners that had previously led on the economic inactivity projects supported under the Shared Prosperity Fund from 2023-2026 were advised that their projects would also be extended for one year – but with a similar reduction in available budgets. These are the only two elements of expenditure that have been allocated from the Local Growth Fund to date this year – and they represent the entirety of the available revenue funding for this period.</p>																				
3.3	<p>NIO launched the consultation on the Local Growth Fund on 8 May 2026. The consultation will close on 26 June 2026. NIO expects to present a draft investment plan to Westminster before the recess period, with a similar plan being shared with the NI Executive in parallel. Subject to these respective approvals, they will then begin the process of commissioning service delivery against the agreed priority areas. The consultation seeks views on resource funding from 2027/28 to 2028/29 and capital funding from 2026/27 to 2028/29. It does not seek to revisit the original decisions around the capital and resource split of the funding.</p>																				
3.4	<p>The Local Growth Fund in NI will have a budget allocation of £129million funding over the next three years – an indicative allocation of £43million per annum. The indicative annual breakdown is as follows:</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="220 1104 1468 1312"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>2025/26</th> <th>2026/27</th> <th>2027/28</th> <th>2028/29</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td><b>Capital</b></td> <td>3.8*</td> <td>27.4</td> <td>27.5</td> <td>29.8</td> </tr> <tr> <td><b>Revenue</b></td> <td></td> <td>11.8</td> <td>15.5</td> <td>13.2</td> </tr> <tr> <td><b>Total</b></td> <td>3.8</td> <td>39.2</td> <td>43</td> <td>43</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p><i>*Note – this £3.8million was allocated to North City Business Centre for the development of workspace in North Belfast.</i></p>		2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29	<b>Capital</b>	3.8*	27.4	27.5	29.8	<b>Revenue</b>		11.8	15.5	13.2	<b>Total</b>	3.8	39.2	43	43
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3.5	<p>The draft strategic framework underpinning the Fund is based around two priorities for growth, namely:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhancing productivity: driving higher value-added activity and increasing the efficiency of the economy to create capacity for sustainable long-term growth</li> <li>• Promoting active participation in the workforce: tackling the barriers to employment to increase the working age population’s participation rate and meet immediate labour needs.</li> </ul>																				
3.6	<p>Each priority includes a number of sub-priorities as follows:</p>																				

Priority	Sub-priority
<b><i>Enhancing productivity</i></b>	Business support and innovation
	Strategic infrastructure investment
	Skills enhancement
<b><i>Promoting active participation in the workforce</i></b>	Localised economic inclusion
	Early intervention

3.7	The consultation document notes that, while MHCLG will maintain oversight of the Local Growth Fund, the Northern Ireland Executive departments will “plan and oversee delivery of the Fund” for all future expenditure. In reality, this is likely to mean that both the Department for the Economy (DfE) and the Department for Communities (DfC) will take the lead on agreed priority projects and will be responsible for commissioning and managing delivery.
3.8	It also notes that a cross-sectoral Partnership Group will be established to “provide insight and advice on delivery”. A Partnership Group existed under the Shared Prosperity Fund and local government had two representatives – one from MUDC and one from BCC. Discussions with NIO have indicated that this Partnership Group will be established once the programme is agreed, rather than advising on the programme content – as was the case for the SPF Partnership Group.
3.10	The consultation document is attached to this report (appendix 1) and an outline of indicative responses is also included in appendix 2. The consultation is focused around a number of questions relating to the core priorities (Enhancing Productivity and Promoting Active Participation) and the sub-priorities as well as the proposals around delivery and consideration of the equality implications.
3.11	<p>In addition to responding to the questions, there are a number of issues that the Committee should be aware of and that have been woven into the draft response. These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explicit support for continued investment in Go Succeed with the potential to supplement existing support and integrate other capital interventions aligned to programme priorities e.g. grant support for digital transformation</li> <li>• Proposal that the activities supported under “Promoting Active Participation” should focus on outreach and engagement support and that outcomes should be appropriate and aligned to this support i.e. job outcomes are not always an appropriate outcome to evidence the impact of this work. This will also help streamline the support ecosystem</li> </ul>

	<p>with the SPF-funded activity focusing on the “supply” side (reaching out to engage key target groups; providing key employability support and helping address barriers to progression) while the LMP activities will then focus more on the “demand-side” activities i.e. working with employers to design and develop employment support interventions for those further from the labour market and create/ring-fenced specific job roles for individuals that are successful in interviews for those roles</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potential to use local government as a delivery mechanism for economic growth support activities – direct commissioning rather than open competitions. This reflects a similar approach under Shared Prosperity Fund when councils were a conduit for substantial proportion of delivery.</li> </ul>
3.12	<p>A key omission from the current consultation is the reference to the “Belfast trailblazer” that was noted in the June 2025 budget statement regarding the fund. At that time, it was intended that this would be a proxy for the “Pride in Place” funding that was made available to towns and cities across the UK. An indicative funding allocation of £2million was set aside for “a Belfast neighbourhood” for a period of 10 years – similar to the funding that was allocated to Derry and Coleraine in 2023. Officers understand that this indicative allocation has simply been “rolled into” the overall Local Growth Fund with the expectation that at least £2million will be allocated to Belfast-based projects – but with no ring-fenced mechanism for doing this. It is proposed that formal correspondence is issued to NIO to verify this position.</p>
<b>4.0</b>	<b>Financial &amp; Resource Implications</b>
	No specific financial resources.
<b>5.0</b>	<b>Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment</b>
	No specific equality or good relations implications. NIO will be responsible for the overall equality impact assessment.
<b>6.0</b>	<b>Appendices</b>
	Appendix 1: LGF consultation Appendix 2: Draft Belfast City Council response



Northern  
Ireland  
Office

# A public consultation on the Local Growth Fund in Northern Ireland 2026-2029

8 May 2026

## Public Consultation: The Local Growth Fund in Northern Ireland (2026–2029)

### Northern Ireland Office (NIO)

#### Introduction

1. In the 2025 Spending Review, the UK Government announced a new targeted approach to local growth funding, comprising a set of interventions to drive growth and strengthen communities across the UK.
2. The Local Growth Fund forms part of this approach, with a focus on supporting each nation to deliver long-term investments for sustained economic growth. Through this Fund, the UK Government is investing in transformational programmes and projects that will create lasting jobs and opportunities in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland<sup>1</sup>.
3. The UK Government is dedicated to working in close partnership with the Northern Ireland Executive to build a modern, dynamic and resilient economy that delivers long-term prosperity for every community.
4. Underpinned by over £129 million in UK Government funding over the next three years, the Local Growth Fund represents a significant pillar of this commitment - providing targeted investment to empower local delivery partners to address specific structural challenges that limit growth but also build on opportunities for development.
5. This consultation invites you to share your views on our proposed strategic framework for the Local Growth Fund to help shape how that investment is targeted to ensure maximum impact across Northern Ireland.
6. Taking forward the insight gathered from consultation, the Northern Ireland Office will work closely with the Northern Ireland Executive to design an Investment Plan for the Local Growth Fund. This Plan will set out details on the priorities, eligible initiatives and delivery approach and, by aligning to the Programme for Government 2024-2027<sup>2</sup>, will complement Northern Ireland Executive funding. Detailed delivery approaches will be designed in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, including the Northern Ireland Executive.
7. We recognise that there has been much discussion over the Resource and Capital split for the Local Growth Fund, especially compared to previous funds such as the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. However the aim of this consultation is to determine how the Capital funding for 26/27 should be allocated, as well as how the Capital and Resource funding for the remainder of the spending review period should be allocated.

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<sup>1</sup> Further details of the overarching Local Growth Funding framework for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales can be found [here](#)

<sup>2</sup>

<https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/publications/programme-government-2024-2027-our-plan-doing-what-matters-most-documents>

### The Local Growth Fund: Core Priorities and Funding

8. As part of the 2025 Spending Review, £43m per annum has been provided by Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) for the Local Growth Fund for Northern Ireland 2026-29 and has set allocations for two different types of spending, in line with the profile detailed in Table 1, below:

**Resources - Resource Departmental Expenditure Limit (RDEL)** - funding, for example, for day-to-day operational costs, such as staff costs for employability programmes, training delivery, business advice, and ‘wraparound’ support services.

**Capital - Capital Departmental Expenditure Limit (CDEL)** - funding, for example, for long-term investment in physical assets, such as digital infrastructure, wastewater facilities, transport, and workspace development.

**Table 1: Local Growth Fund - Funding allocation £m 2026-27 to 2028-29<sup>3</sup>**

	25-26	26-27	27-28	28-29
CDEL	3.8	27.4	27.5	29.8
RDEL		11.8	15.5	13.2
Total	3.8	39.2	43	43

9. There are three pillars to be considered as part of the Local Growth Fund; **enabling local growth infrastructure**, **support for business**, and **skills and employment**. Taking this forward, the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Executive departments have, based on the analytical evidence, identified two core priorities for the Local Growth Fund to target and provided the following funding allocations:

**Enhancing productivity** - through business support and promoting innovation, infrastructure investment and skills enhancement.

**Promoting active participation in the workforce** - through investment in economic inactivity provision, social enterprise support and social inclusion, including working with employers.

**Table 2: Proposed funding allocation £m (including resource and capital spending) across the two priorities, 2026-27 to 2028-29<sup>4</sup>**

Theme		25-26	26-27	27-28	28-29	Total allocation	% of total allocation
Enhancing productivity	CDEL	3.8	13.7	13.8	14.9	46.2	35.8
	RDEL		2.5	3.3	2.8	8.6	6.7
	Sub total	3.8	16.2	17.1	17.7	54.8	42.4

<sup>3</sup> Figures are shown in £m and rounded to the nearest £0.1 million. Totals may not sum due to rounding.

<sup>4</sup> The total funding allocation includes the Northern Ireland share of funding derived from the Pride in Place Programme (Phase 2) and Pride in Place Impact Fund for 2025-26 to 2028-29, that will be delivered as part of the Local Growth Fund, including the £3.8m for 25/26. Figures are shown in £m and rounded to the nearest £0.1 million. Totals may not sum due to rounding.

Promoting active participation in the workforce	CDEL		13.7	13.8	14.9	42.4	32.8
	RDEL		9.3	12.2	10.4	31.9	24.7
	Sub total		23.0	26.0	25.3	74.3	57.6
Annual total		3.8	39.2	43.0	43.0	129.0	100

10. The 2026/27 RDEL allocations are a reflection of the joint agreement between the UK Government and NI Executive in December 2025 for this funding to be used to deliver £9.3 million to economic inactivity projects and £2.5 million for Go Succeed (which are now in delivery). Capital funding that was made available in Northern Ireland for 2025/26 has been utilised by the Executive to progress a community based workspace project to support economic growth in North Belfast<sup>5</sup>.
11. As such, this consultation seeks views on Resource funding (RDEL) from 2027/28 to 2028/29 and Capital funding (CDEL) from 2026/27 to 2028/29.

### **The evidence for investment: Addressing Northern Ireland’s challenges and supporting opportunities for growth**

12. To understand why we have chosen our proposed priorities, we must look at the current position of the Northern Ireland economy. While showing resilience and periods of strong growth in recent years, economic performance in Northern Ireland has been variable as the economy faces deep-seated structural weaknesses.

### **The productivity gap**

13. For over two decades, NI’s economic expansion has been disproportionately driven by employment growth (61% of total growth) rather than labour productivity (39%)<sup>6</sup>. This imbalance has left NI’s productivity 12% below the UK average, ranking it 8th out of 12 UK regions<sup>7</sup>.

**Sectoral imbalance:** the economy has shifted from higher-productivity sectors (e.g. manufacturing) to lower-productivity, labour-intensive services (e.g. hospitality and administrative support). The economy also has a relatively low proportion of employment in sectors that have experienced stronger growth across the UK such as ICT and professional services.

**‘Back office’ functions:** even within high-growth areas like professional services, productivity lags the UK average by 15 percentage points, reflecting a high concentration of lower-value ‘back-office’ activities.

<sup>5</sup> [Major investment to drive economic development in North Belfast | Department for the Economy](#)

<sup>6</sup> Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (2025) [Deconstructing Economic Growth in Northern Ireland](#). From 2000-2022, employment growth occurred at a similar pace to median across UK regions but annual productivity growth of 0.5% was lower than the median rate (0.8%) across the 12 UK regions.

<sup>7</sup> The Productivity Institute (2025) [Northern Ireland Productivity Dashboard 2025](#)

**Public sector concentration:** as of December 2025, public sector jobs accounted for 27% of total employment, highest among UK regions and significantly higher than the UK average of 18%, highlighting the need to stimulate private sector innovation<sup>8</sup>.

**Sub-regional variations:** while NI productivity performance has been a longstanding challenge, variations across sub-regions within NI also show greater distance from the UK average and additional challenges for progressing economic growth<sup>9</sup>.

### **The demographic challenge: a shrinking labour supply**

14. The 'employment-led' growth model of the past is reaching its structural limit. We can no longer rely on a growing population to drive the economy.

**Stagnating growth:** NI's population is projected to increase by just 3.6% by 2050, a stark contrast to the 12.7% projected for the UK and 19.9% for Ireland<sup>10</sup>.

**The 2034 turning point:** natural change (births vs. deaths) is forecast to turn negative by 2034<sup>11</sup>. With unemployment already at a historic low (2.2%<sup>12</sup>), labour shortages will become a severe constraint on growth unless we increase productivity.

### **C. Economic inactivity and the skills mismatch**

15. Northern Ireland possesses a high level of 'latent employment'- people who want to work but face significant barriers.

**The UK's highest inactivity:** At 26.7%, NI's economic inactivity rate is the highest in the UK (UK average: 20.7%)<sup>13</sup>. Notably, of those who are inactive, 16.2% would like to work (i.e. currently want a job) while 50% expect to work at some point in the future (i.e. would definitely or probably work again), representing a massive untapped resource<sup>14</sup>.

**The health barrier:** 36.2% of NI's inactive population cite long-term sickness or disability- equating to 9.6% of the total working-age population<sup>15</sup>. NI also faces the largest disability employment gap in the UK (44 percentage points vs. 29 UK average)<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> ONS, [Public sector employment](#), 19 March 2026

<sup>9</sup> Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (2025) [Delivering balanced regional growth in Northern Ireland](#), May 2025

<sup>10</sup> Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (2024) [Northern Ireland Demographics 2050 - Implications for public policy and infrastructure investment](#), August 2024

<sup>11</sup> Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (2024) [Northern Ireland Demographics 2050 - Implications for public policy and infrastructure investment](#), August 2024

<sup>12</sup> NISRA (2026) [Northern Ireland Labour Market Report](#), 19 March 2026

<sup>13</sup> NISRA (2026) [Northern Ireland Labour Market Report](#), 19 March 2026

<sup>14</sup> Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (2026) Labour Market Intelligence Portal, Labour Force Survey analysis Q4 2025.

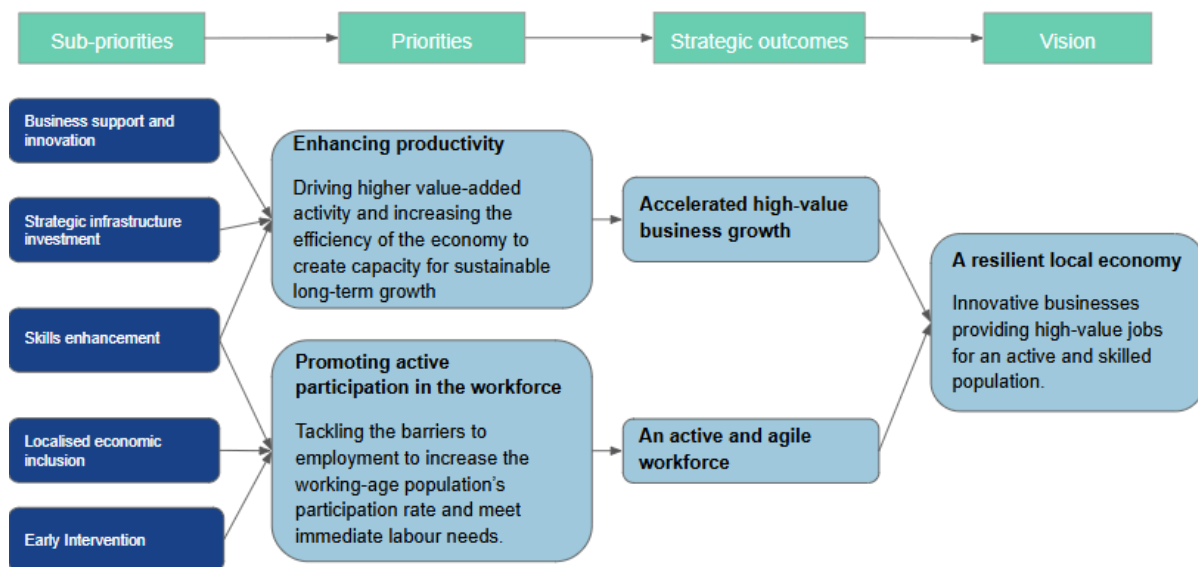
<sup>15</sup> NISRA (2026) [Northern Ireland Labour Market Report](#), 19 March 2026

<sup>16</sup> Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (2023) Maximising potential: A review of labour market outcomes for people with disabilities in Northern Ireland

**The skills gap:** NI has the second-lowest percentage of bachelor-level (RQF 4) qualifications in the UK. By 2033, an annual undersupply of 7,000 individuals educated to RQF Level 3 or above is projected, alongside an oversupply of those with low or no qualifications<sup>17</sup>.

### Our proposed strategic framework: Two priorities for growth

16. To address the structural challenges identified in the economic data, the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive propose a dual strategy - pursuing productivity-led growth as the long-term anchor, while simultaneously promoting active participation in the workforce to ensure maximum employment growth.
17. In the Local Growth Fund, these two priorities are self-reinforcing. Productivity creates the high-wage jobs that make work attractive while greater workforce participation ensures the supply of an active and agile workforce that businesses need to expand.
18. Under this approach, the proposed framework aims to ensure that we are not just creating more jobs, but better jobs, while ensuring that every person in Northern Ireland has a pathway to participate in that prosperity in their local area.



### Priority 1: Enhancing productivity

**The goal:** To support the transition of Northern Ireland towards a high-value, productivity-led economy.

We propose targeting investment toward three sub-priorities as drivers of productivity:

<sup>17</sup> Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (2025) [Skills Barometer: 2023-33](#)

**Sub-priority 1.1 – Business support and innovation**

<b>Core focus</b>	Northern Ireland suffers from lower levels of enterprise and innovation activity compared to the rest of the UK. We propose focused support for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) to help them to innovate, adopt new technologies, expand into export markets and move up the value chain. This includes support for innovation ready businesses, as well as start ups, self-employment initiatives and those at the early stages of developing new ways for growing their business.
<b>Proposed activity</b>	Business and start up advice, grants and support for research and development and digital transformation

**Sub-priority 1.2 - Local infrastructure investment**

<b>Core focus</b>	Growth-driving sectors require high-quality foundations of infrastructure and transport connectivity. Northern Ireland contains significant sub-regional disparities where poor connectivity hampers productivity and median wages.
<b>Proposed activity</b>	Investment in digital and transport connectivity to support regeneration, improve location attraction, and ensure low productivity areas (including areas with high levels of rurality) are not left behind. Support for local water and wastewater infrastructure (including flooding prevention) to protect or unlock land for new social housing, industrial and commercial development (including site assembly and new business premises). Utilising infrastructure investment to harness the potential of a green growth economy, including investment in carbon-neutral technologies.

**Sub-priority 1.3 - Skills enhancement (RQF Level 3+)**

<b>Core focus</b>	By 2033, NI faces an annual undersupply of 7,000 workers with mid-to-high level qualifications. We must close this gap to sustain a high-value economy.
<b>Proposed activity</b>	Tailored skills interventions specifically aligned with high-growth sectors like ICT, professional services, advanced manufacturing, and the green economy.

## Priority 2: Promoting active participation in the workforce

**The goal:** To tackle the high rate of economic inactivity (26.7%) and ensure that growth reduces regional disparities and social exclusion.

With 50% of the inactive population expressing a desire to work, there is a massive 'latent' workforce. To support moves toward employment, we propose a multi-agency approach focusing on three intervention areas:

Sub-priority 2.1 - Education, skills, and reskilling	
<b>Core focus</b>	Economic inactivity is inextricably linked to low educational attainment and NI currently shows the highest rate of inactivity in the UK for individuals with qualifications below NQF Level 2. Breaking this cycle is essential for both the individual and the wider economy.
<b>Proposed activity</b>	Expanding access to adult education and reskilling opportunities designed specifically to bring people back into the labour market.

Sub-priority 2.2 - Localised economic inclusion	
<b>Core focus</b>	Economic inactivity is often concentrated in specific geographic clusters with high levels of deprivation, social exclusion and low levels of connectivity <sup>18</sup> .
<b>Proposed activity</b>	Working with a range of stakeholders, including local employers, to support innovative, granular solutions tailored to local community needs. This includes support for the social enterprise sector, which acts as an engine for local growth by employing those who face the highest barriers to the labour market.

Sub-priority 2.3 - Early Intervention: Addressing NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training)	
<b>Core focus</b>	The most effective way to reduce long-term inactivity is to stop it before it starts. Entrenched barriers often begin when young people disengage from education.
<b>Proposed activity</b>	Dedicated programmes to prevent young people from becoming NEET, focusing on areas with historically low educational attainment.

### Delivery and governance

<sup>18</sup> Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (2024) [Economic inactivity Who, what, where, why?](#)

19. We recognise that Northern Ireland requires a delivery model that is agile, locally informed, and avoids unnecessary bureaucracy.
20. Across the UK, the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) will maintain oversight of the overall Local Growth Fund and is responsible for periodic reporting to the UK Parliament on the Fund. In Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Executive departments and their Accounting Officer(s) will plan and oversee delivery of the Fund, with the exception of the delivery of skills and employment support and business advice in 2026-27, which will be managed by MHCLG directly.
21. Reporting and Monitoring arrangements for the fund, as well as progress metrics, are set out in the Local Growth Fund (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) Technical note.<sup>19</sup>
22. Following final agreement of the strategic framework and outcomes, taking forward input from the consultation process, the NI Executive as Accountable Fund Lead will be responsible for managing the delivery of the Local Growth Fund to ensure alignment with local expertise. In accordance with the activities to be supported under the Fund, the NI Executive will allocate the funding to delivery organisations through a range of approaches, including commissioning and competition where appropriate.
23. To ensure transparency and rigorous management of public funds:

**Partnership Group:** A cross-sectoral group of partners from the public, private and third sector will provide advice and insight on delivery.

**Monitoring and evaluation:** Robust and effective monitoring and evaluation play a crucial role in the success of all policy and investment delivery. It is vital we adopt a culture of continuous review and improvement to learn from previous experience, build on what works, and ensure value for money. As Accountable fund lead, the Northern Ireland Executive will develop guidance to support effective monitoring and evaluation and ensure that funded projects will be subject to regular reporting to ensure they meet stated outputs, outcomes and impacts. The Northern Ireland Executive will promote transparency in that data and coordinate an independent evaluation of the Local Growth Fund.

### **Compliance and equality**

24. As part of our commitment to a fair society, the Local Growth Fund will be developed having regard to the following assessments:

#### **Section 75 (NI Act 1998)**

25. The proposed framework for the Local Growth Fund has undergone an initial Equality screening ([here](#)). The preliminary findings suggest that the plan's focus on Enhancing productivity and Promoting active participation in the workforce will have a broadly positive impact across all Section 75 categories by creating economic opportunity.

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<sup>19</sup> [Local Growth Funding framework for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales](#)

26. As details of the specific programme interventions under the Local Growth Fund are established following the consultation exercise, a detailed monitoring and evaluation framework will be developed. The Local Growth Fund will be subject to a process of ongoing monitoring and evaluation, including assessment of equality impacts.

### **Alignment with the Windsor Framework**

27. In accordance with Article 2 of the Windsor Framework, the UK Government ensures that no diminution of rights, safeguards, or equality of opportunity (as set out in the relevant part of the 1998 Agreement) results from the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. The interventions funded under this plan will be managed to ensure they uphold these non-diminution commitments. The Local Growth Fund will also be subject to a process of ongoing monitoring and evaluation, including assessment of upholding rights and safeguards guaranteed under Article 2.

### **Rural Needs Impact Assessment**

28. As per the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016, there is a need to consider how the plan, and subsequent delivery, will give due regard to the social and economic needs of people in rural areas.

29. With a focus on Enhancing productivity and Promoting active participation in the workforce, the Plan has the potential to target particular barriers to development in rural areas and ensure they have the same growth opportunities as those in urban centres.

30. As details of the specific programme interventions under the Local Growth Fund are established following the consultation exercise, a Rural Needs Impact Assessment will be conducted. Further to this, a monitoring and evaluation framework will be developed to track and assess the impact on an urban/rural basis.

### **Consultation questions**

31. This consultation will respect the Fair Funding principles outlined in the 'Partnership Agreement between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector in Northern Ireland.'

32. The focus of this consultation is to ensure the most effective and efficient use of public funds for maximum impact and value to Northern Ireland. This consultation will not consider the overall level of funding for the Local Growth Fund.

33. Within this framework, we are seeking your views to refine the proposed strategic framework for the Fund. Your responses to the following questions will be instrumental in ensuring that our interventions are practical, impactful, and tailored to the unique needs of Northern Ireland's economy.

### **The strategic priorities**

*Do you agree that the two core priorities - Enhancing Productivity and Promoting active participation in the workforce - are the correct priorities for the Local Growth Fund over the next three years?*

*Looking at the proposed activities under each priority, is the indicative balance of funding between the priorities appropriate? If not, what should it be? (To note: this question is not asking about the total Resource and Capital funding split for the Local Growth Fund but is asking about the proposed funding balance between the two priorities, Enhancing productivity and Promoting active participation in the workforce).*

### **Priority 1- Enhancing productivity**

*Which of three sub-priorities identified (Business support and innovation, Strategic infrastructure investment, Skills enhancement), or others, would you focus on to deliver higher value-added activity and increase the efficiency of the economy?*

*How can the Local Growth Fund best support SMEs and business start ups to grow and move up the value chain, including engaging in Research and Development?*

*Regarding local growth infrastructure, which specific local barriers (e.g., wastewater, flooding, transport, digital, green energy) are most significantly preventing business growth in your local area?*

### **Priority 2 - Promoting active participation in the workforce**

*What specific support is most needed to help those currently economically inactive move toward employment, including self-employment and starting their own business?*

*What specific adult education or reskilling models have proven most effective at re-engaging those with qualifications below NQF Level 2?*

*What capital programmes / projects can best promote active participation in the workforce?*

### **Delivery and equality**

*Which organisations are best placed to deliver each sub-priority of the fund and why? (For example, NI departments, local government, third sector organisations, the private sector, education providers).*

*Are there opportunities to better align with existing or planned provision (For example by boosting an existing local or NI project or initiative)?*

*Are there any groups protected under Section 75 who may be adversely affected by the proposed sub-priorities set out in this proposed Framework? Are there opportunities for promoting good relations?*

*The Local Growth Fund aims to promote regional balance. Are there any further considerations we should give to ensuring support benefits rural communities as per the*

*Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016? How can we ensure that investments in infrastructure and skills are delivered in a way that effectively supports rural communities and businesses?*

**How to respond**

34. This consultation will remain open for 7 weeks. This timeframe allows for a robust engagement process that provides stakeholders the opportunity to share their views, while ensuring we can act swiftly to finalise the design of the Investment Plan and commence implementation as soon as possible.
35. Please submit your responses by **5:00pm on Friday, 26 June 2026**
36. Please provide your comments to the questions outlined in Section 7 using the response form [here](#) and send it to any of the following:
- **Email:** NILGFconsultation@nio.gov.uk or
  - **Post:** Northern Ireland Office, Erskine House, 20-32 Chichester St, Belfast, BT1 4GF
37. To ensure we capture the most comprehensive evidence within this timeframe, we are also conducting a series of targeted engagement sessions with representative bodies and stakeholder organisations across each sector (i.e. the public, voluntary / community, and business) to supplement the public consultation process.

**Appendix 2  
Consultation Questions**

**Strategic Priorities**

**Question 1.**

Do you agree that the two core priorities - Enhancing Productivity and Promoting active participation in the workforce - are the correct priorities for the Local Growth Fund over the next three years?

Enhancing Productivity

(insert an X under the relevant heading)

<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
	X			

**Supporting comments:**

Supporting evidence reinforces the fact that this has been an ongoing challenge in the NI economy for some time and needs to be the focus of collective support across wider government investment. Given the limited resources available in this programme, it will be important to consider how investments can add value rather than duplicating existing activity.

Productivity improvement is a key driver for DfE investment in Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs). As a result, local councils will be progressing a range of interventions to drive productivity improvements across the region, so it will be important to consider how any new activities can complement or add value to existing provision. Likewise, it is a key driver of the Belfast Region City Deal investments, particularly those linked to digital and innovation support.

It's difficult to argue against the focus on productivity but it is important to be realistic about what impact a two-year programme can have on productivity outcomes. These investments need to be longer-term and at an appropriate level. Short term funding interventions can only ever have limited long-term impact or effect long-term change.

Productivity should not be understood solely in terms of business output or inward investment, but also through the quality, accessibility and adaptability of local places. For example, Belfast city has a commercial vacancy rate of approximately 32%. Many buildings have underused spaces representing an opportunity to support local enterprise, flexible workspaces, skills development and start up activities. Re-purposing these spaces can help create a more resilient local economy, reduce dereliction and provide accessible employment opportunities closer to where people live.

Promoting Active Participation in the Workforce

(insert an X under the relevant heading)

<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
	X			

**Supporting comments:**

Promoting active participation in the workforce complements and supports the focus on enhancing productivity and can make a critical contribution to driving local growth.

The nature of the challenge is significant across all NI but there are particular pockets – in both urban and rural areas – where resources need to be focused to ensure optimal impact. Likewise, there are key target groups – particularly young people and those who are disabled – that will require focused support and we would encourage focused investment on these groups.

Activities to support labour market participation are more likely to utilise revenue rather than capital funding. However, given the balance of this fund, consideration may need to be given to enhancing elements that promote labour market engagement (supporting infrastructure; investment in facilities) rather more traditional support mechanisms. Clarity on potential “capital” activities in this area would be helpful.

Promoting active participation in the workforce should also focus on reducing structural barriers to employment through targeted investment plans than support and grow the existing ecosystem. This includes enhancing existing economic centres, addressing long term vacancy and dereliction, improving access to public transport and active travel infrastructure and supporting development that provides homes close to employment and educational opportunities and local services. While 57% of the indicative allocation towards this priority is capital funding, it is unclear from the consultation document what types of eligible capital expenditure can be incurred within this priority.

**Question 2.**

Looking at the proposed activities under each priority, is the indicative balance of funding between the priorities appropriate? If not, what should it be? *(To note: this question is not asking about the total Resource and Capital funding split for the Local Growth Fund but is asking about the proposed funding balance between the two priorities, Enhancing productivity and Promoting active participation in the workforce).*

(insert an X under the relevant heading)

<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
			X	

**Supporting comments:**

The indicative balance of revenue funding between the two priorities appears to be inconsistent with potential eligible areas of spend, as outlined in the consultation document. This is particularly relevant given the capital/revenue split as the interventions and indicative activities to support active participation in the workforce are largely revenue based, yet revenue funding represents only 43% of eligible expenditure at present.

Across the two priorities, we also note that the indicative allocation for priority 1 is around 42% of available budget with 58% of the budget proposed for priority 2. Given that there is a much broader spectrum of eligible capital activities aligned to priority 1 measures, we would propose that these figures are reversed. This is less a comment on the relative merits of the priorities and more a reflection of the most appropriate spend on eligible activities aligned to each of the individual priorities.

Place-based interventions that support a mixture of priority 1 and priority 2 activities could provide more flexibility in the types and range of services supported. Funders may wish to consider whether there are mechanisms for supporting projects that address both priorities – this might enable investment in a more coherent programme of support. Local councils would be well placed to advise further on the potential nature of these place-based approaches.

**Priority 1- Enhancing productivity**

**Question 3.**

Which of three sub-priorities identified (Business support and innovation, Strategic infrastructure investment, Skills enhancement), or others, would you focus on to deliver higher value-added activity and increase the efficiency of the economy?

(insert an X under the relevant heading)

<b>Business support and innovation</b>	
<b>Strategic infrastructure investment</b>	
<b>Skills enhancement</b>	

**Supporting comments:**

All three elements are complementary and can make a valued contribution to driving local growth. Some specific commentary on the relevant sub-priorities outlined:

**Business support and innovation:** we support the focus on support for SMEs, helping them to innovate, adopt new technologies, expand into export markets and move up the value chain. This is consistent with the Go Succeed model developed and delivered by councils under the Shared Prosperity Fund. Councils have taken a continuous improvement approach to this model and have begun the process to look at the evolution of the service, focusing more on driving value and focusing resources more purposefully on those businesses that have the potential to innovate, create jobs and support reinvestment across the region, while structuring the support through a place-based lens. Councils are open to engagement on further evolution of the service in line with funder needs, including targeted support for digital transformation and improving innovation-readiness (potentially utilising capital resources).

**Strategic infrastructure investment** can be a primary focus for delivering higher value-added activity and increasing the efficiency of the economy, particularly where it supports the regeneration and reuse of vacant and derelict spaces. However, this should be closely aligned with business support, innovation and skills enhancement to maximise long term impact. Vacancy and dereliction continue to undermine the economic potential of Belfast and many neighbouring communities. Poor quality and under-used environments can deter private sector investment, reduce investor confidence and create a perception of decline that is not helpful to innovation or business growth. Concentrated vacancy can also contribute to anti-social activity, reduced footfall and weaker community confidence, further limiting economic activity and place attractiveness. The Local Growth Fund presents an opportunity to address this challenge through targeted regeneration and infrastructure investment that enables the productive reuse of existing buildings and sites.

Investment in sustainable transport and active travel infrastructure should also be considered part of the strategic infrastructure investment, as improved accessibility is essential for connecting people to employment, education and services. Better connected and revitalised city centres are more likely to attract businesses, retain talent and support higher productivity

sectors. However it is important to consider how the limited resources available through this programme can be most effectively invested. In some cases, the scale of the infrastructure challenge may be so significant that the LGF resources can effect little or no change – and therefore it would not make sense to direct these resources on these areas of work (e.g. wastewater infrastructure).

**Skills enhancement:** we agree that targeted skills interventions – particularly at level 3 and above – are critical for driving productivity. We also understand that the overall skills profile is improving and that the number of people with no or low skills is decreasing. While apprenticeships and vocational skills in key growth areas are critical, consideration needs to be given to how these pathways can be more inclusive (e.g. individuals that do not have L2 English and Maths cannot currently engage on an apprenticeship programme). Given the prevalence of small businesses in Northern Ireland, consideration may also have to be given to more flexible solutions e.g. shared apprenticeship models.

#### **Question 4.**

How can the Local Growth Fund best support SMEs and business start ups to grow and move up the value chain, including engaging in Research and Development?

#### **Answer:**

There are a number of factors that need to be considered if SMEs are to grow and move up the value chain, including engaging in R&D. These include:

##### **1. Enable Accessible, Locally Delivered Support**

Go Succeed has created a single entry point in the ecosystem with an in-built triage system to provide businesses with the support that they need in a time that works for them. This “funnel” creates a clear entry point into innovation, with the potential to add value through wider “add-on” services such as grants for innovation, digital transformation and R&D. The “packaged” support of mentoring and grant support makes it easier for the SME to apply the learning in the business and improves the likelihood of success. Councils are well positioned to act as trusted intermediaries, ensuring that innovation support reaches businesses that would not otherwise engage.

##### **2. Invest in Place-Based Ecosystems and Enterprise Infrastructure**

Supporting businesses to move up the value chain requires strong local ecosystems. The Fund should:

- Support sub-regional sectoral clusters aligned with local strengths (e.g. agri-food, advanced manufacturing, tourism, digital and creative industries)
- Support innovation diffusion activities within capital investment projects – including those aligned to City and Growth Deals – in order to maximise SME access to and uptake of these resources.

**Question 5.**

Regarding local growth infrastructure, which specific local barriers (e.g., wastewater, flooding, transport, digital, green energy) are most significantly preventing business growth in your local area?

**Answer:**

While it is clear that wastewater/flooding issues are impacting development projects all across NI, it is important to consider what realistic impact LGF investment can have in addressing these challenges. Instead, it may be more appropriate to focus resources on areas of potential opportunity to support growth e.g. regenerating places through investment in and redevelopment of vacant and/or underutilised buildings and sites. These spaces can negatively affect perceptions of place quality and investor confidence discouraging private sector investment and limiting the attractiveness of areas for new and expanding businesses. In many locations prolonged vacancy contributes to reduced footfall, blight, anti-social activity and declining commercial vitality, creating an environment that is not supportive for innovation or economic growth.

Another significant barrier is transport connectivity and accessibility. The lack of affordable public transport, poor pedestrian infrastructure and underdeveloped active travel networks can restrict access to employment, reduce labour mobility and make it more difficult for businesses to retain and attract workers. This particularly affects those without access to private vehicles, including young people, lower income households and older residents.

To address these barriers the Local Growth Fund should support integrated regeneration projects that combine infrastructure investment, sustainable transport improvements, digital connectivity and adaptive reuse of vacant assets. A place-based approach of this nature would help create more attractive, accessible and productive environments for businesses and communities alike. Local councils are well placed to advise further on appropriate approaches to support growth in local areas.

**Priority 2 - Promoting active participation in the workforce****Question 6.**

What specific support is most needed to help those currently economically inactive move toward employment, including self-employment and starting their own business?

**Answer:**

We highlight the need for targeted, flexible, place-based support to address the wide range of barriers faced by economically inactive individuals. Key priorities include tailored, locally delivered employability support comprising:

- Community-based outreach through trusted local providers to engage individuals furthest from the labour market
- Personalised mentoring, coaching, and confidence-building programmes to support progression
- Ensuring access to flexible, wraparound support including childcare, transport assistance, and health and wellbeing services
- Long-term engagement rather than short, time-limited interventions
- Focus on progression rather than “into work/jobs created” as an appropriate outcome measurement, with greater consistency in how this is measured.

We consider that LGF activities supported under “Promoting Active Participation” should focus on outreach and engagement support and that outcomes should be appropriate and aligned to this support i.e. job outcomes are not always an appropriate outcome to evidence the impact of this work. This will also help streamline the support ecosystem with the LGF-funded activity

focusing on the “supply” side (reaching out to engage key target groups; providing key employability support and helping address barriers to progression) while the LMP activities operating in all councils areas will then focus more on the “demand-side” activities i.e. working with employers to design and develop employment support interventions for those further from the labour market and create/ring-fence specific job roles for individuals that are successful in interviews for those roles. Engagement between the supply and demand support is obviously critical but we consider that, with greater role clarification in the way that we have described it, this can be achieved – thereby creating more effective local solutions and a clearer understanding of outputs attributable to respective investment sources. It is important to note the funding-dependent nature of LMP delivery and the fact that councils are working on annual funding cycles (at best) while trying to provide long-term, flexible support in line with participant needs.

Regarding pathways into self-employment and enterprise, there are many examples across councils of how Go Succeed support has worked alongside other interventions such as LMP activity to support self-employment for those who are furthest from the labour market. Given councils’ delivery across both areas, there is the potential to explore opportunities for further collaborative activity in this space, based on our learning.

### Question 7.

What specific adult education or reskilling models have proven most effective at re-engaging those with qualifications below NQF Level 2?

### Answer:

There is a strong and effective community-based support infrastructure all across Northern Ireland that has significant experience in engaging and working with individuals who are far from the labour market. They employ a range of approaches that have been shown to be effective including:

- Community-embedded learning provision
  - Delivery in familiar, non-formal settings (community centres, libraries, local hubs) to reduce stigma and build trust
  - Outreach-led engagement through local networks and grassroots organisations.
  - Informal “first step” programmes that ease learners back into education.
- Bite-sized and flexible learning models
  - Short, modular courses that allow incremental achievement and build confidence
  - Flexible scheduling (part-time, evening, blended/online delivery) to accommodate caring responsibilities and health barriers
  - Recognition of prior learning to support quicker progression
  - Introduction of digital badges to track progression pathways and enable those with no or low skills levels to build a strong “skills passport” (now being developed across all LMPs)
- Essential skills integrated with vocational pathways
  - Combining literacy, numeracy, and digital skills with practical, work-related training
  - Providing 1-2-1 support to ensure progression into further training, apprenticeships, or employment.
- Wraparound and personalised support
  - Dedicated mentoring and pastoral support to address confidence, motivation, and personal barriers
  - Access to childcare, transport assistance, and wellbeing services
  - Ongoing learner tracking to support retention and progression

Councils have also developed specialisms and expertise on working with these individuals to create sustainable employment opportunities. Through strong partnerships with local businesses, they have developed effective interventions that include:

- Employer-connected models
  - Co-designed programmes with local employers to support real job outcomes
  - Creating inclusive pathways – developing non-traditional pathways into jobs in key growth sectors
  - Inclusion of work placements, site visits, and guaranteed interviews where possible
- Stepping-stone pathways to enterprise
  - Introductory enterprise and self-employment programmes for those less suited to traditional employment, aligned to the Go Succeed model.
  - Practical, supported routes into self employment or freelancing

We note that the current focus in the consultation is largely on re-skilling but our view is that the critical outreach and engagement work and support to address barriers is critical – even ahead of the skills support. This can come once the participants are engaged and confidence has been built to help them consider skills development and potential labour market engagement.

### **Question 8.**

What capital programmes / projects can best promote active participation in the workforce?

#### **Answer:**

The most effective capital programmes will be those that adopt a place-based integrated approach by combining regeneration, connectivity, skills infrastructure and sustainable transport to create attractive accessible opportunities and economically active communities. A “Centre First” approach of enhancing existing economic centres will provide the added benefits of a clustering of economic, employment and opportunity with quality place-making to strengthen the existing offer while delivering on growth ambitions.

A key priority should be the regeneration and repurposing of vacant and derelict buildings within cities and neighbourhoods. Bringing these spaces back into productive use can create community services, mixed use developments, childcare provision, training hubs and workspaces that support local employment and economic participation. Repurposed buildings could provide much needed homes for key workers and affordable accommodation in accessible locations close to employment and public transport.

As noted above, the consultation document does not currently suggest that these types of interventions might be eligible for support under priority 2. As a result, councils consider that it is important to be realistic about the scale of capital investment that can be delivered under this priority measure.

### **Delivery and equality**

#### **Question 9.**

Which organisations are best placed to deliver each sub-priority of the fund and why? (For example, NI departments, local government, third sector organisations, the private sector, education providers).

#### **Answer:**

Local government authorities should play a central role in delivering strategic infrastructure investment as well as regeneration and place-based economic development initiatives. Councils have detailed knowledge of local conditions, community needs and spatial priorities and are well positioned to co-ordinate regeneration activity, town/city centre renewal and the reuse of vacant

and derelict spaces. Local Authorities are also experienced in delivering agile programmes that deliver outcomes at scale, in conjunction with Executive Departments and with the private and third sectors. They have robust audit processes that can provide full accountability and transparency for funders.

Belfast City Council through its community planning partnership has experience of convening stakeholders, aligning investment and ensuring projects contribute to wider place-making and economic strategies. In common with other local authorities, it has already worked with partners to agree a series of strategic interventions required to unlock inclusive growth and regeneration within the boundary. It is important to consider how LGF resources might be allocated to support delivery rather than reinventing the wheel.

Sub-priority 1.1 – Business Support and Innovation – Councils are well placed to support core service delivery through their evolving Go Succeed model. This has created a strong track record of delivery and is built on a strong partnership involving the 11 councils working closely with DfE; Invest NI and the FE colleges as well as a wider support network to ensure effective local coverage in keeping with the Minister for the Economy’s priorities around sub-regional growth, driving entrepreneurship and productivity improvements. In Belfast, we have also focused on deriving value for our small businesses from critical investments such as City Deal Digital and Innovation projects.

Sub-priority 1.2 – Local infrastructure investment – the delivery lead will depend on the specific infrastructure element to be supported. For example, councils may work with DfC on local regeneration support but green growth investments may be led by Invest NI or academic/skills partners.

Sub-priority 1.3 – Skills enhancement – DfE is likely to be the lead partner on this element but we would propose close collaboration with councils (specifically relating to LMP activities).

Sub-priority 2.1 – Education, skills and reskilling – DfC is likely to have a view on the most effective deployment but councils will have a direct role in advising on potential local solutions. The LMP provides a mechanism for this engagement at local level – ensuring that resources are most effectively deployed. DfE may also become engaged around reskilling support – particularly where this is supporting progression.

Sub-priority 2.2 – Localised economic inclusion – this falls directly within the scope of LMPs and they would be the best place to guide and support delivery.

Sub-priority 2.3 – Early intervention – DfE (and potentially DE/EA) may be best placed to advise on prioritisation. Delivery support could be channelled through LMPs and/or CPPs – depending on how significant this challenge is in local areas.

While the Executive Departments have a key role to play within the delivery of the LGF, the administration of the fund should be agile and streamlined without putting undue burden and time delay on the delivery agents. Councils worked very closely with MHCLG on the Shared Prosperity Fund, and the administration approach adopted – commissioned service delivery from MHCLG to councils – provided an effective delivery model. Consideration should be given to the role of Local Authorities managing the LGF directly – particularly in those areas identified above where, in our view, they should have a lead role.

**Question 10.**

Are there opportunities to better align with existing or planned provision (For example by boosting an existing local or NI project or initiative)?

**Answer:**

There are significant opportunities to align the Local Growth Fund with existing local and regional regeneration initiatives to maximise impact, avoid duplication and accelerate delivery outcomes.

Opportunities include:

- Local Economic Partnerships – projects are coming forward across all 11 council areas and are focused on productivity improvements (alignment with priority 1)
- Community Planning Partnerships – all local Community Planning Partnerships will have agreed a series of prioritised interventions to support place-based growth for their respective areas. These are likely to include activities across both priority areas
- Shaping Sustainable Places – this emerging policy approach from DfC, DfI and DAERA represents a more collaborative, engaged model for developing solutions to specific place-based challenges through funding local physical and infrastructure projects. Potential for alignment with priority 1.2
- Opportunity to support the evolution and growth of Go Succeed (particularly relating to sub-priority 1.1). There is a track record of delivery and an existing partnership in place – as well as strong political for the future development of this service
- Enhanced Investment Zones – work progressing on sector-focused support interventions, based on regional specialisms. Subject to final decisions on agreed areas of focus, potential to align to LGF to maximise impact.

There will be other local level examples across respective council areas and these will be drawn out in individual responses. One specific example in Belfast is the work that is being undertaken to address vacancy through its emerging vacancy toolkit and related city centre regeneration initiatives. This work seeks to address long term vacancy and dereliction through targeted capital investment, the repurposing of underused buildings and sites, and the promotion of more active and sustainable urban environments (alignment to sub-priority 1.2). The Local Growth Fund could build on these approaches by supporting projects that bring vacant properties back into productive use for housing, workspaces, commercial and retail activity and community infrastructure. There is also an opportunity to support land assembly and strategic site interventions where stalled development has limited regeneration potential and private sector investment.

There is also strong potential to align the Fund with “A Bolder Vision” strategy, which promotes a more connected, accessible and safer city centre and neighbourhoods through public realm improvements, active travel infrastructure and sustainable transport. Investment that improves walking, cycling and public transport accessibility can help reduce barriers to employment, improve access to education and services and create healthier and more attractive environments. Better connectivity also supports increased footfall and commercial activity within city centres, strengthening the conditions for local business growth and private sector investment.

Belfast City Council is also the delivery partner for a number of capital investment schemes to support economic growth in local areas. The council has significant expertise not only in programme management and oversight but also in local engagement and collaborative working. It has strong financial processes that are fully transparent and can be a trusted delivery partner for NIO in this space.

Finally, the Belfast Region City Deal partners (council, academia, public sector) have built strong working partnerships and have already implemented significant projects of scale to drive productivity. As the focus moves to benefits realisation, there is an opportunity to consider how the Local Growth Fund can be used to drive targeted activities in line with the indicative programme priorities.

**Question 11.**

Are there any groups protected under Section 75 who may be adversely affected by the proposed sub-priorities set out in this proposed Framework? Are there opportunities for promoting good relations?

**Answer:**

Groups that may face barriers include disabled people, older people, young people, carers, individuals on lower incomes, people living in rural areas and those without access to private transport. If investment is concentrated in specific places or focused on particular sectors there is a risk that some communities and individuals could become further excluded from employment opportunities – hence the need for targeted outreach and engagement.

There is also a risk that regeneration and infrastructure investment could unintentionally contribute to displacement or unequal access if improvements to local areas are not accompanied by affordable housing, accessible and affordable transport and inclusive community facilities. The repurposing of vacant and derelict spaces should therefore prioritise community benefit, affordability and accessibility to ensure that regeneration supports existing communities rather than displacing them.

The framework presents significant opportunities to promote good relations if investment is delivered through a place-based and inclusive approach. Regeneration projects, shared public spaces, travel infrastructure and community facilities can help create more connected and accessible environments that encourage social interaction and shared use across different communities. Investment in accessible city centres and neighbourhoods, public realm improvements and integrated transport can support greater participation and reduce social isolation.

There are also opportunities to promote good relations through collaborative delivery models involving local government, education providers, the third sector and community organisations.

Importantly, the framework should ensure that consultation, co-design and community engagement are embedded throughout project development and delivery. This would help ensure that investment reflects local needs, supports equality of opportunity and contribute positively to social cohesion in NI.

The proposed framework has strong potential to promote good relations, provided investment decisions are inclusive, geographically balances and focused on reducing barriers to participation for disadvantaged groups.

**Question 12.**

The Local Growth Fund aims to promote regional balance. Are there any further considerations we should give to ensuring support benefits rural communities as per the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016? How can we ensure that investments in infrastructure and skills are delivered in a way that effectively supports rural communities and businesses?

**Answer:**

No specific comments here.

**Question 13.**

If you have any related comments which have not been addressed in the above questions, please use this space to share them.

**Answer:**

We are mindful of the time pressure on spend and would encourage NIO to move at pace in securing agreement around the investment plan in order to move forward on delivery.

We note the annual funding allocations (both capital and revenue) and would ask NIO to explore opportunities for flexibility across each spend year. This is particularly important given the capital-focused nature of the programme and the need for flexibility in these schemes, including working across financial years.

We welcome the proposed establishment of the Partnership Group to “provide advice and insight on delivery”. It is regrettable that this Partnership Group will not be established until after the adoption of the investment plan, and therefore partners will not be able to influence the content of the plan. Local Government was an active contributor on the SPF Partnership Group and we would welcome the opportunity to participate in the LGF Partnership Group structure

On 11 June 2025, MHCLG announced 25 trailblazer neighbourhoods to receive long-term investment. [Government announces 25 "trailblazer neighbourhoods" to receive long-term investment - details - GOV.UK](#). Belfast was listed as one of those neighbourhoods, to receive £2million annual funding over 10 years. However the current consultation document makes no reference to how this funding is to be allocated. We would ask for urgent clarity on this position from NIO.

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