

**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)

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
	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)

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
	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)

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
			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)

Business support and innovation	
Strategic infrastructure investment	
Skills enhancement	

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.