

Creative sector incubation support: Northern Light Incubator

Project overview/summary	Six-month business incubation programme (to be repeated annually for two years), designed to support the growth of creative screen enterprises by providing targeted support, access to facilities and expertise needed to de-risk IP development, provide access to world-leading technologies and accelerate business growth opportunities, helping businesses to test and validate workflows, support new product development and commercialise more rapidly.
Key activities/outcomes	<p>The programme aims to identify and support a minimum of 20 businesses annually (x2). There will be two tiers of support provided. Tier one support will involve a dedicated programme of industry-led support and mentoring, as well as incubation space at Studio Ulster. At least six companies will receive the higher-level support in each programme cohort.</p> <p>Tier two will be available to at least 14 additional businesses per cohort. They will be able to access the programme of industry-led workshops and training support. However they will not access the incubation support or the additional in-house mentoring from Studio Ulster team.</p> <p>Businesses taking part will focus on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Harnessing IP development for business growth• Developing, testing and validating IP, workflows, tools• Develop robust and viable use cases• Business growth strategy development• Value proposition development and market testing• Leadership and management skills• Building customer pipelines• Approaches to funding and investment <p>Businesses will have access to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dedicated desk space for 6 months within a professional working VP studio and environment (tier one only)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to VP studio facilities and resources for IP development, testing and validation (tier one only) • Structured mentorship programme with leading industry experts in business, creative and technical fields (tier one only) • Industry masterclasses • Peer to peer cohort networking and cross cohort support • Access to the Northern Light Network, a community of businesses, funders and investors and researchers • Work placement students from Ulster Screen Academy courses • Research and industry expertise from Ulster Screen Academy and CoSTAR Screen Lab • Signposting to wider business support (including Go Succeed; Invest NI support; Catalyst support; funding support (depending on specific need). <p>At least 40 companies will take part over the two-year programme. Key outcomes will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New products developed (from innovation to commercialisation) • Skills developed – consolidating the local skills base in order to create a more stable indigenous business base • Cluster development/sector development – growing the creative sector, with a focus on new technologies (future-proofing) – establishment of peer-to-peer Northern Light Network for ongoing engagement and support.
Ability to deliver LEP objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sector development support for creative sector – focus on virtual production • Aims to support companies to develop new products and explore new markets – both of which will drive productivity improvements • Creating “good jobs” – supporting high value roles • Also has potential to align to a wider creative support approach – can have more of an “inclusion” focus (potential to fund separately)
Alignment to wider activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belfast Stories: development of new studio space to act as “anchor” and focal point for creative and screen businesses – potential to use this space to showcase new products developed

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Also potential to align this support to wider screen production (not just virtual production) support – early-stage engagement with Belfast Stories team re: future programming ahead of capital build completion • Opportunities to link to current skills development work (e.g. E3 courses on creative media/media make up) as well as UU courses – exploring work placements/employment opportunities within growing businesses – also look at how the masterclasses/open events might be available to the emerging talent in BMC/UU.
Indicative annual budget	Two-year budget profile iro £700k (c£350k+ p.a.). Some flexibility in budget to extend numbers if required
Project timelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project mobilisation (resourcing; development of space; sector engagement): April-June 2026 • Year one cohort sign-up: May-July 2026 • Core delivery: August 2026-February 2027 • Year one review and evaluation: March-April 2027 • Year two cohort sign-up (taking account of year one learnings): April-May 2027 • Core delivery: June-December 2027 • Year two review and evaluation: January-February 2028

Business growth and innovation support

Project overview/summary	<p>A range of business growth and innovation supports focused on growth-focused start-ups and existing businesses to help them create jobs; explore new markets and improve their understanding of new technologies such as AI. There will be a combination of generic and sector specific supports.</p>
Key activities/outcomes	<p>This package of support measures will focus on growth-focused businesses not currently engaging with Invest NI or other supports.</p> <p>The supports will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhancing Go Succeed support, covering both start-up and growth activities – but with the potential to focus on/target specific locations (parts of the city) and/or specific sectors (including creative – aligned to Northern Light) through top-up support • Introduction to export support – identifying companies currently accessing Go Succeed and other supports with the potential to explore new markets (including first time exporters) • AI empowering business support – working in partnership with AICC Transform Programme and BRCD AI capital grant programme to extend the reach of support to ensure uptake by SMEs outside of traditional tech sectors • Management and Leadership support – improving business productivity by upskilling SME leaders to equip them to lead their companies more successfully. • REAP next steps approach – building on methodology developed via MIT but with a growing focus on AI-based innovation driven businesses – customised interventions focused on commercialisation; investor-readiness; focus on inclusion.
Ability to deliver LEP objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on helping businesses to grow (new markets; job creation; management and leadership skills) • Aims to support companies to develop new products and explore new markets – both of which will drive productivity improvements • Creating “good jobs” – supporting high value roles

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Also has potential to align to wider support interventions: BRCD investments; Local Innovation Partnership Fund; creative support approach – can have more of an “inclusion” focus (potential to fund separately)
Alignment to wider activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BRCD • Local Innovation Partnership Fund • Enhanced Investment Zones • AICC work, including Transformer programme
Indicative annual budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Go Succeed growth support: £280k p.a. x 2 • New export support: £50k p.a. x 2 • AI support: £50k p.a. x 2 – timing dependent on mobilisation of BRCD work • AIDE starts: £250k over two years (subject to further scoping – second half of y2 start) • Management and Leadership support: £100k over two years (subject to further scoping)
Project timelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Go Succeed growth support: delivery from 1 April 2026 • New export support: scoping and mobilisation April-June 2026; delivery August 2026-Feb 2028 • AI support: scoping and mobilisation April-June 2026; delivery August 2026-Feb 2028 • AIDE starts: scoping work with BRCD and potential delivery partners – April-June 2026; delivery August 2026-Feb 2028 • Management and Leadership support: scoping and mobilisation April-June 2026; delivery August 2026-Feb 2028.

Capital investment for creative growth

Project overview/summary	<p>Capital investment programme to enable security of tenure for creative workspace provision in Belfast, build business resilience; support regeneration and build new clusters.</p> <p>A study has been undertaken on Creative Workspaces to provide a clear picture of the current provision of creative workspaces within Belfast, define workspace requirements for the city’s creative ecosystem and make recommendations to advance the delivery of future creative workspace. A recommendation that emerged from the study identified a capital investment requirement that could help support feasibility, business case development to support a sustainable approach to infrastructure provision.</p> <p>The business case will identify the optimal funding model and route to market including financing levels to ensure viability for long term ownership of asset model. The capital investment will include a seed funding approach to act as a catalyst in addressing initial viability challenges and the urgent need for creative workspace provision and will be complemented by targeted wrap-around support that will focus on business resilience and growth, including support for management and leadership within organisational leads.</p>
Key activities/outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Initial feasibility study and business case to test existing assumptions around demand and to identify appropriate funding models and “route to market” in order to launch and deliver this solution within the lifetime of the LEP• Roll-out of capital funding intervention focusing on creative businesses – addressing current issue of short-term/precarious letting arrangements and enabling organisations to focus on resilience, sustainability and growth• Supporting local regeneration and economic growth activities by placing creative businesses at the heart of the city’s growth

Ability to deliver LEP objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on capital/commercial development, with specific focus on creative sector • Focus on entrepreneurship and business capacity building and resilience – moving creative businesses from short-term planning to longer-term business sustainability • Cluster support interventions involving both capital and revenue support • Considering opportunities for re-use of older buildings to address net zero and focus on environmental sustainability/energy saving measures
Alignment to wider activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of wider programme of support across the creative/cultural sector (including Belfast Stories work and the proposed Northern Light incubator) • Alignment to Belfast City Council work around city development and regeneration – with a focus on addressing vacancies and exploring opportunities for targeted regeneration in key locations
Indicative annual budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indicative overall budget of £800,000. Proposed that an initial expenditure of up to £50k is set aside for feasibility study and business case on the funding model and approach. • In line with emerging DfE indications around the timing of expenditure, it is proposed that this funding may run into financial year 2028/29 to enable all relevant preparatory works (planning approval etc.) to be put in place ahead of redevelopment work.
Project timelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feasibility study and business case: April 2026-June 2026 • Agreement on model and launch of “commissioning”/application process for bids: August – September 2026 • Project mobilisation and delivery: October 2026-January 2029

Summary budget position (draft – subject to DfE agreement)

Total available budget (subject to DfE confirmation)	£2,868,000
Northern Light business incubation	£700,000
Business Growth and Innovation	£1,100,000
Capital investment for creative growth	£800,000
Staffing	£268,000