



<b>Subject:</b>	Belfast Region City Deal – update
<b>Date:</b>	20 <sup>th</sup> March 2026
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	John Walsh, Chief Executive
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Sharon McNicholl, Deputy Chief Executive / Director of Corporate Services

**Is this report restricted?** Yes  No

**Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.**

Insert number

- Information relating to any individual
- Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual
- Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)
- Information in connection with any labour relations matter
- Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained
- Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction
- Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime

**If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?**

After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sometime in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Call-in**

**Is the decision eligible for Call-in?** Yes  No

<b>1.0</b>	<b>Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues</b>
1.1	This report has been prepared to provide a progress update on activity within the Belfast Region City Deal (BRCD).

<b>2.0</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
2.1	<p>The Committee is asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Note the latest progress in respect of the BRCD.</li> <li>• Approve continued participation in the Digital Transformation Flexible Fund at a cost of £11,500 which is within current BRCD budgets.</li> </ul>
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Background</b>
3.1	<p>The Belfast Region City Deal (BRCD) is a £1billion programme of investment that was signed in December 2021 and represents a new way of working between central and local government and regional partners to support the delivery of:</p> <p><i>“Inclusive economic growth that delivers more and better jobs, a positive impact on the most deprived communities and a balanced spread of benefits across the region.”</i></p>
3.2	<p>This report sets out progress to date across all pillars of investment and an update on a possible extension to the Digital Transformation Flexible Fund.</p>
	<b>Main report</b>
	<b>Investment to Date</b>
3.3	<p>By the end of Q3, the BRCD PMO had paid out £75.4m for projects across all pillars of the programme with a year-to-date spend of £33.7m.</p>
3.4	<p><b>Innovation Pillar – 5 projects progressing.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The £64m <a href="#">iREACH Health</a> project - a world-class integrated clinical research innovation centre led by Queen’s University - is progressing well. The completion of construction phase at 2 buildings on either side of the Lisburn Road close to the City Hospital is expected to complete in December 2026 and March 2027.</li> <li>- Meanwhile, <a href="#">AMIC’s Factory of the Future</a> - a place for companies to discover the latest manufacturing advancements and technologies - is also nearing a significant milestone, with the facility at Global Point Newtownabbey now completing and with staff beginning to move to the facility.</li> <li>- Progress continues at Ulster University’s <a href="#">CDHT</a>- a £42m quality Centre for Digital Healthcare Technology with associated ‘living labs’ in the areas of cardiology, diabetes, respiratory and stroke. Imminent sub-funding and collaboration agreements with BHSCT, will now also enable the Living Labs element of this project to move ahead. Demolition works are ongoing; the Council has also now granted Planning permission and procurement for the main contractor is in progress.</li> <li>- <a href="#">Momentum One Zero</a> - a global innovation centre at Queen’s University - is expanding its facilities to build on its existing Global Research Institutes (Deep Tech, Agri and Health) and house 550+ experts from across many organisations to solve business and societal problems through research and innovation in advanced digital technologies and data. Construction</li> </ul>

commenced in September and completion is expected by November 2027 - a Memorandum of Understanding with the AI Competency Centre has now also been agreed.

- Meanwhile [Studio Ulster](#) is well into its operational phase and, with the first productions filmed using the facilities already having been shown on BBC during the festive period, including Titanic Sinks Tonight.

3.5 **Digital Pillar - three new OBCs approved, two projects progressing, one project concluded**

- Outline Business Cases (OBCs) have been approved for 5G Research, additional investment into the successful 5G Innovation Regions programme, and the Regional Contracts for Innovation initiative; all projects have begun and are awaiting final funding contracts, and the AI Grants business case is close to submission.
- The [Digital Twin Centre](#) - which creates virtual representations of physical assets to bridge the gap between physical and digital worlds as testbeds to optimise performance, reduce costs, and predict outcomes - has now successfully completed its first Industry Accelerator with strong SME engagement and has launched its first Academic Accelerator call.
- Work on [i4C](#) - a new innovation and clean technology centre for SMEs at St Patrick's Barracks site in Ballymena - is now well advanced, and RIBA Stage 2 almost complete, positioning the project to draw down BRCD funding. An operator has also been appointed for the facility.
- Meanwhile, the c.£1m fund for innovation in immersive technology, [Augment the City](#) has concluded successfully with a final showcase in Belfast City Hall in January, where the final three entrepreneurs presented their prototypes, and provided their insights into the futureproofing of the tourism sector.

3.6 **Tourism and Regeneration Pillar – 5 projects progressing**

- The [Bangor Waterfront](#) programme has been designed to return Bangor to a destination of choice. Concept design and survey work for Ballyholme Yacht Club and Pickie Fun Park has been advancing with RIBA 2 complete for both projects and public consultation, in advance of submission of planning applications, underway. The procurements for the design teams for the Urban Waterfront and Public Realm and Marine projects are ongoing.
- Building on an already popular destination in Hillsborough Castle, [Destination Royal Hillsborough](#), will further enhance the existing offering to create a world class heritage village. An OBC Addendum has been submitted for approval and planning permission for the public realm element of the programme was granted in January 2026, allowing designs to be finalised. Key surveys works and concept designs are being progressed for the other elements of the programme in tandem with Addendum approval.
- In Newry, the Newry regeneration programme aims to increase footfall within Newry City Centre. The contractor for the [Newry Theatre and Conference Centre](#) has been appointed and construction is due to start in June 2026. NMDDC has received a pre-action protocol

letter in relation to the Civic Hub element of the Newry regeneration programme and NMDDC are responding through the appropriate legal channels.

- Both of [Mid and East Antrim Council's](#) tourism projects - Carrickfergus and Gobbins - are progressing through the detailed design stages of project development and works to procure an Operator is ongoing.
- [Belfast Stories](#) achieved a major milestone with DoF approval of its OBC, and work is now focused on finalising the Contract for Funding and completing the subsidy control assessment.

### 3.7 **Infrastructure Pillar – 1 project progressing, 2 projects on hold**

- DoF approval for the [BRT Phase 2](#) has been granted to DfI who have now appointed Atkins to progress design development.
- Procurement of a Contractor for [Lagan Pedestrian and Cycle Bridge](#) is ongoing and DfI are considering the implications of the A5 judgement on all DfI projects.
- Following completion of a public consultation exercise for [Newry Southern Relief Road](#) earlier this year, DfI are awaiting a decision on whether a public inquiry will be required for the project.

### 3.8 **Employability and Skills Pillar – 5 Skills Assessments completed**

Five [cross-deal skills assessments](#) for the BRCD's key investment sectors have now been completed. Following this work we have engaged with project promoters and partners to consider how we might address the challenges with a view to agreeing an action plan. Individual projects across all pillars are also demonstrating good progress towards boosting inclusion, growth and digital futures through their own skills activities. Examples of these are included below:

#### **Skills for Inclusion**

To maximise inclusion, the IREACH Health and Studio Ulster projects are each providing exposure to future career opportunities to students. Meanwhile our own Belfast Stories has introduced pupils from three Belfast schools to the latest design proposals and the design process through Creative Youth workshops.

#### **Skills for Growth**

Skills in high value, high growth sectors are being promoted through both AMIC's IT apprenticeships and the Momentum 1.0 Internship Programme which offers intern opportunities in cutting edge, deep tech innovation projects.

#### **Skills for Digital Futures**

Led by BCC's City Innovation office, a BRCD funded AI Capability Building Workshop programme will aim to increase AI adoption within our six BRCD councils by helping them to identify and prioritise potential AI use cases.

## **Social Value**

At the overall programme level the BRCD also brings additional opportunities such as contributions to social value. Projects across the Programme continue to apply SIB's Buy Social model and to date 16 contracts are committing 14,975 Social Value points, with 8,707 delivered so far. The points include 135 people accessing employment-related opportunities, mainly apprenticeships, work experience, student placements, and trainee roles, alongside careers events, mentoring, training, and site visits.

Environmental benefits are being achieved through training, awareness activities, volunteering, and reuse of surplus materials, while health and wellbeing outcomes are supported through awareness campaigns, training, assessments, and community donations.

The PMO will be considering future workshops in areas such as Benefits, Employability and Skills and other challenges and opportunities facing partners.

## **Digital Transformation Flexible Fund (DTFF)**

The Digital Transformation Flexible Fund (DTFF) concept was initially developed in response to the low levels of innovation and digital transformation taking place across the region - particularly among the small business community. Following the development of a business case in September 2022, on behalf of all 11 councils, £6m capital funding was awarded from the City Deal Complementary Fund with a further £1.1m from The Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA). At that point it was agreed that fund would be administered by Newry Mourne and Down District Council on behalf of Northern Ireland, and a revenue contribution from each council was agreed for the lifetime of the project up to March 2026.

The project is now nearing completion and has experienced a high level of demand and depending on the outcome of the current funding call there is an option to extend to a further call as long as any commitments do not exceed the overall agreed capital budget. This would mean that Newry, Mourne and Down District Council will require a further revenue contribution of £11,500 for the cost of continuing the administration of the fund. This can be accommodated within existing Belfast Region City Deal budgets so there is no additional financial ask. DTFF has been very successful in helping to stimulate Digital Transformation and Innovation in small and micro businesses who generally do not have the capital reserves or resources to start to experiment, prototype and deliver new products or services using new and emerging technologies. Committee is therefore asked to approve continued participation in the programme.

3.9	<p><b>Next Steps</b></p> <p>Partners are currently preparing to report back formally on their respective Q4 and Year End positions which will inform the BRCD Annual Report – due to be brought back to the Aug/Sept meeting of this Committee. This will offer a more complete overview of progress and achievements to date.</p>
3.10	<p><u>Financial &amp; Resource Implications</u></p> <p>All costs associated with the BRCD are within existing budgets.</p>
3.11	<p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>The approach taken to develop the City Deal has been subject to independent equality screening and rural proofing and states that;</p> <p><i>‘BRCD is inherently inclusive, affording an opportunity for the region to grow in a way that will benefit the economy of Northern Ireland as a whole, thereby enhancing the lives and well-being of its citizens. If during further development of the programme it becomes apparent that there may be an adverse impact on certain groups or communities then the partnership commits to carrying out further Section 75 work and including screening and EQIAs as and when appropriate.’</i></p>
4.0	<p><b>Appendices – Documents Attached</b></p>
	<p>None</p>