

Belfast City Council's Response to the Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland Skills for a 10x Economy - DRAFT

The Skills Strategy was considered by the Council's Strategic Policy and Resources Committee at its meeting on 20 August with the enclosed corporate response agreed. This response remains subject to ratification by Full Council on 1 September 2021 and we will inform you at that stage if there are any changes made.

1. Are you content with the overarching strategic direction set out in the section *The Programme for Government, our Economic Vision (a 10x Economy) and the Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland*:

“the Skills Strategy must be directly aligned to the PfG aim of improving wellbeing for all by supporting efforts to tackle inequalities, providing low skilled, low paid, or unemployed individuals with the opportunities they need to work in ‘better jobs’, whilst concurrently focusing on provision of the skills and qualifications needed to drive economic growth and competitiveness in the sectors where Northern Ireland has real global potential.”

The Council agrees with the overarching strategic direction aligned to the Programme for Government. In particular, the focus on lifelong learning is welcomed to ensure that no one is left behind in terms of skills provision in NI. However, to ensure this is met in practice, independent and fit-for-purpose careers advice and guidance is needed – both for young people and for adults - to ensure inequality is tackled and the skills gaps are redressed. Independent careers/skills advice and guidance is needed to shape aspirations and to create skills pathways that support outcomes for individuals (better jobs) but also increasing talent pool for our economy.

As documented in the Council's response to the Executive on the PfG Outcomes Framework relating to Skills and Employability,¹ the Council calls for further devolution of employability and skills functions – such as those provided by Employability NI and the creation of the Labour Market Partnerships – to increase the effectiveness of interventions and improve outcomes for Belfast residents.

It is recommended that the Labour Market Partnership structures that have been established in each council area are designated as the subregional structures proposed within the Strategy. This will ensure that both Employability and Skills are aligned using a place-based approach.

¹ <https://minutes.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/s90483/Programme%20for%20Government%20Outcomes%20Framework%20-%20Draft%20Consultation%20Response.pdf> and <https://minutes.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/s90485/Appendix%20-%20Draft%20Council%20Response%20to%20PfG%20Outcomes%20Framework.pdf>

The Council would wish to explore how we can work with partners to use an intelligence-driven and evidence-based approach to enhance the effectiveness of the planning work around future skills needs and training provision to meet these needs with the objective of supporting inclusive economic growth. To do this, the Council intends to establish a Labour Market Observatory for Belfast – bringing together data and intelligence both in terms of supply and demand, and we understand that other councils are exploring similar approaches. We recommend that these insights are shared across partners and utilised to inform the design of interventions that are agile, optimise outcomes (jobs, education, training) and ensure alignment between labour market demand and skills. To do this effectively, the Council recommends that better data sharing among central government departments and the council is required (in compliance with GDPR and Data Protection legislation).

In Belfast, the work of Innovation City Belfast will be critical in shaping and directing the skills interventions required to meet the growing demand in the sector. Significant investments such as the City Deal will create opportunities that can enhance competitiveness and productivity levels. These will necessitate commensurate levels of investment in skills in order to ensure that there is a sufficient and appropriate supply of skilled workers.

As the planning authority, the city Council is now in receipt of significant intelligence regarding future employment opportunities at key developments. The Council would wish to explore how we can work with partners to use this information to plan better around skills needs and training provision to meet these needs with the objective of supporting inclusive economic growth.

The Strategy should not only concentrate on providing access to better jobs, but also support people who may require additional assistance in getting a first foot on the employment ladder and have the confidence, skills and career path created to obtain a better job. Quality of work is important, together with security, wages, contracted hours, progression potential and better protection for unstable work.

2. Do you agree with the need to rationalise the skills landscape by limiting the number of strategies governing separate parts of the skills system, instead focusing on a single, overarching, Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland (see page 40-41)?

The Council agrees with the need to rationalise the skills landscape. We propose that DfE works closely with the Labour Market Partnerships to do this, creating an overarching framework for Employability & Skills that works to actively reduce skills mismatches by ensuring that provision is directly matched to intelligence-driven demand. In our view, employability and skills should be closely aligned.

3. Have you any other comments on the Strategic Context Chapter?

In reference to the over-provision up to Level One qualifications, the Council agrees there is over provision at that level and below. However, Level One and below needs to be provided to allow foundational skills to be built. The role of local provision to engage those who are further back in the labour market also needs to be addressed and the role of the VCSE sector is crucial in doing the outreach amination and engagement within local communities needed to create a skills pipeline that meets employer needs. The challenge is to build transparent and coherent pathways from level one towards higher skills levels or towards other vocational pathways, rather than them necessarily being an end in themselves.

4. Acknowledging the need for the development of 'SMART' targets, do you agree that the skills supply gap identified under the Skills Barometer's high growth scenario should be placed at the centre of the proposed Strategy (see page 43)?

The Council broadly agrees that the skills supply gap identified under the NI Skills Barometer's high growth scenario should be placed at the centre of the proposed Strategy. Belfast's Skills Barometer is in line with the gaps identified at levels three to five. However, the NI Skills Barometer needs to be supplemented to capture real-time market intelligence on labour supply and demand: this volatility has been highlighted by the effects of COVID-19. A greater focus on 'highly skilled' workers should not overshadow acute labour shortages which are threatening the sustainability and survival of businesses across many sectors. The Council recommends that intelligence from the proposed Labour Market Observatory, within Belfast's LMP proposals, should be used in tandem with the Barometer to inform decision-making and allocate appropriate resources.

In addition:

- The Skills Barometer is an invaluable data source to guide the focus of the strategy however, it would be beneficial to see focus on not just higher skills levels such as the 4 cluster areas proposed but also on skills needed for a strong regional economy including health and social care; the skills gaps created by the demand for 'replacement jobs' in sectors such as logistics and transport; and emerging skills demand such as the green economy (transport and retrofitting).
- There are challenges in attracting and retaining workers being reported by employers and representative bodies across a range of sectors such as transport and logistics (all driving occupations), hospitality, social care etc. Some sectors are directly linking labour shortages to EU exit. Other issues such a "fear of further lockdowns" also means that workers who are currently furloughed are anxious about returning to work in specific sectors while many others

have left the sector for other types of work meaning many businesses are now facing into staff shortages as the economy begins to open up again. Initiatives therefore need to be agile to meet immediate skills shortages at level three and below. The success rate of the Council's Employment Academy model in helping people access jobs or better jobs sits at 79% although further resources to address skills gaps in an agile way will be required to address sectoral demand.

- There is currently a lack of a skills development curriculum for new and emerging jobs in the green economy across all education and skills providers in NI. The green economy and related skills are largely overlooked in the strategy and, as a key growth area, it would be beneficial for a great emphasis on curriculum development and provision for new and emerging sectors if we want to future-proof the strategy. Without a proper curriculum (at all levels) it will be difficult to give local people the right skills to embrace the opportunities that will be created by the green economy
- The Strategy document states that some sectors such as hospitality, social care etc. have a reputation of not providing 'better quality jobs', however there is a work to be done to support these sectors to tackle this. Business and employers are key partners in employability and skills provision. To this end, the Council welcomes the 'better job pledge' as quality of work is important, together with security, wages, contracted hours, progression potential and better protection against precarious employment. We recommend that the Inclusive Growth City Charter (Belfast Business Promise) being developed by the Council is utilised as the basis for developing this 'better jobs pledge' and are happy to share this information
- The Skills Strategy should provide support to ensure better jobs across all sectors – not just higher growth sectors – recognising the need to support 'replacement jobs' which experience significant skills mismatches such as logistics and driving occupations
- Although the Strategy document specifically recognises the under-provision of skills level between level two to five, the sectors identified tend to need at least level four qualifications as an entry level. There is a lack of support for the sectors that employ those with qualification level two to five, for example logistics, administration and care sectors. In addition, given the recruitment challenges in some of the high growth sectors, it is important that work is undertaken with employers to look at new and alternative entry pathways, as a means of securing the labour market supply for the future
- The NI Skills Barometer will also benefit from DfE's policy Objective 11, on page 96 regarding investment in the development of a consolidated portal, providing open access to information on current and forecast labour market skill needs and applicable study/work opportunities.

5. Are you content that the proposals contained in pages 43 - 56 provide an ambitious and comprehensive approach to 'Addressing Skills Imbalance, Driving Economic Growth'?

No	Proposal	Page	Belfast City Council Response
1	We will examine the potential to mainstream remote learning provision in key areas of essential skills, employability skills and digital skills for individuals and employers.	50	We welcome this approach
2	DfE will work directly with DfC to support collaborative approaches between local and central government to develop the education and training provision required to underpin both the Skills Strategy and the 'Employability NI' Strategy.	52	We strongly welcome this approach
3	The outcomes from the 'Transition of Young People into Careers (14 – 19) Project', jointly led by DE and DfE will be recognised within the new Skills Strategy.	53	The Council welcomes the commitment to develop and introduce new measures on careers guidance outcomes for young people. However, the service should align and join up with an overall career service encompassing young people and adults and the proposal under Point 13 on 'Preparing for Success'. Under Belfast's LMP, the Council is proposing a "Gateway" service to provide residents with timely advice and guidance to help them find work or upskill.
4	DfE will review how it collects information on the destination and outcomes for FE College leavers, to improve evidence on long-term outcomes for FE qualifiers.	54	The Council welcomes this approach and would encourage DfE to share this information as part of their engagement with Local Labour Market Partnerships in order to improve outcomes for participants and inform the content of new interventions.
5	We will ensure Northern Ireland's Further Education sector has the resource and capability to deliver its dual objectives of providing essential, entry level pathways to education and professional and technical skills, to support economic and social prosperity.	55	The Council welcomes this approach. However we also acknowledge the key role played by the VCSE sector, particularly in engaging those who are further back in the labour market, those with lower attainment levels and those experiencing in-work poverty etc. We consider that there is an opportunity for the development of local models whereby the VCSE engages in the essential outreach and early engagement work and is supported by FE and other providers to ensure alignment with vocational and employment demand.

6	A review of level 4 and 5 'HE in FE' education will be conducted. Recommendations and actions arising from the review will be incorporated in the implementation of the Skills Strategy	55	We welcome this approach in order to ensure appropriate levels of supply for future economic growth, particularly in key growth areas
7	Relevant Government departments and arms-length bodies will contribute fully to the 'Independent Review of Education', announced by the Minister of Education in December 2020, to ensure our education system is sustainable, economically relevant and equipped to deliver the best outcomes for our children, young people and society as a whole.	57	The Council welcomes this approach.
8	We will increase collaborative investment between Government, research institutions and business in post-graduate education and research, which support the development of Northern Ireland's key strategic clusters set out in 'A 10x Economy'.	58	We support this approach. We consider that some of the models developed through the work of the Belfast Region City Deal can be useful blueprints for collaboration of this nature, and strongly endorse the work of Innovation City Belfast in taking some of these initiatives forward
9	Recommendations emerging from the Women in STEM Working Group will be fully recognised in the Skills Strategy and subsequent skills action plans.	60	The Council welcomes this approach. We also suggest that there should be a commitment to supporting inclusion amongst all under-represented groups as part of all of the interventions that are proposed.
10	We will build on 'Preparing for Success', by developing and introducing new measures of careers guidance outcomes and by developing clear, common, transparent and accountable quality standards.	60	The Council welcomes this approach. Encouraging Lifelong Learning is an important objective. However, plans need to ensure that adults as well as younger people are aware of industry and employment/skills opportunities – and how they can change career if desired. Delivery plans should consider the needs of adults in a population that may already have had a negative experience of careers guidance. However, to ensure this is met in practice people need independent guidance to navigate through the myriad of employability and skills provision through a fit-for-purpose independent careers advice and guidance service for adults as well as young people – as recommended by the Belfast Labour Market Partnership - to ensure inequality is tackled and the skills gaps are redressed. Independent careers/skills advice and

			guidance is needed to shape aspirations and to create skills pathways that support outcomes for individuals (jobs/better jobs) but also reducing skills mismatches within the labour market.
11	We will invest in the development of a consolidated portal, providing open access to information on current and forecast labour market skill needs and applicable study/work opportunities.	60	The Council welcomes this approach. However, it requires sufficient resources in staffing and outreach is required to enable quality interaction with people (mentoring, careers guidance advice clinics, roadshows and employment opportunities showcasing what industries need).
12	We will enhance engagement between employers and the education sector to identify and publicise opportunities for individuals in education to engage with the world of work.	62	The Council welcomes the focus on providing employer engagement opportunities and work experience opportunities. This will provide opportunities to all, including under-represented groups and those requiring additional support. However, enhanced engagement is required as early as possible to maximise impact. Engagement with industry should happen at primary school and then be continually re-enforced throughout secondary school and beyond. Strong role models should be used as “influencers” particularly where there may be gender (or other) imbalances in employment in specific industries. This approach will require greater collaboration between the Department of Education and Department for the Economy.
13	We will develop bespoke skills action plans to support Northern Ireland’s key strategic clusters.	62	The Council welcomes this objective. However we would welcome extending this approach beyond the “core” priority sectors to cover those sectors that are likely to experience significant demand especially logistics, social care, hospitality etc.

6. Are there any additional proposals you believe should be considered under the ‘Addressing Skills Imbalances, Driving Economic Growth’ objective?

Broadly, the Council welcomes this approach. Additionally, we would welcome a focus on gender inequalities in skills provision, skills levels and access to ‘better jobs’. Much of the skills provision is still unequal in gender balance, and this is particularly the case for high growth sectors.

7. Are you content that the proposals contained in pages 57 - 75 provide an ambitious and comprehensive approach to ‘Creating a Culture of Lifelong Learning’?

The Council acknowledges that the VCSE sector are a vital stakeholder in engaging with those who are further back in the labour market, those with lower attainment levels, those experiencing in-work poverty etc. and recommend that the provision of community-based education and skills development is recognised as a key mechanism to reach these residents in the city to support people’s empowerment, motivation and confidence – a vital starting point for the skills pipeline in the city and regionally. However this can only work if the system is fully integrated and there is a need for much greater alignment to enable residents to benefit from clear pathways towards rewarding careers. We are exploring some interesting models in collaboration with the RSA e.g. digital badges and would be keen to engage with DfE on the outworking of these interventions.

No	Proposal	Page	Belfast City Council Response
14	We will assess the potential for more locally focused approaches, to support DE’s policy interventions in relation to vulnerable children, particularly in areas of high social deprivation. This will include an assessment of how data can be better used to monitor pupil outcomes from education and the efficacy of policy interventions throughout the education system.	59	The Council welcomes the potential for more locally focused approaches to support DE’s policy interventions in relation to vulnerable children, particularly in areas of high social deprivation. The Council is committed to addressing issues through Community Planning Partnership Structures, namely the Educational Inequalities within the Jobs, Skills and Education Board.
15	We will develop a new lifelong learning project and action plan, directly aligned to the achievement of the strategic goals set out in the new Skills Strategy.	60	For a number of years, Belfast has committed to being a “learning city” and is a member of UNESCO’s Learning City Network. We are currently revisiting the focus of this work and would welcome the opportunity to explore how we can contribute to and drive the regional approach.
16	We will develop proposals for the expansion of childcare support, to enable all individuals with parental responsibilities to participate in lifelong learning.	63	The Council welcomes this approach. However, plans should be extended to those who have other caring responsibilities (e.g. disabled or older relatives).
17	We will review funding exemptions to ensure more individuals can participate in ‘reskilling’ opportunities, aligned to under-supplied qualifications in engineering and technology,	63	We support this approach and consider that it needs to incorporate re-skilling across a range of skills levels, in order to create inclusive pathways to new jobs

	mathematics, computer science and physical and environmental sciences.		
18	We will develop, and consult on, legislation to introduce training leave allowances for Northern Ireland employees.	64	
19	We will work with the FE Sector to examine the development of remote/blended, modular learning approaches, tailored to the needs of individuals and their employers.	65	<p>The Council welcomes the Department's proposed commitment to remove current age-related barriers to make apprenticeship opportunities at levels two and three more available. However, the Council recommends that a new delivery approach is needed to offer 'portable' or 'flexi-job' apprentices. Some industries (construction and creative industries) cannot offer a long-enough placement with a single employer for apprentices to meet the government's minimum 12-month duration requirement. In the TV and film sector, for example, most roles are freelance and usually only run for two to three months. If we are to achieve the ambition of inclusive growth, a flexible intervention would greatly assist the Council [and the public sector], to deliver stronger social value outcomes within public procurement contracts, namely in construction. It will also lend itself to large construction infrastructure builds in city under City Deals. The Council recommends that a shared apprenticeship scheme is needed (for example, CITB's scheme in England and Wales, which supports apprenticeships while recognising that not all employers can provide full 104 weeks required for an apprentice to complete training).</p> <p>The strategy refers to public sector apprenticeships which should be welcomed; however, it must be balanced with support to the private sector to re-build and recover following Covid-19.</p>
20	Under the auspices of the new Skills Strategy, DfE will develop a renewed approach to management and leadership in Northern Ireland.	70	We strongly support this approach – and would propose that DfE works closely with councils to tailor interventions for local businesses – as a means of driving up competitiveness and productivity

21	We will introduce a business pledge to recognise and promote employers who actively engage with principles of the work quality indicators. Businesses with 50+ employees must subscribe and actively promote the principles of the 'Better Jobs Pledge' prior to engagement with publicly funded support programmes.	74	Creating an inclusive economy is at the heart of the council's agenda. One key commitment was the development and implementation of an Inclusive Growth City Charter for Belfast for employers across the city – setting a city wide standard in relation to procurement, employment and civic / neighbourhood engagement. Based on the engagement to date, the Council has drawn up a draft Charter – the Belfast Business Promise. The Charter focuses on good employment, procurement, and the role of businesses in their community through eight Charter Pledges. The Council therefore welcomes this proposal and offers that this city charter can inform the development of the 'better jobs pledge'.
22	The NICS will take steps to mark itself out as a leader in the adoption of High-Performance Working Practices and the development of management and leadership skills in Senior Civil Service grades.	75	The Council welcomes this approach.
23	We will develop a discrete, collaborative project, to define what employability skills means in the Northern Ireland labour market and propose a series of actions to improve the performance of our education system.	76	A focus is required, not only on traditional job search strategies but on enterprise, self-employment, social enterprises and job creation in the strategy. Supporting innovation and enterprise skills as a cross cutting skills set for the NI economy is particularly important as our comparatively low business start-up rates and high level of business deaths directly impact on productivity.

8. Are there any additional proposals you believe should be considered under the 'Creating a Culture of Lifelong Learning' objective?

No additional comments.

9. Under 'Enhancing Digital Skills, Creating Our Digital Spine' we include only one recommendation, that an expert panel is appointed to develop a specific Digital Skills Action Plan for Northern Ireland (see pages 76 - 81). Do you agree with this approach?

No	Objective	Page	Belfast City Council Response
24	An expert panel of individuals from business and education will be appointed to develop a specific Digital Skills Action Plan for Northern Ireland.	82	The Council welcomes this approach and the work of Innovation City Belfast may be a useful model to consider. Digital skills are fundamental to the success of the economy as we move to economic recovery. The pandemic has accelerated the need for digital

			skills as those that were able to adapt and operate digitally were proved to be the more resilient. The Strategy recognises that digital skills are important for everyone in society, not just those with careers in the digital sector, and we fully support this.
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10. Have you any other comments on the Strategic Goals and Policy Objectives?

No additional comments.

Chapter 5: Policy Enablers

11. The first two 'policy enablers': 'Enhancing Policy Cohesion' and 'Building Stronger Relationships' focus on a refreshed approach to the governance of the skills system (pages 84 - 90). Do you agree that these structures are a useful and appropriate approach to improving the development and implementation of skills policy in Northern Ireland?

No	Objective	Page	Belfast City Council Response
25	A new Northern Ireland Skills Council will be responsible for the implementation of the Skills Strategy. It will have ministerial leadership and include senior representatives from all government departments and local government.	86	The Council welcomes this approach. Cross-government buy-in and engagement is critical – at regional and local government level.
26	The Northern Ireland Skills Council should maintain an oversight role in the commissioning and development of all skills policies and related research.	86	The Council welcomes this approach in order to ensure greater coordination.
27	We will continue to work across central and local government to develop and implement sub-regional approaches to skills development, tailored to the needs of local businesses and communities.	87	The Council welcomes this approach and recommends that Labour Market Partnerships are used as the sub-regional structure.
28	The Northern Ireland Skills Council will be established to provide long-term, consistent, advice on the development and implementation of all aspects of skills policy. It will include representation from business leaders, senior representatives of education and employee representatives from trade unions.	88	The Council welcomes this approach. We recognise that there may be a need for additional working groups e.g. sectoral groups – but consider that the NISC should provide the vehicle for overall coordination. There may be an opportunity to consider how this aligns with the work of the Regional Employability and Skills Board
29	Under the auspices of the Northern Ireland Skills Council, we will review	88	The Council welcomes this approach

	and rationalise the existing (skills) advisory infrastructure.		
30	Employer, employee and education institutions will be given a key role in determining the terms of reference for the Northern Ireland Skills Council.	88	The Council welcomes this approach
31	The Northern Ireland Skills Council should develop a sub-committee to consider how gender, and other diversity issues, can be better addressed across education, skills and employment policies and practices.	89	The Council welcomes this approach. Once agreed, these commitments should then be mainstreamed and should form part of the commitments for commissioned bodies that have responsibility for delivering key skills interventions.
32	The new Skills Strategy will be underpinned by 2, 5 and 10 year action plans.	90	We agree with the need for a longer-term strategic plan supported by shorter-term action plans.

12. The third policy enabler focuses on 'Investment in the Skills System'. The programme of change proposed in this consultation document is likely to require substantial investment. Do you agree that this should be prioritised?

No	Objective	Page	Belfast City Council Response
33	The Skills Strategy will be endorsed, as a whole-of-government Strategy, by the Northern Ireland Executive, recognising the key, strategic importance of education and skills development to our social and economic prosperity.	93	The Council welcomes cross-departmental collaboration as well as effective support pillars to engage with local communities to promote inclusive growth and reduce inequalities.
34	A ring-fenced skills fund will be developed to provide new opportunities in the labour market and support the skills development of the working age population as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare for the economic changes brought about by our exit from the EU.	93	The Council welcomes this approach. We also propose that the recent reductions in skills expenditure should be reversed as a matter of priority in order to support inclusive economic growth. We are content to ensure that the work of the Belfast Labour Market Partnership is aligned to relevant priority interventions.