



An Roinn
Geilleagair



DELIVERING THE ECONOMIC VISION

Year One Progress Report

FEBRUARY 2025



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Ministerial Foreword



One year ago, I set out my economic vision with four priorities; to increase the number of good jobs, to raise productivity, to decarbonise our economy, and to drive forward regional balance.

Given the shortened mandate, the focus was on action.

The Department and its partner organisations immediately began to recalibrate their activities in line with this strategic direction.

My Department's [2024/25 Business Plan](#), published in September, set out 41 specific actions we would take in support of the four objectives.

My approach has been supported by dynamic and motivated leaders from the business community, the trade union movement, community and voluntary sectors, and the skills eco-system.

Co-design has been a key feature of our work and I would like to thank all our partners for your contribution.

The financial situation is extremely challenging.

Indeed, between 2020/21 and 2025/26 my Department's Resource baseline will have decreased by over 5%, before inflation is taken into account.

That makes it all the more important to make the best possible use of our resources.

I am working closely with my officials to consider how best to use our budget to deliver on the priorities set out in the draft Programme for Government and my Department's Business Plan.

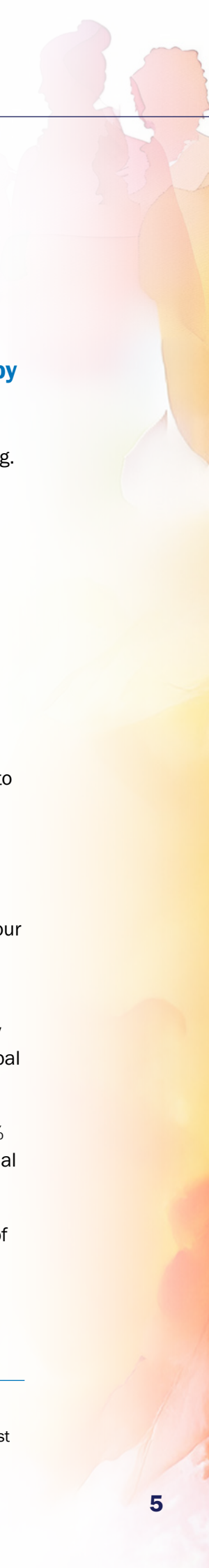
Despite the challenging financial context, this report demonstrates that significant progress has been made.

Strong foundations have been laid in year one.

The momentum that has been built up will continue to drive delivery in the remaining two years of this mandate.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Conor Murphy'.

**Minister Conor Murphy
MLA**



One Year On: The Economic Context

After several years of economic volatility caused by Covid and its aftermath, and an international energy crisis, 2024 has been marked by greater stability on the global stage.

In general terms global inflation pressures have been receding and trade has been recovering.

However, the OECD in its latest Economic Outlook (December 2024)¹, points to challenges in the form of potential rising trade tensions, protectionism, escalation of geopolitical conflicts and challenging government budgets in some countries.

Within that global context, recent economic data paint a largely positive picture of our local economy.

Output here (NICEI²) increased by 3.0% over the twelve months to quarter 3 in 2024.

Over the same period, growth in Ireland and the UK stood at 2.5% and 1.0% respectively.

Indeed, over the 12 months to September 2024, our total goods exports increased by 5.5% to £11.2bn.

In contrast, over the same period total goods exports by England decreased by 4.5%, with exports from Scotland and Wales down 10.9% and 9.5% respectively.

Similarly, while economic inactivity levels³ remain the highest on these islands, the local labour market has been pretty robust with the unemployment rate falling to historic lows and the number of people in employment reaching historic highs.

Local business surveys have, on the whole, underlined this relatively upbeat picture, but they also urge caution against complacency and emphasise that we are not isolated from the global economic risks mentioned above.

The NI Chamber of Commerce's latest quarterly survey (Q4 2024) highlighted that while 83% of businesses reported reasonable (or better) trading conditions, increasing employer National Insurance Contributions and the rise in the National Living Wage are causing them concern.

Linked to this, the Department of Finance has commissioned research to examine the cost of doing business here.

1 [Economic Outlook: Global growth to remain resilient in 2025 and 2026 despite significant risks | OECD](#)

2 NICEI Source [Economic and Labour Market Statistics Branch](#)

3 Economic inactivity relates to those people not in employment who have not been seeking work within the last four weeks and/or are unable to start work within the next two weeks.

Research is clear that small advanced economies, like ours, can better fend off these kind of headwinds, and excel, if they have a strong policy foundation that provides the underpinnings for economic success⁴.

The Minister's Economic Vision, and the work that has been progressed in the last 12 months gives us that strong policy foundation.

This 'One Year On' report highlights what the Department for the Economy has been doing to deliver the Minister's Economic Plan; which has productivity, good jobs, regional balance and decarbonisation at its core.

For each of these priority areas, we have significant ground to cover, but work is now underway.

On productivity, our output per worker is 13% below the UK average with an even more pronounced gap compared to the Republic of Ireland.

New statistics show that only two thirds of jobs here have the fundamental characteristics of a Good Job⁵.

At a sub-regional level, the employment rate is highest in Mid & East Antrim (79.5%) and lowest in Derry & Strabane (65.4%), a gap of over 14 percentage points.

While 44.5% of our total metered electricity consumption was generated from metered renewable sources located within the North, we still have much to do to meet our decarbonisation goals.

To support the delivery of the Minister's Economic Plan, the Department for the Economy has published a comprehensive Research Programme⁶.

It is providing the evidence necessary to measure our progress, guide how we address the remaining challenges and help us build on our economic potential.

The result of this work can be found on our website⁷.

Victor Dukelow
Chief Economist
Department for the Economy

4 Skilling, D (2016), [Economic-Context-and-Policy-Approaches-in-Small-Advanced-Economies.pdf](#)

5 The basic characteristics of a Good Job or defined as a job underpinned by a permanent, non-zero hours contract which pays at least the Real Living Wage. Related NISRA statistics can be found at: [Good Jobs in Northern Ireland | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency](#)

6 [DfE Research Programme 2024-27 | Department for the Economy](#)

7 [Economic research | Department for the Economy](#)

1 A regionally balanced economy that delivers for everyone

The Department has taken significant steps in the last year to drive forward regional balance.

Most significantly, the Department's [Sub-Regional Economic Plan](#) was published in October 2024.

This set out a new locally led approach to economic policy, and was supported by the publication of Invest NI's new [three-year Business Strategy](#).

An important part of Invest NI's plans is to focus on an enhanced regional approach; supporting micro and small enterprises, with a commitment to deliver 65% of its investments outside of the Belfast Metropolitan Area by 2026/27.



Local Economic Partnerships

As part of this work, the Department, along with Invest NI, and local Councils are working to create 11 new Local Economic Partnerships.

These partnerships are built upon existing structures and relationships, to put local economic decision-making into the hands of local people, and to deliver economic growth regionally.

The first of these Partnerships, in Newry, Mourne & Down Council, and Antrim & Newtownabbey

Borough Council, have already met.

All partnerships will meet for the first time before the end of March as they begin the important work of identifying, agreeing and making proposals for local economic projects to be progressed over the next three years.

These partnerships will be supported by a £45m fund, the details of which can be found [here](#)

11
LOCAL
ECONOMIC
Partnerships
supported by
£45m fund



City & Growth Deals

We have started to see real progress on City & Growth Deals in the last year.

Despite earlier concerns about the pace of delivery and the British Government's commitment to funding them, these deals are now on track to deliver economic growth right across the North.

In April, £72m was committed for the Causeway Coast and Glens Growth Deal.

This funding is supporting the development of projects including a Centre for Food & Drug Discovery at Ulster University's Coleraine Campus.

It is also supporting a Connected Causeway project which will enhance the visitor experience on the North Antrim Coast.

In September, £210m was committed to support the Derry City and Strabane City Deal.

This includes a Cognitive Analytics & Digital Robotics Innovation Centre (CADRIC), and the School of Medicine, both based in Ulster University's Magee Campus.

Design teams for both are due to be appointed by March 2025.

This City Deal funding is also supporting a new college for the Strabane campus of North-West Regional College, with plans to invite tenders for the appointment of a design team also due by March 2025.

The DNA Museum project at Ebrington is also advancing well.

In November, £252m was committed for the Mid South-West Region Growth Deal.

Amongst other projects supported by this important funding, the Department for the Economy is now working with Councils to deliver regenerative tourism within the Cuilcagh Lakelands Landscape Project, as well as investment in a decarbonisation programme.

The Belfast Region City Deal is also progressing well.

Studio Ulster, a global production centre of excellence, led by Ulster University is scheduled to open in Spring 2025 while construction is well underway for a 10,500 m2 state of the art Factory of the Future, led by Queen's University Belfast to house the Advanced Manufacturing Innovation Centre.



Progress against the long-standing commitment on the expansion of Magee by an additional 10,000 places has moved on at pace this year, following Minister Murphy's establishment of an independent Task Force in March.

The Task Force produced [its report](#) in December, with a comprehensive and costed action plan to expand the campus to 10,000 students, with Executive commitment to the work reflected in the Programme for Government and Investment Strategy.

Implementation of this plan will be a game changer for unlocking the economic potential of Derry and the whole North-West region.

Minister Murphy has already approved funding for the purchase of sites in the city that are needed for the expansion, and an increase of student numbers by 500 places.

The Task Force's Final Report and Action Plan projects that in just four years, the annual economic return will exceed £258 million.

Delivery of the plan has already begun.

In addition, Minister Murphy ensured that students at the Graduate Entry Medical School at Ulster University's Magee campus will be able - from this coming academic year - to access tuition fee loans of up to £4,855.

Applications for these loans are expected to open in March, supporting access to these highly desirable and much needed courses to people of all backgrounds.



Community Wealth Building

Working in partnership with the Department for Communities and Department of Finance, progress has also been made on the recommendations from the Department for Communities' Independent Report on Community Wealth Building, published in 2022.

The three Ministers met in June to agree a collaborative approach and since then, significant strides have been made.

The Department for the Economy has now established a Credit Union Working Group to strengthen and modernise the North's credit unions.

Membership includes representatives from the Irish League of Credit Unions, and the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions.

The working group is focused on modernisation which will enable credit unions to offer a wider

range of products and services, in line with their counterparts in Britain and the South of Ireland, while also maintaining their unique, community-focused ethos.

Work is also ongoing with the Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulation Authority to ensure that the regulatory framework helps underpin modernisation efforts.

A credit union consultation will be launched later this year to collect feedback on any necessary legislative proposals that will facilitate credit union changes.

Real Living Wage

Another key recommendation from the Community Wealth Building report is the payment of the Real Living Wage.

This is not only important from a regional balance perspective, but also as a key component of a good job.

In June, Minister Murphy gave his support for a full-time Living Wage Franchise, to encourage uptake of the Real Living Wage.

He committed funding for Advice NI to conduct this work, and over 125 local employers have now signed up.

The Real Living Wage and Advice NI are also providing accreditation and support for local employers across the North for the first time.

125
LOCAL
EMPLOYERS
have now signed
up to the Real
Living Wage

Social Enterprise Action Plan



Another welcome development - linked to Community Wealth Building - was the Department's publication of a three-year Social Enterprise Action Plan in December.

25
VOLUNTEER
Social Enterprise
Champions now in
place

One of Minister Murphy's first commitments upon taking office was to harness the unrealised potential of the social economy sector, right across the North.

In May, Minister Murphy appointed a co-design group – consisting of organisations from across the sector. This was chaired by CEO and Founder of Madlug, Dave Linton, and co-chaired by NOW Group CEO, Maeve Monaghan.

14 actions were identified across five objectives; including raising awareness of the sector, supporting leadership and training, and providing investment.

Work has already begun to deliver on these actions, including the introduction of 25

volunteer Social Enterprise Champions within Invest NI, InterTradeIreland and every Council across the North.

These volunteers are providing tailored guidance to the social enterprise sector, ensuring they can better engage and secure support.

Belfast City Council, in partnership with WorkWest has developed training to ensure Champions understand the challenges and barriers facing the sector.

Support and guidance is also being provided by Social Enterprise NI who will formally introduce the Champions to the sector at their annual conference in March.

Protecting consumers

The Department continues to work with the Consumer Council to champion and safeguard the interests of consumers across the North.

The Department's Trading Standards Service is also working to protect consumers and keep markets fair for honest business.

In the last year, Trading Standards officers have supported hundreds of scam victims, with over £1m being returned to the victims of scams.

2 Supporting our businesses to boost their productivity through innovation and growth

Supporting our high-potential sectors

In June 2024, the Minister launched a set of action plans, designed to focus on and enhance growth across seven of the North's most innovative, productive and export-orientated economic sectors.

These include Agri-Tech, Life and Health Sciences, Advanced Manufacturing, Materials and Engineering, Fintech and Financial Services, Software including Cyber, Screen Industries, and Low Carbon including Green Hydrogen.

These action plans set out a roadmap to drive growth by improving collaboration and clustering, responding to industry skills requirements, nurturing innovation, and better coordinating trade and focused investment.

Since these plans were published, much work has been progressed to support these important sectors.





Encouraging Entrepreneurs

With a commitment to supporting local talent, Minister Murphy launched a new £5m programme, to help early-stage, technology-based, start-up businesses and entrepreneurs to become global businesses of the future.

The Founder Labs programme aims to support 40 businesses over the next four years, supported by Invest NI and the Northern Ireland Office.

To date, 250 applications have been received for the programme.

The first cohort of 20 technology-based start-ups are already getting support to develop their business idea, sell into global markets, and raise private investment to enable them to scale and grow.

The programme is also fostering collaborations within the all-island tech start-up community.

250
APPLICATIONS
have been received for
the Founder Labs
Programme

Agri-Food Investment Initiative

Another key action from the sectoral action plans was the launch of a new four year £46m capital investment initiative for Food and Drink Processors in July.

This Initiative, delivered by Invest NI, will enhance the productivity and competitiveness of the Agri Food and Drink Processing sector by providing financial assistance for transformative and innovative capital projects.

Since its launch, there has been significant interest.

93 companies have engaged with Invest NI to understand how they might avail of the funding support. Further detail on successful bids for funding will be made in the coming weeks.

Agri-food was also the focus of collaboration this year, with a new 'Diamond' forum established to bring together the agri-food industry, research

institutions and government to identify gaps in Net Zero and environmental sustainability.

This group has already met twice, to agree research priorities to help the sector address the Net Zero challenge.

93
COMPANIES
engaged with Invest NI
on the Agri-Food
Investment Initiative

Business Innovation

Also in November, Minister Murphy launched Invest NI's new £4million Business Innovation Grant Scheme.

Delivered in partnership with Innovate NI, the scheme will provide grants of between £5-20k to businesses to develop, commercialise, and implement new or improved products, services, or processes.

Over 900 micro-businesses, sole traders, and SMEs from right across the North, have already successfully completed the eligibility checker.

You can learn more about the scheme at [Business Innovation Grant](#).



Clustering

Another important step in supporting our high-priority sectors was Invest NI's launch of the 10-year £11m Cluster Acceleration Programme in September.



This programme aims to identify and support up to five super clusters and 50 Cluster Feasibility Studies aligned to the North's high priority sectors.

The funding will be used to provide financial support to groups wishing to collaborate on specific projects.

A Cluster Acceleration Conference was held in October, attended by more than 170 business leaders, entrepreneurs, academic partners, and government departments, hoping to become part of future cluster ecosystems.

Global cluster experts attended and shared learning, including representatives from the World Bank, Norwegian Offshore Cluster, Fintech Scotland Cluster, and others across Austria, Iceland, the Basque Country, and the Netherlands.

As a direct result of the conference, the NI Maritime & Offshore emerging cluster, and Norwegian Offshore Wind cluster announced the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding. This will now support their collaboration in offshore wind, energy storage and future fuels.

Since the launch of the Cluster Acceleration Programme, the Invest NI Cluster Team has engaged with over 70 businesses from sectors including Agri-Tech, Green Economy, Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering, Fintech and Software.

16 applications for support have now been submitted.

Productivity Booster

In November, Minister Murphy announced further support for local businesses, through a new SME Productivity Booster scheme, as part of a new Skills Fund.

The scheme is now being delivered in collaboration with our six further education colleges, who are providing training in areas including leadership, business improvement and lean processes.

The scheme will provide up to £350k to small and medium businesses across the North, to support increased productivity and skills development for staff.

To date, further education colleges have engaged with over 100 companies, with 76 applications for support currently being progressed.

In addition, over 200 individuals have already availed of training assessments focused on boosting the productivity of their business.

**OVER 200
INDIVIDUALS**

have already availed of training assessments focused on boosting their productivity



Future Medicines Institute

Another significant step forward in the last 12 months was the launch of the Future Medicines Institute at Queen's University Belfast in December.

Over the next six years, the Institute, will be supported by £35m from the Department for the Economy, as well as an additional £20m from consortium members including Diaceutics PLC, Fusion Antibodies PLC, Randox Laboratories Ltd, Almac Group, Sonrai Analytics, Exploristics and ProAxis.

Work on the Institute began in January and is estimated to be completed by December 2030.

This investment will support further growth of the Life and Health Science sector and will increase the North's competitiveness by accelerating the development of technologies and precision medicine products.

It will also provide a bespoke skills programme supporting a talent pipeline for the sector.



Canadian Advisory Council

Supporting local businesses to increase their productivity through international exports has been an important focus this year.

During his visit to Canada in September, Minister Murphy launched a new Canadian Advisory Council to support trade and Foreign Direct Investment.

Canada is the North's 7th largest single export market, with exports of £192m.

This new Council is comprised of 13 executives from across Canadian Agri-tech, Advanced Manufacturing & Engineering, Fintech and Financial Services sectors.

The Council has already opened doors for local businesses in Canada, with two local companies already winning new business.



Promoting Dual Market Access

The unique trading opportunity afforded to the North through Dual Market Access has been an important component of the Department's work in the last 12 months.

In September, Invest NI established a Dual Market Access Unit to focus on the North's unique position to move goods freely from here to Britain and the EU.

Invest NI is also leading engagement on this issue locally, and internationally, with a new local engagement forum meeting regularly, and roundtable discussions on Dual Market Access already progressed as part of overseas visit programmes in the USA, Canada and Europe.

In October, Minister Murphy visited Germany to build on already growing trade links and to build awareness of the Dual Market Access opportunity.

The visit was an important step towards deepening relationships with key players in industries in Germany, including life and health sciences, digital innovation and screen, and advanced manufacturing.

A programme for further European engagement has been developed, including Brussels and the Netherlands, where further engagements will be undertaken with Chambers of Commerce and business organisations to raise awareness.



Supporting Global Trade

In the last twelve months the Minister also led local trade delegations to New York, Chicago, Washington, and Toronto, with the aim of increasing exports and progressing opportunities for Foreign Direct Investment.

In March 2024, the Minister participated in a week-long visit to the US for business and political engagements in New York and Washington, D.C.

During his visit he met with senior leaders at Citi, one of the North's largest inward investors and had meetings with prospective investors with the aim of securing more good quality jobs for the whole region.

In Washington DC, the Minister used his attendance at prestigious events, including the Ireland Fund's National Gala, NI Bureau Breakfast and business reception hosted by US Economic Envoy to NI, Joe Kennedy III, to showcase the North's world-class products and services.

In September the Minister led a trade mission to Chicago and Toronto with 12 of the North's local innovative technology companies.

Companies on the programme have since signed distribution and partnership agreements with North American companies, and are in the final stages of securing sales, or planning to return for follow-up meetings with potential new partners.



3 Driving an All-Island Economy

Driving economic prosperity on an all-island basis has been an important focus this year.

Funding ratios

In April, Minister Murphy allocated £6.5m of additional core funding to Tourism Ireland.

This reinstated the Department's contribution to the all-island funding ratios for the organisation, previously approved by the North-South Ministerial Council.

This funding has been invested in enhanced international consumer advertising, e-marketing, events and publicity, to increase overseas tourism to the island.

In addition, the full allocation of £5.3m was allocated to InterTradelreland, meeting the Department's North-South Ministerial Council endorsed funding commitment of a 2:1 funding ratio with Dublin.

Coupled with a decision of the North-South Ministerial Council to raise InterTradelreland's headcount from 42 to 65, this has enabled InterTradelreland to plan their programme of business support with more certainty.

Sustainable Tourism

In June, Minister Murphy signed an agreement with Minister Catherine Martin in the Republic of Ireland, on the need for sustainable tourism across the island.

Both departments, and their agencies are now working together as part of an All-Island Strategic Tourism Group, to maximise opportunities to promote all-island tourism, and encourage economic prosperity on an all-island basis.

As part of this collaboration, Tourism NI is working with Failte Ireland to extend their experience branding into the North.

This includes amalgamating Fermanagh into Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand and continuing the collaboration between the Wild Atlantic Way and Causeway Coastal Route through Shared Island Funding, with a small capital grant scheme now open for applications.



Tourism Vision & Action Plan

Minister Murphy's focus on tourism as an economic driver was further supported by his appointment of a new Tourism Partnership Board, which met for the first time in September.

The Board is comprised of representatives from both the tourism industry and the hospitality sector, alongside Executive Departments and local government.

The purpose of the Board is to advise and make recommendations to the Minister through the development and implementation of a [10 year Tourism Vision and Action Plan](#).

This was published in January and sets out the Department's ambition for growth in the tourism sector over the next 10 years.

The plan identifies 17 actions which will be critical to achieving this ambition in a way that promotes regional balance, raises productivity, creates good jobs, and lowers carbon emissions.



Dublin Hub enhances all-Ireland connections

The All-Island economy was further supported with the official opening of Invest NI's new Hub, in Dublin, in September.

The new strategic meeting space for companies and stakeholders across the North is now being used for client meetings, developing new trading partnerships, and exploring the southern market.

The Hub is now the base for Invest NI's Dublin team, who are working to secure inward investment to the North, and to Tourism NI who are working increasingly on cross-border tourism.

With cross-border trade up by 125% since 2018, and cross-border tourism surging over the last few years, this hub is an important space to support the all-island economy.

Cross-border studying

Work in relation to cross-border studying has also been progressing well.

The Department has worked closely with the Secondary Students Union NI - representing sixth form students across the North - to understand what information they would find helpful as they make choices on their next steps in education.

This has resulted in new, co-designed guidance being published on the [NI Direct](#) website.

This liaison is continuing and will be extended to include the National Union of Students - Union of Students in Ireland on both sides of the border as well as the Irish Second-Level Students' Union to ensure meaningful engagement with students across the island.

The Department's Careers Service is working on updating its publication, [A Guide to Career Entry Routes](#), to include advice and guidance on applying to universities right across the island.

The Department is also working proactively with the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, and the Central Applications Office to ensure information is readily available to students from the North, applying to institutions in the South of Ireland and vice-versa.

All-island trade mission

Promoting trade and international investment on an all-island basis has also been a key focus in the last 12 months.



In November Minister Murphy led the first ever all-island trade mission, to the world's largest Fin-Tech trade event in Singapore.

In partnership, the Department for the Economy, Invest NI, Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland supported the four-day trade mission, which promoted the island of Ireland as a hub for innovation in Reg-Tech, Fin-Tech, and financial services.

It also afforded 14 companies from across the island the opportunity to collaborate and showcase their products and services to the Singapore and wider Asia-Pacific markets.

4 Commitment to skills

The commitment to improve our skills landscape right across the North underpins the Economic Vision.

As such, in the last 12 months, significant steps have been taken to support the development of skills at all levels across the North.

Further Education including Lecturers' Pay

One of the Minister's earliest decisions was to make an increased pay offer to lecturers in Further Education.

In April, the Minister welcomed a decision by members of the University and College Union, and The Teachers' Union NASUWT, to accept the offer.

The pay offer includes an increase in starting salary for lecturers from £24,496 to £30,000, and an 8.4% pay increase plus £1,000 added to all other lecturers' pay points in 2023/24.

Increased student support

In March, recognising the impact of the cost of living crisis on students, the Minister provided an additional £1million to support students facing financial hardship. This increased the total funding for 2024/25 to £3.7m.

Eligible students at Queen's University, Ulster University, The Open University, St Mary's University College, and Stranmillis University College can apply for this funding through Student Services in their institution.

In January, Minister Murphy also announced a 20% increase in the maximum student maintenance loan available to full-time undergraduate students from academic year 2025/26. This will provide in the region of £50 million of additional support to approximately 35,600 local students studying in these islands.

Multiply Scheme

Also in September, the Minister launched the £6m Multiply programme.



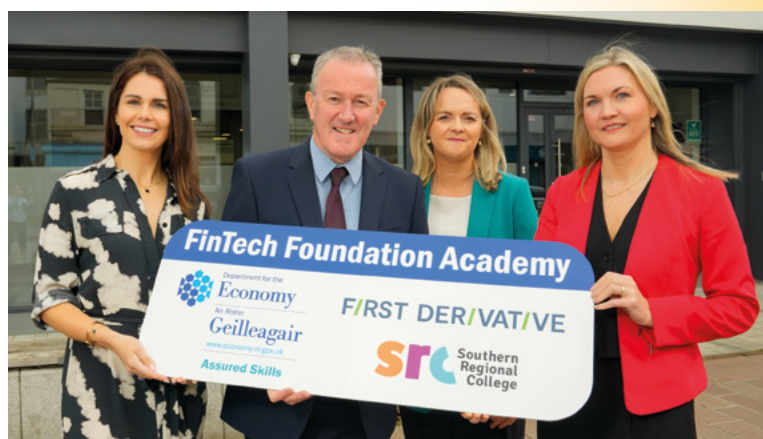
Funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, this programme is currently being delivered in partnership with local councils, colleges and universities.

2,500 local people are currently participating in 115 schemes to improve adult numeracy, confidence with numbers, and career prospects.

Digital Skills

In September, the Department worked with industry to publish a new **Digital Skills Action Plan**, giving more people access to the training they need to develop a career in the digital and software sectors.

The Department is currently working on childcare support to help with flexibility for those seeking to access training in these areas and is exploring ways to increase the uptake of apprenticeships within these growing sectors.



Skills Fund

In July, a new three-year Skills Fund was launched, with £12m allocated in 2024/25.



£600K

of the new Skills Fund is supporting and growing the childcare sector

This provided a significant investment to address skills gaps to benefit individuals and employers across the North.

To date, 20 initiatives have benefitted from the funding, supporting 5,000 people to upskill and reskill.

One such initiative is the Skill Up programme which is now providing 3,500 students, with access to 300 online courses.

Skill Up is delivered through our local college network with a particular focus on those facing barriers to participation in learning and employment.

For example, 70% of those taking part in online courses have caring responsibilities and 50% are over the age of 40.

This is helping to address the gap in lifelong learning between the North and the rest of the island.

The Skills Fund is also currently supporting women returning to the workplace.

100 women are currently receiving training in areas such as ICT, Project Management and Business Leadership, at our Further Education Colleges, which will be followed by a placement with a local employer.

£500k has been invested in breaking down barriers to learning.

As a result, 300 people, who would traditionally experience barriers to learning, such as those who are neurodivergent, have a physical disability, or are from disadvantaged backgrounds are now receiving support to ensure they can successfully transition from further and higher education into employment.

£600k of the new Skills Fund is supporting and growing the childcare sector, which is critical to enabling parents to enter and stay in the workforce.

In partnership with our local councils, 110 childminders are now receiving training and additional upskilling to work in leadership roles within the sector.

Bespoke childcare qualifications have also been developed to enable childminders to make the transition into childcare in a flexible way.

The new Skills Fund has also provided an additional £800k for the 'Skills Focus' and the 'Innovate Us' initiatives.

Through Skills Focus, 400 employees from 80 local businesses are now receiving training in areas important to them.

And 100 innovation projects are now being supported in SMEs, to enable growth and development in their staff, through Innovate Us.

£400k has been invested in a new green skills project; working in partnership with industry.

So far, this funding has supported 300 people to be equipped with the skills to take up roles in emerging areas including net zero, electric vehicles, retrofitting and hydrogen.

With the support of the new Skills Fund, and in collaboration with public sector employers, the Department for the Economy is developing 10 new public sector apprenticeship pathways and six demonstrator projects.

The aim of these is to support 100 new employees into public sector organisations – including health and education, from September 2025.

A total of £250k has been allocated from the Skills Fund to encourage greater uptake of learning within the workplace through the Union Learning Fund.

This has already supported almost 900 enrolments for qualifications in essential skills, project management, customer service and teamwork.

In addition, Apprenticeship Academies, Navigator Pilots and bursaries are being supported.

The Minister also announced additional places at local universities for those from under-represented backgrounds, with 50 local people now accessing this opportunity.

£400K

has been invested in a new green skills project; working in partnership with industry



Focus on Careers

A firm focus for the Department in the last 12 months has been its commitment to enhancing careers advice, and to working in collaboration with the Department of Education to achieve this.



Together, both departments have reached an advanced stage in producing a joint Careers Action Plan which will be instrumental in shaping the future delivery of educational and guidance services over the next three years and beyond.

In addition, discussions with other stakeholders including the Department for Communities have contributed to a series of new draft actions that will support clients of all ages, outside of the school setting.

Over the last year, the Careers Service has provided important careers advice to 50,000 pupils in post primary schools, and over 14,000 adults in the wider community.

The Careers Service is working in partnership with post-primary schools, training providers, Colleges, the Youth Justice Agency, and the Health and Social Care Trusts to provide the right information and support to clients of all ages.

Targeted help has also been made available for those facing redundancy or unemployment, and individuals hoping to return to the labour market.

Apprenticeship Inclusion Challenge Fund

In October, the Minister launched a new £600k Apprenticeship Inclusion Challenge Fund.

This fund will support six projects which will be awarded up to £100k each.

These projects will be aimed at promoting apprenticeships for underrepresented groups including women, disabled people and those from less advantaged areas.



Special Educational Needs post-16

Also supported by the new Skills Fund is the Department's work to look at options for change within skills and training provision post-16, for young people with Special Educational Needs.

A team has been established within the Department and has already engaged extensively, with schools, colleges, parents, young people, voluntary and community sector organisations, social enterprises, and training providers on the important issue.

The team is currently scoping the existing provision and legislation in order to provide options to the Minister to improve access and outcomes for young people.

5 Forging ahead with the Good Jobs Agenda

On taking office in February, Minister Murphy announced his intention to bring forward the most significant piece of employment legislation since the Good Friday Agreement.

This legislation is intended to modernise the North's employment law framework to support delivery of the Minister's Good Jobs agenda.

Following extensive engagement with a vast array of stakeholders, the Minister launched the Good Jobs Employment Rights Bill Consultation in July.

This was a wide-ranging consultation seeking views on proposals across four main themes - Terms of Employment, Pay and Benefits, Voice and Representation, and Work life balance.

The consultation ran for 13 weeks and closed on 30 September, with 192 responses received.

Before and during the consultation, the Minister and his departmental officials met directly with trade unions and with representatives of employers and businesses from a variety of different sectors, including the community and voluntary sector.

Engagements included a mix of one-to-one discussions, meetings, and large events attended by multiple stakeholders, including many local businesses.

In September, the Department hosted a conference with the Minister's Critical Friend for Good Jobs, Dr Lisa Wilson from the Nevin Institute.

Experts in the field of employment relations from across Ireland and Britain also joined the discussion which allowed those attending the opportunity to hear directly from academic experts about the principles underpinning the good jobs framework.

It also provided the opportunity for any issues, concerns and questions to be raised and addressed, and for discussion on the positive impacts Good Jobs can have on employment relations and the wider economy.

Indeed, engagement is continuing, with opportunities for discussion and debate throughout the design of the legislation and its progression through the Assembly.

Departmental officials are now analysing the responses to the consultation, which will help inform the Minister's decisions on the way forward.

**192
RESPONSES
RECEIVED**

on the Good Jobs Bill
consultation

Support for Employee Ownership

Another significant step forward for the Good Jobs agenda, was the increasing interest in Employee Ownership across the North this year.

The Employee Ownership model is well recognised in its delivery of increased productivity for businesses, with workforces that are better engaged and supported in their employment.

In August, the Department published research on employee ownership across the North, which highlighted the significant opportunity for growing the model here, and the benefits it could bring¹.

The Minister has been proactively supportive of the model in the last 12 months, working with the DLD Fund, Employee Ownership Ireland – which launched earlier this month - and Invest NI to explore ways to grow this model further.

In the last year, four local businesses have transitioned to the employee ownership model, doubling the number of transitions from the previous year.

**IN THE LAST YEAR
4 LOCAL
BUSINESSES**

have transitioned to
the employee
ownership model

1 [DfE \(August 2024\). Research-Bulletin-24-1 Employee Ownership.pdf](#)

6 The commitment to decarbonisation

The Minister's economic plans recognise that decarbonising the North's economy will be both a challenge and opportunity.

As such, there has been a firm focus this last year on supporting business to both manage the move to decarbonisation, but also to optimise the opportunities for growth arising from the transition.

Capital Grants to support energy efficiency

In May, Invest NI launched a new £21m Energy Efficiency Capital Grant scheme for local businesses.

This scheme, which has already proved very popular, provides businesses with support to reduce energy costs and to build resilience through green efficiency.

Invest NI received a high demand for the scheme in the first nine months and has already awarded £2.8m to help companies implement energy efficiency projects.

In addition to the capital grant scheme, Invest NI also provides support for technical consultancy and sustainability reports to help business reduce energy and carbon emissions.

Energy efficiency support for low-income homes

In September, Minister Murphy announced an additional £2.5m for a sustainable energy programme for low-income households.

This funding is supporting the installation of energy efficiency measures in approximately 1,000 homes to improve warmth and comfort and to lower energy bills and reduce carbon emissions.

Ban on onshore oil and gas exploration and production

In December, the Executive endorsed Minister Murphy's proposal to ban onshore oil and gas exploration and production in the North.

This marks significant progress, safeguarding the planet for future generations and enabling the Department to focus efforts on supporting the development and generation of renewable energy.

US Net Zero Advisory Board



In October, a US Net Zero Advisory Board was launched by Minister Murphy.

Supported by US Envoy, Joe Kennedy III, the Board was established to leverage the world-class expertise of the North's strategic diaspora community.

It is comprised of leaders in Net Zero industries who bring immense knowledge and expertise, tasked with enhancing international awareness of the North's green economy and Net Zero strengths.

Invest NI's green economy team are proactively engaged with the Board who have already facilitated introductions with the University of Massachusetts Amherst to explore opportunities for local companies here.

Invest to Save in the public sector's transition to Net Zero

The North's public sector has a significant physical footprint and high levels of energy consumption.

In 2024/25, the Department for the Economy has invested £28m in almost 60 projects across the central government estate to support decarbonisation and lower, more stable energy costs in the public sector.

This brought the 3-year investment to over £70m, providing important public sector leadership in the path to Net Zero.

For example, £235k was provided to Southern Regional College's Newry East Campus to install Solar PV panels;

Almost £100k was allocated to the NI Fire and Rescue Service to replace lighting with LED fittings at its Lisburn HQ;

And almost £240k was allocated to the Education Authority to install heating controls at four special education schools across the North.

Smart meters and support for low carbon heating

Also in October, Minister Murphy launched important consultations on smart electricity meters and support for low carbon heating in residential buildings.

The consultation on smart meters sought views on how the roll-out should be managed to ensure it is consumer-focused, and to identify organisations who could support the roll-out.

These meters give people better control of their electricity use and eliminate the need for energy companies to estimate bills.

The consultation received a total of 203 responses. Officials within the Department are now analysing these to develop a design plan for publication later this year.

The consultation on future support of low carbon heat technologies in residential properties closed in January.

The 108 responses provided views that will support the Department in the development of heat decarbonisation policy.

The early adoption and support of low carbon heating technologies will act as a catalyst for growth within the green economy and present huge economic opportunities across the region.



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