

Digital Innovation in the post-Covid world

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Jayne Brady, Belfast Digital Innovation Commissioner, explains why digital innovation has the potential to transform Northern Ireland's economy, and outlines the region's plans to realise this ambition.

Last March, just four months before Belfast Region City Deal (BRCD) partners were due to submit the first draft of our Digital pillar proposition to Government, we found ourselves in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Along with the rest of society, each partner organization began grappling with the immediate impact of the lockdown. Local council partners focused on re-organizing vital local services, including setting up new food delivery schemes for sheltering households. Our universities brought their expertise to bear in areas as diverse as diagnostics and epidemiology, while local business, often on a pro bono basis, addressed other aspects of the crisis such as the manufacturing of PPE.

At the same time, most of us were making the switch to remote-working; our organizations quickly becoming reliant on a suite of technologies that allowed us to be productive from home. Workers, parents and children have all harnessed the power of video-conferencing, cloud computing, security protocols, and Google Classroom.

Meanwhile commentators began musing about the long-term implications of remote working and the impact of Covid in general. In the space of just a few months our economy and entire society experienced massive change that has generated uncertainty about our future.

It was against this background, as the new Belfast Digital Innovation Commissioner, that I began working with the partners to consider whether our vision of an economy transformed by digital innovation remained valid in a post-Covid world. Certainly, the response to the crisis provided useful pointers. First and foremost,

it demonstrated the resilience and can-do attitude of people in Northern Ireland.

To my mind, it also demonstrated the ability of our organizations to take risks and to innovate when they need to. We often tend to be overcautious in trying new things – particularly when it comes to exploiting digital technologies to transform how we do things. This is a charge often leveled at the public sector – but it's also prevalent in the private sector. Covid, however, has shown us that we have the ability and capacity to innovate if we are willing to try. So, I would suggest, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the case for investment in digital not only remains strong but has become essential to our recovery.



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Our region is certainly well-placed to take forward such an ambition. In the last decade we saw a 300% increase in investment in R&D by our local businesses. 26% of all job openings here in 2019 were in digital technology – the highest in UK (Tech Nation). Prior to Covid, Belfast had been identified by fDi Intelligence as one of the world's top 10 Digital Economies of the Future (the only UK city other than London to be listed). And, coming out of Covid, the trend continues – with tech recruitment already back at 90% of pre-pandemic levels.

The BRCD digital innovation ambition is to accelerate and strengthen this exciting momentum.

Our partners are placing great emphasis on the power of digital innovation to do much of the heavy lifting. While we can't confidently predict what technological disruption will look like, we can draw on the region's existing research and knowledge economy successes to support SMEs and the workforce to prepare for it and to build resilience.

The key elements of our approach:

- Adopt a mission-orientated approach that encourages both economic growth and innovative solutions to 'grand challenges' that include health and wellbeing; the impact of AI & Data; and sustainability and resilience.
- Build into all aspects of our approach an emphasis on inclusive innovation – ensuring that our approach addresses inequalities and contributes to 'levelling up'.
- Support a collaborative partnership model to drive co-investment and collaboration across industry, academia and government.
- Build on those key industry clusters in the Belfast region that demonstrate the potential for global excellence in innovation and research – particularly in FinTech, life and health sciences and green tech.
- Create investment instruments that can respond with flexibility and agility to emerging opportunities and support long-term digital, research and innovation investment. This £55 million package is likely to be a mix of equity funding, loans, and grants to nurture the best of our innovative SMEs. A 'problem-solving toolbox' will also be designed to attract

SME and university research innovation to address public policy issues associated with our grand challenges.

- Establish a £39 million Infrastructure Enabling Fund to support the development of a Belfast Smart District and a regional testbed network through investment in enabling infrastructure and world-class digital connectivity.
- Establish a network of Regional Innovation Hubs to ensure diffusion of innovation and skills throughout the region, which further build on regional strengths in key sectors such as advanced manufacturing and creative industries.

I am particularly excited by the opportunities represented by the five Innovation centers of excellence being developed by Queen's University and Ulster University. We are designing the digital pillar so that we can build upon the world-class research of these centers to accelerate innovation within existing companies and also to foster exciting new businesses and cluster growth. But I also see the centers as unique resources in equipping the city in tackling the wider challenges that we face as a society.

Over the coming months, we will work with our partners in the Northern Ireland Government to confirm our final approach. Our aim is then to work towards the launch of our first funding program in the following year.

The Belfast Region City Deal offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to make carefully tailored digital investments that will support the region in harnessing the many economic opportunities to grow businesses, create jobs, foster inclusion, and bring world-class innovation to the challenges of the coming decade. It's a big deal for digital innovation.

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