



Department for the
Economy
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An Roinn
Geilleagair



Business Plan

2025-26

End Year Progress Report

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MINISTERIAL FOREWORD

This Report captures the progress my Department has made against its 2025-26 Business Plan.



The plans we laid out at the beginning of the year were designed to advance the four objectives in my Economic Vision. Despite a very challenging international and fiscal context, the North is outgrowing Britain both in terms of output and exports. And the dial is turning in the right direction on all four of my objectives.

The proportion of Good Jobs has increased from 67.4% in 2024 to 69% in 2025.

Our Productivity in terms of output per hour worked increased by 8.5% between 2022 and 2023, from £35.80 to £38.87, and our productivity gap with the UK average has continued to narrow in recent years.

In terms of Regional Balance, the gap in average weekly earnings between the highest and lowest earning Council areas has narrowed from about £180 in 2023 to £150 in 2025.

And CO₂ emissions have reduced from 6.5 tonnes per capita in 2022 to 5.8 tonnes in 2023 – reaching a 50% reduction from the baseline year of 1990.

The work of my Department has contributed to these positive outcomes. To deliver more Good Jobs, we consulted on and brought forward proposals on the Employments Rights Bill, the most significant upgrade of our employment law for a generation. We have brought the Living Wage franchise to the North and 214 companies have now signed up.

To raise Productivity, we are implementing our dedicated Action Plans to grow our highest productivity sectors. We are promoting the benefits of Dual Market Access to local exporters, have established a new AI Advisory Panel, and InterTradeIreland is supporting all-Ireland clusters.

To achieve Regional Balance new Local Economic Partnerships were established across all parts of the North. There has been a 22% expansion in students at Ulster University's Magee campus over two years and funding for the City of Derry Airport has helped it to grow its passenger numbers. Both Stranmillis and St Mary's University Colleges, the latter a vital community asset in West Belfast, have been given a significant funding uplift. County Fermanagh became part of the prestigious Hidden Heartlands tourism brand. And Portrush successfully hosted the 153rd Open.

To accelerate our journey towards net zero, we published our midterm review of the Energy Strategy and delivered on various key commitments. We introduced Bills to ban onshore petroleum licensing, support decarbonisation preparation, and close the RHI scheme. We published a Final Scheme Design for the Renewable Electricity Price Guarantee, launched a Green Skills Action Plan, and in February this year we reached a critical milestone in the review of mineral licensing with a call for evidence from communities, industry, and stakeholders to help shape future minerals policy.

As we move into the final year of this shortened mandate, my focus remains firmly on the continued delivery of my Economic Vision and on the commitments set out in our Programme for Government.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "C Archibald". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr. Caoimhe Archibald
Minister for the Economy

PROGRESS REPORT

There were 50 actions contained within the 2025-26 Business Plan, designed to further the four priorities of Good Jobs, Productivity, Regional Balance and Decarbonisation. A summary of the year-end position against these actions is as follows:

| GREEN | YELLOW | AMBER | RED |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|---|
| 30 | 10 | 10 | 0 |
| Complete or on track for delivery | Will be delivered but with short delay (1-6 months beyond target timescale) | Will be delivered but with significant delay (more than 6 months beyond expected timescale) | Will not be delivered or issues which place delivery in significant doubt |

The position for each of the actions in the 2025-26 Business Plan at 31st March 2026 is outlined below.

| Commitment/Action | End Year Status | Year End Position |
|--|-----------------|--|
| GOOD JOBS | | |
| 1. Securing Executive agreement for the Employment Rights Bill. | | This is the largest and most comprehensive piece of legislation on employment issues in more than a decade. It includes some provisions tailored to meet the specific circumstances of the local economy – such as those on zero-hours contracts – that have been developed reflecting the views of stakeholders raised during the consultation exercise. The Executive considered the detailed policy proposals details in February 2026 and the draft Bill was shared with the Executive for consideration on 29 April 2026. |
| 2. Laying regulations in the Assembly on the right to safe leave for victims of domestic abuse. | | The regulations to implement right to safe leave for victims of domestic abuse will be laid at the Assembly by the end of the Assembly Mandate. |
| 3. Lay regulations on the extension of existing rights to Parental Bereavement Leave and Pay to include those who experience a miscarriage and remove the current 6-month continuous employment criteria. | | Regulations extending existing rights to Parental Bereavement Leave and Pay to those who experience a miscarriage and removing the current 6-month continuous employment criteria were laid by the end of March. This allowed the changes to come into effect by 6th April 2026. |
| 4. Completing the development of and rolling out a Good Work Charter with the Labour Relations Agency. | | A co-design group which includes the Labour Relations Agency, Diversity Mark, Living Wage NI, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, employer representative bodies and trade unions has been established to develop the Good Jobs Charter. Since the Good Jobs Charter is intended to complement the Employment Rights Bill, the co-design group members wished to wait until the policy underpinning the Bill was finalised before progressing. A consultation launched in April 2026. |

| Commitment/Action | End Year Status | Year End Position |
|--|-----------------|--|
| GOOD JOBS | | |
| <p>5. Reporting on the delivery of Outcome Agreements between DfE and our three universities in the 2024/25 academic year and publishing new Agreements for 2025/26.</p> | | <p>The Universities have reported on the delivery of the Outcome Agreements for the 2024/25 academic year in the subsequent year's Outcome Agreement. The 2025/26 Outcome Agreements for Queen's University and the Open University have been agreed and signed. The Department is continuing to engage with Ulster University on points of detail in their opening statement before it can be finalised.</p> |
| <p>6. Putting in place a new Skills for Life and Work 2025 programme to support young people in need of entry Level/Level 1 training.</p> | | <p><i>Skills for Life and Work 25</i> was launched in September 2025. In its first year of operation, the programme is supporting 1,845 young people with low or no qualifications to overcome barriers and progress towards employment or further learning.</p> |
| <p>7. Publishing and beginning to implement a Careers Action Plan, including working with developers to build a new careers portal that will provide careers information and tools to people of all ages and abilities.</p> | | <p>The careers Action Plan was published on 18 June 2025.</p> <p>The Department is working collaboratively with the Department of Education to deliver the Action Plan. Early actions include putting in place Quality Guidelines, strengthening the supporting partnerships, measures to improve Careers Service recruitment and capacity and the greater use of digital tools to support clients.</p> <p>Good progress has been made on the development of the Careers Portal project, with Business Case approval secured and work on the procurement documentation well advanced. Delivery of the project is dependent on the Department's capital funding position.</p> |

| Commitment/Action | End Year Status | Year End Position |
|---|-----------------|--|
| GOOD JOBS | | |
| <p>8. Implementing the Apprenticeship Action Plan including the apprenticeship 2025 programme.</p> | | <p>The Apprenticeship Action Plan was launched on 11 August 2025.</p> <p>Of the 19 actions in the Apprenticeship Action Plan, 12 had a target date of up to and including March 2026. Of those, eight have been completed, one has been delayed, and three have not yet started due to budget constraints.</p> <p>The ApprenticeshipsNI 25 Programme was launched in September 2025.</p> |
| <p>9. Launching six projects through the Apprenticeship Challenge Fund to increase apprenticeship uptake across underrepresented groups.</p> | | <p>Six projects were launched in April 2025. All six are operating well and are expected to complete at end of August 2026.</p> |
| <p>10. Publishing research from the all-island Working in Ireland Study.</p> | | <p>The testing and completion of the survey that provides evidence for the study took longer than originally estimated. This had a knock-on impact on the delivery timeline for the project outputs.</p> |
| <p>11. Developing a workplan in collaboration with the Further Education sector to develop Vocational Training programmes including curriculum development, work placements and vocational pathways.</p> | | <p>A significant vocational training programme has been developed and rolled out in collaboration with the Further Education sector. Level 2 Traineeships are the main pathway for vocational training post-16. Traineeships provide project-based learning, work experience, transferable skills and literacy and numeracy qualifications and offer clear progression routes into apprenticeships, further education or employment. They are offered in around 40 different occupational areas across the FE college network.</p> |

| Commitment/Action | End Year Status | Year End Position |
|---|-----------------|--|
| GOOD JOBS | | |
| <p>12. Initiating and co-designing a programme of work to ensure the Further Education sector is best placed to deliver the skills which learners need to improve their life chances and to contribute to economic growth.</p> | | <p>The Programme was announced by the Minister in a Written Ministerial Statement on 14 April 2026. A team has been established in the Department to drive forward the review.</p> |
| <p>13. Commencing the delivery of the actions contained in the Skills Action Plan to address skills imbalances in our economy.</p> | | <p>The Skills Action plan was launched in October 2025. The plan sets out the actions that the Department will focus on to ensure that everyone has a pathway to enhance their existing skills and contribute to the Minister’s Economic Vision. The delivery plan runs over seven years, up to 2032. Delivery has started on the actions within the plan.</p> |

| Commitment/Action | End Year Status | Year End Position |
|---|-----------------|--|
| PRODUCTIVITY | | |
| <p>14. Implementing with delivery partners the 2024-27 sectoral action plans to drive growth within our economy's seven most innovative and high-potential sectors.</p> | | <p>Overall good progress has been made against the seven Sector Action Plans, with delivery substantially underway or complete, as the focus shifts towards the third and final year of activity.</p> |
| <p>15. Working with Innovate UK and Invest NI to develop and publish a Collaborative Innovation Action Plan for the North.</p> | | <p>In partnership with Innovate UK and Invest NI, the Department developed and published the Collaborative Innovation Action Plan on 1 October 2025. The Plan established a shared framework to strengthen collaboration and support increased innovation activity and drawdown of Innovate UK funding.</p> |
| <p>16. Working with business and other interested parties to develop policy proposals around the wider uptake of Artificial Intelligence across the economy in the North.</p> | | <p>The Department published its <i>AI Strategic Direction</i> document in December 2025.</p> <p>The Minister has convened an AI Advisory Panel, which brings together representatives from academia, industry, social economy and the workforce to ensure a joined-up and well-informed approach to harnessing the opportunities of AI for economic development. The first meeting was held on 16 April 2026.</p> |
| <p>17. Through the Export Forum streamlining the provision of export support for the benefit of businesses selling beyond the North, including addressing the barriers to exporting faced by woman entrepreneurs and woman-led small and micro businesses.</p> | | <p>This action has been delayed by unforeseen external circumstances. The past year has seen an unprecedented period of tariff and trade volatility, which has required the Department to prioritise its resources to work closely with industry to understand the impacts at sectoral and supply chain level and inform our responses to mitigate any potential detriment to the economy. As a result, progress on the work to streamline the support available for exporters has been slower than anticipated.</p> |

| Commitment/Action | End Year Status | Year End Position |
|---|-----------------|---|
| PRODUCTIVITY | | |
| 18. Taking a more targeted approach to exploiting dual market access for our high-potential economic sectors. | | The Department is working with Invest NI, InterTradeIreland and others to raise awareness of the opportunities of dual market access with trading partners in Europe, the United States and beyond through targeted and sector-focussed trade missions and roadshows. |
| 19. Delivering through the Skills Fund a range of targeted skills initiatives, including Skill Up, Step Up and the SME Productivity Booster. | | <p>The 2025/26 Skills Fund supported over 9,000 individuals and over 500 employers.</p> <p>Delivery was through 20 rapidly deployed and flexible projects that responded directly to priority skills gaps aligned to the Economic Vision: Skill Up provided online learning opportunities from Levels 2 to 7; Inclusive Futures and Step Up provided new pathways to learners seeking training and employment; and the SME Productivity Booster focused on assessing training gaps and providing support to those companies most in need.</p> |
| 20. Working towards the delivery of an Enhanced Investment Zone for the North, co-designed with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, to harness £150m of available funding to drive economic growth. | | The EIZ programme secured all required UK Government and NI Executive approvals by the end of March. This was achieved in a shorter timescale than any other UK EIZ proposal. This positions the programme to transition swiftly into delivery at the start of the new financial year. |
| 21. Commencing the rollout of Project Gigabit, which will bring high speed broadband to c11,000 premises across the North. | | Following a successful procurement exercise, work has started on bringing gigabit-capable services to a further 9,300 premises by December 2027. Over 1,000 premises have already been enabled. Work has begun on exploring alternative broadband technologies for very hard-to-reach premises. |

| Commitment/Action | End Year Status | Year End Position |
|--|-----------------|--|
| PRODUCTIVITY | | |
| 22. Consulting on and finalising an Aviation and Route Development Policy to maximise air connectivity and drive economic growth. | | <p>Work was delayed by unforeseen pieces of work that were time critical and had to take priority, including responding to UK legislation on Sustainable Aviation Fuel.</p> <p>The aviation policy consultation was launched on 27 March 2026.</p> |

| Commitment/Action | End Year Status | Year End Position |
|---|-----------------|---|
| REGIONAL BALANCE | | |
| <p>23. Supporting the work of Local Economic Partnerships to facilitate the delivery of Year 1 projects.</p> | | <p>All 11 Local Economic Partnerships are in place. By 31 March all Councils had Action Plans approved for 2025/26, six of these plans cover the period to the end of 2027/28. Two action plans for 2026/27 and 2027/28 are currently awaiting approval and three council areas are still developing action plans for this and next financial year. In line with these approvals delivery of projects had started in a number of areas. Councils have started drawing down the funding, demonstrating a shift from the set up phase to the delivery of projects across the LEP programme.</p> |
| <p>24. Implementing the agreed actions outlined in the Magee Taskforce Final Report and Action Plan to progress towards the target of 10,000 students at Ulster University Magee Campus.</p> | | <p>Student enrolments at Magee exceeded 6,500 in September 2025, which is a 22% increase over the last two years, and two years ahead of the projections in the Taskforce report. A Programme Board and working groups on student accommodation and enabling infrastructure have been established by the Department.</p> |
| <p>25. Launching a Sub-Regional Skills Barometer to better understand and address skills needs on a localised level.</p> | | <p>The Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) commenced their research work in December 2025. Publication of the final reports is expected during 2026-27.</p> |
| <p>26. Supporting the accelerated delivery of the City & Growth Deal programmes.</p> | | <p>During the year, the first City and Growth Deal capital build project – Studio Ulster – launched in June 2025. The Department approved over £120m in funding for six projects and construction work commenced on two projects: Momentum One Zero and Derry~Londonderry North Atlantic Museum.</p> <p>Three projects have seen slippage in their delivery timescales, mainly due to cost pressures from construction cost inflation. The Department will continue to work with key stakeholders to support the delivery of these projects.</p> |

| Commitment/Action | End Year Status | Year End Position |
|---|-----------------|--|
| REGIONAL BALANCE | | |
| <p>27. Working in partnership with Invest NI to implement the Invest NI Review Action Plan.</p> | | <p>32 out of the 35 Strategic Actions from the Invest NI Review Action Plan have been completed.</p> <p>The People and Organisational Development Strategy (Action 19) is on track for completion by December 2026. The remaining two Actions are anticipated to be completed by March 2027:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the review of Invest NI’s Middle Tier Structure (Action 6) has been delayed by the need to re-run the recruitment exercise for the Chief Development Officer role. The review is expected to conclude by end of summer 2026. the Transfer of Tourism Support Functions to Tourism NI (Action 31) has been paused to avoid any hiatus in support available for tourism businesses while Tourism NI prepares its new programme. The target date for the transfer of functions is now 1 April 2027. |
| <p>28. Working in partnership with Tourism NI and Tourism Ireland to implement the year one actions of the Tourism Vision and Action Plan.</p> | | <p>Notable areas of progress in the Tourism Vision and Action Plan include Tourism Ireland’s overseas marketing activity delivering strong results, including the “Ireland Unrushed” campaign, which reached over 100 million people across key international markets with very strong persuasion scores (90%+). Progress has been made on extending Fáilte Ireland experience brands into the North. In particular, Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands has been agreed for use in Fermanagh, supported by overseas promotion focused on the Shannon–Erne waterways. Good progress has also been made on City Deals tourism projects and on the development of an Aviation policy as reported on under their respective Business Plan targets.</p> |

| Commitment/Action | End Year Status | Year End Position |
|---|-----------------|--|
| REGIONAL BALANCE | | |
| <p>29. Concluding a review of the current skills and training landscape for young people with Special Educational Needs after they leave school.</p> | | <p>The Minister announced her reforms in June 2025. The Department has led a cross-department bid under the Transformation Fund which has been recommended (subject to funding). Work is ongoing on the implementation phase including the establishment of Cross Department Data Sharing Working Group in February 2025 and commissioning research of SEN related data by UKRI Researcher. In October 2025, the Department also published a statistical topic paper for Participation on DfE Training and Education Provision by Disability. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) have undertaken an evaluation of SEN in FE during autumn and winter terms.</p> |
| <p>30. Publishing a Credit Union consultation and beginning the process to modernise Credit Union legislation.</p> | | <p>The consultation was launched on 17 April 2025 and ended on 10 July 2025. The analysis of the consultation responses and the Department's proposed next steps will be published and go forward for Executive approval in early 2026/27.</p> |
| <p>31. Completing the new £51m Northern Regional College campus in Ballymena.</p> | | <p>The new state of the art campus was completed within its approved programme and budget and opened to students at the start of the 2025/26 academic year. The College has reported that in-line with its opening full-time enrolments increased by 12%.</p> |
| <p>32. Supporting Invest NI as it works towards increasing its investments outside of the Belfast Metropolitan Area to 65% by 2026-27.</p> | | <p>In the first year of its business strategy, 59% of Invest NI's investments were to businesses either located outside the BMA or offered NI wide opportunities. This represented a steady start towards the target of 65% of investments by Year 3 of its Business Strategy.</p> |

| Commitment/Action | End Year Status | Year End Position |
|--|-----------------|--|
| DECARBONISATION | | |
| <p>33. Leading an all-Government approach to deliver a pathfinder community energy project.</p> | | <p>The Department established a Pathfinder group involving local and central government, the Centre for Advanced Sustainable Energy (CASE), DAERA, the Utility Regulator and Northern Ireland Electricity Networks, to consider options for a pathfinder community energy project. A number of proposals were evaluated by the Pathfinder group during the course of the year, considering factors including technical options to decarbonise heat and electricity supply, including heat networks, renewable gas and small-scale renewable generation. A potential solution has been identified which requires a feasibility study to assess the costs, benefits, and regulatory constraints involved. The findings will inform the pathfinder delivery plan.</p> |
| <p>34. Commencing delivery of the Circular Economy Strategy with responsible production and consumption at its core, including the development of an action plan.</p> | | <p>A draft Circular Economy Strategy has been approved by the Minister. As it is a cross-cutting strategy, Executive approval is required. Subject to the Executive's approval the Strategy and an associated multi-year work programme will be published before the end of March 2027.</p> |
| <p>35. Publishing a design plan for future low carbon heating, energy efficiency support in residential buildings.</p> | | <p>A single approach to the delivery of Actions 35, 36 and 44 has been identified in the form of a proposed Domestic Energy Efficiency and Heat Programme. Work on the design plan was completed in March 2026. The plan will be published alongside a consultation on the scheme design and funding options early in 2026/27.</p> |
| <p>36. Publishing a consultation on Energy Efficiency support in residential buildings.</p> | | |

| Commitment/Action | End Year Status | Year End Position |
|---|-----------------|---|
| DECARBONISATION | | |
| 37. Publishing a new measure of electricity consumption and renewable generation. | | The work was completed by the end of 2025. The first Electricity Consumption and Renewable Generation report using the newly developed measure was published on 5 March 2026. |
| 38. Reporting to the Executive on the mid-term review of the Energy Strategy. | | The Energy Strategy Mid-Term Review was published on 18 December 2025. |
| 39. Introducing a draft bill on Offshore Renewable Energy Installations. | | The legislation has been deferred as it has not been possible to include it in the Executive's legislative programme for the current session. It is planned to be introduced in the 2026/27 session. |
| 40. Introducing a draft bill on the primary powers for a Renewable Electricity Support Scheme. | | The Executive approved the detailed policy content in March 2026. The Department aims to secure Executive approval for the draft Bill by 30 June 2026 with a view to introducing the legislation to the Assembly before summer recess 2026. |
| 41. Introducing a draft bill on The Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation). | | The Bill was introduced to the Assembly on 20 April 2026. |
| 42. Introducing a draft bill on a ban for onshore petroleum licensing. | | The Bill was introduced to the Assembly in April 2026. |
| 43. Introducing a draft bill on the RHI Scheme closure. | | The RHI (Closure of the Scheme) Bill was introduced to the Assembly on 6 October 2025, completed the Consideration Stage in March 2026 and passed the Final Stage on 12 May 2026. |

| Commitment/Action | End Year Status | Year End Position |
|--|-----------------|---|
| DECARBONISATION | | |
| 44. Consulting on the future of domestic energy efficiency support and delivery. | | Being taken forward in a combined approach with Actions 35 and 36. |
| 45. Consulting on the Strategic Environmental and Habitats Regulations Assessments. | | The consultation on the assessments relating to the Offshore Renewable Energy Action Plan took place between February and May 2025. |
| 46. Consulting on Bio-methane policy. | | The Inter Departmental Biomethane Group (IDBG) was reformatted at the end of 2025 to include further expertise to support the development of biomethane policy. The public consultation, planned for 2025 was postponed due to a delay in information from stakeholders. The public consultation is now targeted for the end of 2026. |
| 47. Consulting on Hydrogen policy. | | The consultation took place between September and December 2025. |
| 48. Implementing the Green Skills Action Plan, which sets out a comprehensive framework to guide Government, employers, trade unions, education providers and individuals on what is needed to deliver the skills for the future and meet net zero targets. | | The Green Skills Action Plan was launched in May 2025. It was developed by a working group of the Skills Council led by business and industry stakeholders. It contains 28 actions, of which two have been completed and a further 14 are underway. |

| Commitment/Action | End Year Status | Year End Position |
|---|-----------------|---|
| DECARBONISATION | | |
| 49. Work with stakeholders including the Utility Regulator to progress the development of interconnector policy. | | Research on interconnection was completed in January 2026. An interconnector policy statement will be published by the end of 2026. |
| 50. Developing a Net Zero Accelerator Fund that will be delivered by Invest NI. | | Invest NI commissioned an independent market needs analysis which has not identified any issues with access to finance for businesses in the net-zero sector that could be addressed by a new fund. The Department and Invest NI will continue to engage with stakeholders to identify potentially beneficial uses for the funding that might be available. |

| | |
|---------------|--|
| Green | Complete or on track for delivery |
| Yellow | Will be delivered but with short delay (1-6 months beyond target timescale) |
| Amber | Will be delivered but with significant delay (more than 6 months beyond expected timescale) |
| Red | Will not be delivered or issues which place delivery in significant doubt |