

## Agenda Item No. 11

### Report to Chairman and Members of Economic Development & Enterprise SPC

12<sup>th</sup> September 2023

#### Re: Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor

##### **Context:**

The Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor Partnership was initially progressed by the Chief Executives of the eight local authorities along the corridor, and representatives of the two universities from UU and DCU. Governance structures were formalised, including the establishment of a Chief Executive Group, a Director's group and a Political Advisors Group. Dublin City Councils three representatives on the Political Advisory Group are Lord Mayor Daithí de Róiste, Cllr Tom Brabazon and Cllr Alison Gilliland. The next meeting of the Political Advisory Group, chaired by Cllr Peter Byrne is scheduled for 28<sup>th</sup> September and will be held in DCU. The latest meeting of the Director's group was held on 7<sup>th</sup> September in Dundalk, updates were provided on Peace Plus, Skills Research, Communication and Engagement and a feasibility study on Innovation Hubs and Connected Circular Economy and a partnership agreement.

Amanda Byrne was appointed in June 2023 as the DBEC Programme Manager. Amanda is supported in this work by the Programme Officer who was appointed in August. The work of the Political Advisory Group also receives secretariat support from Newry Mourne & Down District Council, as does the Chief Executives and Director's group.

##### **Development of DBEC Development Plan, Strategy and Action Plan**

Following a joint decision by the members of the Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor (DBEC) partnership, a tender process was established to appoint external consultant to provide research and consultation services, to support the development of the corridor. This led to the appointment of KPMG in September 2021, who carried out a programme of work that is now complete. The work involved three stages, the production of a development plan, a strategy, and an action plan to support the work of the DBEC partnership. KPMG presented the draft development plan, strategy and action plan to the members of the DBEC Political Advisory Group as they were being developed at meetings. The appointment of the Programme Manager and Partnership Officer were actions under the Action Plan and have led to the establishment of a full time DBEC Partnership team who are working with the established groups to implement a collaboration agreement/memorandum of understanding that is supported by all eight local authorities and 2 universities and a work programme in line with the strategy and the action plan, is also part of the agenda. Set out below is a summary of the key issues highlighted under the three stages of the development plan, strategy and action plan.

##### ***Stage 1 - Development Plan***

The first document produced by the external consultants is the development plan which addresses key issues to support the partnerships development such as governance, legal & operating structures, identified funding opportunities and resource requirements (human and financial). Built on the research undertaken to that point, including priority areas of cooperation, existing governance arrangements and the current funding landscape.

KPMG have also undertaken comparative analysis of other similar economic corridors, and consulted with internal and external stakeholders, to recommend appropriate governance, operational and resourcing requirements, that will help the partnership achieve its ambitions up to 2030. KPMG briefed the members and consulted them as part of the Stage 1 work during the first Political Advisory Group meeting held in person in November 2021.

The Stage 1 Development plan report was published in February 2022. The development plan resulted in several recommendations; these include:

- A phased development timeline up to 2030. In the short term from 2022-2024 priorities include the setting up of initial partnership personnel, consideration of legal structures, and identification of funding options.
- DBEC should remain an informal partnership model in the short term, together with an MOU, with a view to exploring independent legal status for the partnership in the future. This will be funded initially through council contributions.
- DBEC should be established with a bottom-up governance structure, largely based on the current existing structure. This includes a board of 12 growing to 16 in the long term to include private sector representatives.
- The partnership should be housed at a single location with staff and resources to lead and manage delivery of the partnership aims
- Key areas of focus should include Research and Development, Trade and Investment, Skills and Infrastructure and Connectivity

### **Stage 2 – DBEC Strategy**

Following completion of the Development plan KPMG continued to work on Stage 2, which involved the development of a strategy for the DBEC partnership. The draft report was included in the meeting papers of the Economic Development and Enterprise SPC held in November 2022.

#### This Strategy work involved:

- Articulating the vision for sustainable economic growth across the region and identifying a series of headline objectives, strategic priorities and key actions required to deliver on the vision.
- Assessing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to achieving regional economic growth.

Setting out the economic context of the region, including a review of existing evidence base, external environment and emerging areas of work at a local and regional level, and their potential to impact on the region.

- The role of DBEC within the current cross border economic support system.
- Identification of key resources, funding requirements (including potential sources of funding) needed to deliver the DBEC entity
- All stages of this work have been informed by extensive stakeholder engagement including workshops with DBEC partners and one to one meetings with stakeholders and strategic partners.

The KPMG team held consultations with a range of stakeholders from across the region representing the public and private sectors and academia. In tandem with work on strategic plan officials from partner councils have continued to identify collaborative opportunities, in addition to engaging with external stakeholders to further the aims of the partnership.

In June 2022, the partnership applied to the Irish Government's Shared Island Local Government Development Fund for funding to conduct a feasibility study on Enterprise Hubs and on a Connected

Circular Economy between Dublin and Belfast. Both applications were successful in being awarded funding under this initiative.

### **Key issues**

**The strategy outlines the following ambition, objectives and enablers for the partnership up to 2030.**

### **Ambition**

The ambition of the DBEC Partnership is “to become a leading economic corridor in Europe, achieving sustainable growth through collaborative R&D, a highly skilled workforce and enabling infrastructure”.

The partnership is working to raise the profile of the Dublin Belfast Corridor to be world renowned as a “major international centre in growth sectors such as professional service, advanced manufacturing, ICT, life sciences and advanced agriculture”.

A number of key enablers and strategic objectives have been agreed and are outlined as follows:

DBEC Strategic Objectives against which partners will align on corridor specific initiatives:

### **Strategic Objectives**

1. Increase skills and training to meet the labour requirements of the region, building on and expanding the existing workforce
2. Advocate for cross border infrastructure to strengthen connectivity and access to markets and labour
3. Enhance cross border collaboration in R&D and Innovation, targeting investment in high growth sectors and the green economy
4. Promote sustainable and climate conscious growth along the corridor, aligned with councils’ development plans and wider policy objectives
5. Align with and support economic development partners to increase trade and investment along the corridor
6. Market the region and elevate the DBEC brand so that the region becomes globally renowned as an attractive place to live and do business

The research has **identified three enablers** which will underpin future growth: skills, infrastructure, and research and development (R&D). Focussing on improving these enablers will support economic growth of the whole corridor. Within the corridor, some **sectors** are already strong and have been identified as key focus areas for skills development, infrastructure investment, and research and development.

- Professional Services and ICT
- Advanced Manufacturing and agriculture
- Life Sciences

Success in three ways of working will enhance delivery of actions undertaken. This includes delivery, governance and resourcing and marketing and communications.

**Short term priorities within the action plan include:**

- Appointment of a Programme Manager and Partnership Officer to lead the DBEC Partnership team and implement a collaboration agreement supported by all eight local authorities.
- Develop a DBEC skills barometer. This will monitor the changing needs of the labour market, measure demand and supply of skills, and benchmark existing attainment levels.
- Identify the barriers to skills development, such as funding, residency requirements or unclear career progression.
- Begin the exercise of identifying infrastructure gaps, including an understanding of improvements to amenities, to generate a high-quality of life within the region.
- Create an outreach list of high potential innovative SMEs in priority sectors based along the corridor; and engage with senior executives about DBEC's role in promoting the corridor, and wider R&D opportunities.
- Identify current and potential future opportunities for funding.
- Organise regular learning sessions for councils to share initiatives with other council officers and elected members to explore expansion of successful initiatives along the corridor
- Develop a coherent marketing and communications strategy with a clear editorial line. Initially, this could include a document setting out the benefits of the corridor, dedicated communication channels and consideration of comparator corridors for lessons learned

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