



First Minister Arlene Foster MLA, and deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill MLA (front row) launching the Regional Economic Strategy for the Mid South West Region. Back row: Councillor Robert Irvine, Vice Chair of the Mid South West Steering Group; Roger Wilson, Chief Executive of Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council; Alison McCullagh, Chief Executive of Fermanagh and Omagh District Council; Anthony Tohill, Chief Executive of Mid Ulster District Council and Councillor Cathal Mallaghan, Chair of the Mid South West Steering Group.

# Supercharging the Mid South West Economy

As the Mid South West launches its Regional Economic Strategy, the Mid South West Region Governance Steering Group write for *Ambition*, outlining how an area already considered the economic engine of Northern Ireland has plans to boost productivity and prosperity.

**The commitment of three Councils to work collaboratively to drive economic growth across their areas makes sense. By pooling resources, ideas and status the collective can benefit from economies of scale and the region is much better placed to pursue investment.**

The Mid South West is a collaboration between Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and Mid Ulster District Council.

In the pages that follow you will read more of the detail of our collective ambition for the Mid South West Region and that ambition is firmly grounded in a place which has been the economic engine of Northern Ireland for quite some time. We're proud of where we've come from, however we know that as a region we are capable of much, much more if we can address the deficits that exist – infrastructure,

skills, innovation and tourism – and by doing so, provide the right conditions for those sectors where we are already leading the way – advanced manufacturing, engineering, agri-food, health and life sciences, tourism, construction and others – to excel.

In essence our Regional Economic Strategy is focused on helping companies across the Mid South West supercharge the growth of their businesses which will in turn turbocharge the growth of the Mid South West economy and the Northern Ireland economy.

We will strive to tackle the barriers to growth while also helping companies to become exemplars in their field, capable of competing with the best in the world.

Collaboration is central to achieving this aim, not just across the three councils in the Mid South West but also with the business

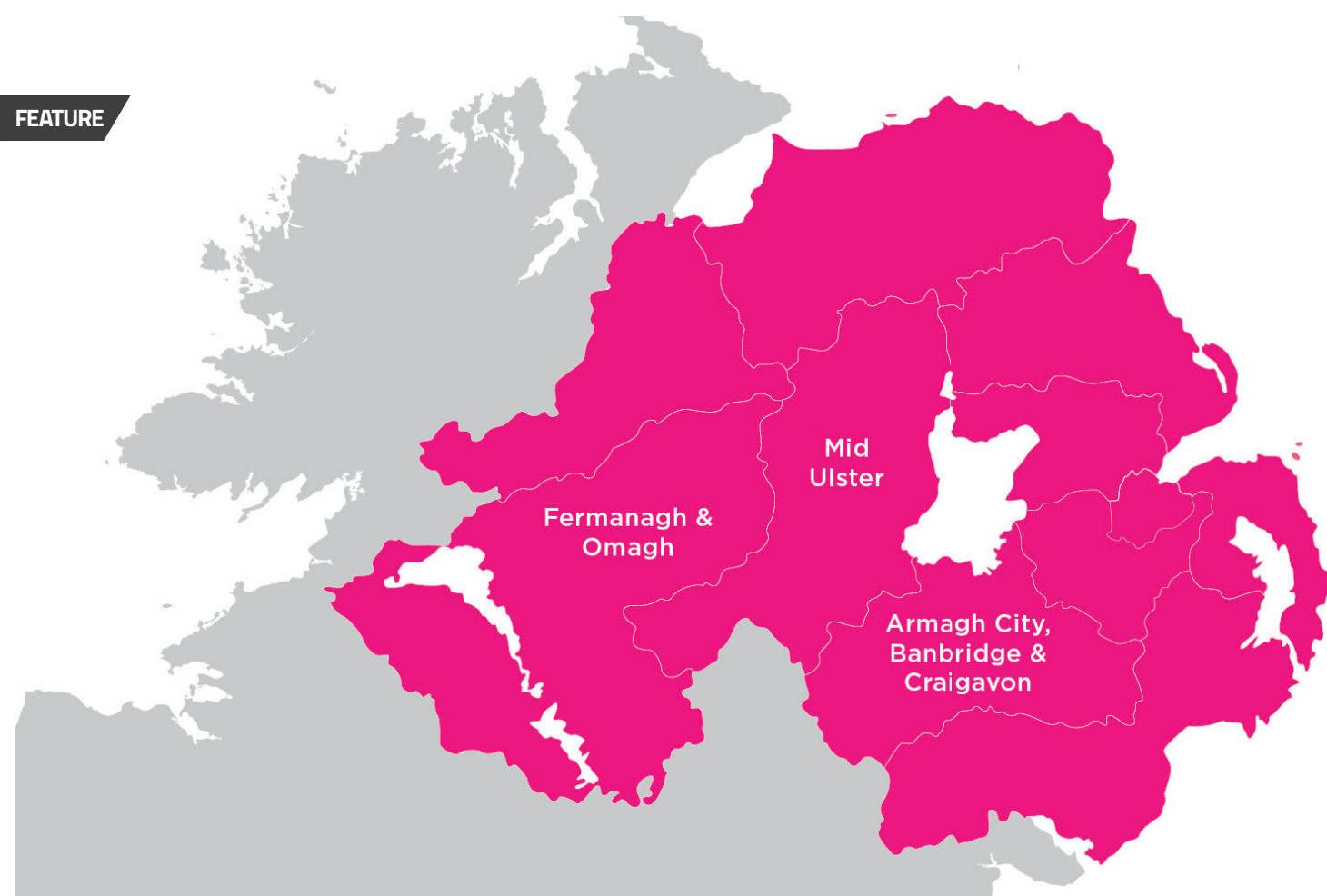
community which is at the heart of the region's economic future.

We have already benefitted from the insight and expertise of our Business Reference Group, made up of some 18 companies who represent the region's sectoral strengths and who were central to shaping the strategy.

Moving forward, the commitment from all businesses in the Mid South West – startups, SMEs, large companies and every inward investor – will be critical to ensuring that the strategy can be successfully delivered.

We are breaking new ground with our Regional Economic Strategy and together we will be able to boost productivity and prosperity across the Mid South West Region and create an even better place for everyone to live, work and play.





## The Mid South West Regional Economic Strategy – What is it?

The Regional Economic Strategy outlines an ambitious and confident way forward for the Mid South West Region and, indeed, the whole of Northern Ireland. It was an important initiative when work first began on it in 2018 and it's even more important now as the region deals with the economic effects of and recovery from the Coronavirus pandemic.

The strategy has been developed in close consultation with government departments and agencies, Invest Northern Ireland, Tourism Northern Ireland, skills bodies, business representative groups, educational institutions, universities and, crucially, businesses from a wide range of sectors – these contributions have been vital.

The key to its success is putting businesses and our economy at the heart of our plans to ensure that funding support – whether public

or private – is invested in the most responsible and effective manner.

Significant investment will be required to deliver the strategy with a total commitment to date of £252 million towards a Growth Deal from the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. In addition, we intend to pursue other opportunities, such as investment through PEACE PLUS and the Shared Prosperity Fund to name a few.

### The Regional Economic Strategy

The strategy is structured around four intervention pillars:

1. 'Future Proofing' the Skills Base
2. Enabling Infrastructure
3. Boosting Innovation and Digital Capacity
4. Building a High-Performing Tourism Economy

Our interventions will be geared towards delivering exponential and long term benefits including:

- Increasing productivity levels and closing the productivity gap
- Driving business growth
- Protecting our unique sectoral advantages and realising sectoral opportunities
- Creating more, better paid jobs
- Rebalancing the regional economy
- Increasing our global impact and underlining the benefits to the Northern Ireland economy.

### THE 'ECONOMIC ENGINE' OF THE NI ECONOMY

Contributes  
**£7.7bn**  
of GVA

Home to  
**1/3**  
of NI firms

Accounts for  
**1/5**  
of NI economy

Accounts for  
**27%**  
of NI's exports

**1/4**  
of NI population

**90%**  
of local jobs taken  
by residents

**70%**  
more employment in  
advanced manufacturing  
compared to the UK  
average

**214,000**  
workplace-based jobs



### 1. 'Future Proofing' the Skills Base

Future proofing the skills base is becoming ever more important. It's a top priority emerging from our engagements with business. We want to ensure that the requisite skills are available in scale and profile to underpin our region's ambitions and those of our already very successful businesses.

As well as requiring significant financial investment, we are seeking to drive change in four policy areas:

- access to labour/lobbying for a differentiated migration policy
- policy changes to 'Off-the-Shelf' Apprenticeships
- extending the range of Higher-Level Apprenticeships and Degree Apprenticeships available in our region and
- a greater focus on Shared Apprenticeship schemes.



### 2. Enabling Infrastructure

Investment in infrastructure is critical. If we're going to get anywhere we need to have the strategic road infrastructure that enables our businesses to access all areas including ports and distribution points.

We've pinpointed where improvements are needed – the Armagh East Link; the A29 Cookstown bypass, the A4 Enniskillen Southern bypass, as well as the development of the A3 Armagh North & West Link, the A29 Dungannon bypass and the A32 Omagh to Enniskillen.

It's not just roads. Investment must also be targeted at:

- addressing broadband, mobile coverage and reliability
- transforming our high streets to be places of choice for our local communities
- enabling access to available industrial land
- driving investment in electricity supply, and
- supporting opportunities for regeneration and site development.



### 4. Building a High-Performing Tourism Economy

Finally, we want to focus on building a high performing tourism economy. Our region has so much to offer – the Fermanagh Lakes, the Sperrins, our literary heritage, the cultural significance of Ireland's oldest city, Armagh, where Patrick established his first church, the Ulster American Folk Park – and more besides. The recent announcement of the commitment to the Game of Thrones Legacy Project from the private sector is a welcome investment.

We want to invest in the development of our tourism product – including cross-border – in actions that stimulate/de-risk and expedite quality hotel investment as well as improving infrastructure for routing/ signposting and visitor engagement.

However, we know from Tourism NI research that the main barriers to growing our visitor economy are accessibility and connectivity.



### 3. Boosting Innovation and Digital Capacity

Advanced manufacturing is one of our big success stories and it has enormous potential. We're placing our ambitions in this area into the NI-wide 'eco-system' and at the centre of what is being discussed within the City/Growth Deals (i.e. the Advanced Manufacturing Innovation Centre in the Belfast Region City Deal and the Centre for Industrial Digitalisation, Robotics and Automation in Derry/Londonderry City Region). Our ambition is to create an innovation and skills academy delivered by the South West College in Dungannon.

In relation to Agri-food our impact is global. We'll support our colleagues in CAFRE in the development of a Northern Ireland Agri-food Robotics Centre at the Loughry Campus and we'll work in collaboration with AFBI to develop a centre for Agri-Tech Innovation. We will develop Agri-food incubation space to support food development for smaller SMEs, an area that's currently being explored by the Southern Region College.

Then there's the digital tech sector. We need to develop a network of Digi-Hubs to support this sector's growth. In addition to exploring a number of potential health innovation proposals with the Region's two leading and acute teaching hospitals, we're also exploring a new-build Health and Care Centre in Cookstown.

### NEXT STEPS

We've already engaged extensively with our businesses and key sectors, with politicians locally, regionally and nationally, with central government, with education and the wider stakeholder community, and that will continue.

We will also continue to work closely with the other City/Growth Deals to ensure that we complement each other and provide maximum benefit for NI PLC.

We've outlined the scale of our ambition and

the need to support investment to demonstrate significant GVA output.

We will continue to welcome the input and guidance of our industry/business base. We need their continued engagement with this initiative as we move through the next stages in development.

The collaboration of our three councils to develop the Mid South West Regional Economic Strategy is a model of what can be achieved by people working together for the common good. But we don't want it to stop there.

We are living in truly life-changing times. In years to come, people will look back on 2020 and the Coronavirus pandemic and see it as a challenging experience for us all. We want to make it a positive moment in our history – the beginning of something transformative which builds on the Region's creativity and innovation.

This is truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to supercharge the Mid South West economy, to boost prosperity for everyone in Northern Ireland and create the right environment for our powerhouse businesses to thrive.

For more information contact [info@midsouthwestregion.org](mailto:info@midsouthwestregion.org) or [midsouthwestregion.org](http://midsouthwestregion.org) and on Twitter @MSW\_Region