Sustainably Transforming a Regional Economy

The Past
Historically, Northern Ireland as a region has created a significant global impact through the creativity and knowledge of its citizens. Our manufacturing industry spans all four industrial revolutions — from the 19th century, when the Belfast area produced half of the linen output for all of Ireland, to the 21st century, when our aerospace companies provided components for a Mars rover and pre-launch testing services for NASA's James Webb telescope. In between, we developed the pneumatic (inflatable) tire for automobiles; we established a global reputation for marine engineering (Titanic); we invented the portable heart defibrillator, the aircraft ejector seat (which to date has saved more than 7,600 lives), and we gave the world the TV series Game of Thrones. These are just some examples of what we have achieved.

The Present
The Centre for Competitiveness was established by the private sector in partnership with our local government as a not-for-profit, independent membership organization. Our mission is to actively support the development of an internationally competitive regional economy through innovation, productivity, quality excellence, and sustainability. We execute our mission by forging collaborative partnerships with relevant stakeholders.

In 2020, the Council on Competitiveness published a landmark report, Competing in the Next Economy, which highlighted the importance of collaborative networks in achieving the step change in innovation required for the Next Economy. This report helped to inform the publication in May 2021 of the Northern Ireland government's report 10X Economy, outlining a vision for a decade of innovation that will encourage greater collaboration to deliver a ten times better economy with benefits for all citizens. The realisation of this vision will be facilitated by local collaborative networks, which is a key focus for the Centre for Competitiveness in 2022.

We have a successful track record of facilitating such partnerships in the fields of product development (advanced composite materials), digital transformation (Industry 4.0 for manufacturing enterprises), and digitization and decarbonization of energy supply through our Smart Grid Ireland Sustainability Cluster.

We developed and launched an internationally recognized Innovation Assessment framework in collaboration with

"If we are to succeed in competing in the next economy, then we need to embrace the reality that we will only be able to do this through a collaborative partnership approach."
Global Federation of Competitiveness Councils

The Future

In a time of significant global challenges and geopolitical turbulence, we recognize that we need to draw inspiration from our creative heritage to enable us to build the foundations for a sustainable future economy. To that end, in December 2021, the UK government granted formal approval for the Belfast City Region Deal (BCRD). This agreement involves partnerships with different stakeholders, including academia, industry, and local, regional, and national governments. These parties will be responsible for delivering an integrated program of investment that will represent a step-change in inclusive economic growth and productivity. However, like many city regions, the Belfast Region faces a range of barriers to continued economic growth, such as:

- Productivity levels below the UK national average and international competitors;
- Economic inactivity levels are amongst the highest in the UK;
- 16 percent of adults have no qualifications, creating skills shortages and mismatches on the pathway for the future economy; and

- Low levels of regional investment in the drivers of innovation in business and education.

The BRCR initiative will target the development of the following growth sectors:

- Financial, business and professional services
- Agri-food
- Digital and creative technologies
- Advanced manufacturing, materials and engineering
- Life and health sciences
- Tourism
- Construction and materials handling

At the core of the BCRD is a proposal to transform the Belfast Region’s innovation and digital capabilities. This will involve creating global centers of innovation excellence in our priority growth sectors that leverage the research capabilities within our universities through new partnership structures and enhanced digital capability and connectivity to extend their impact across the Belfast Region’s economy. The vision is for an interconnected, innovative, and digital ecosystem in which researchers and businesses are able to work together to test, develop, and apply new technology to improve performance, productivity, and, critically, bring new products and services to market.

One proposed transformative project is the Advanced Manufacturing Innovation Centre (AMIC), which will operate at the interface between academia and industry to accelerate the development of new manufacturing technologies and ensure that real industrial challenges based on market need are solved through collaboration with the best university research. The Centre for Competitiveness will play a fundamental role at the interface by bridging the gap between academic expertise and industry challenges.

A state-of-the-art Factory of the Future is planned as the flagship facility of AMIC, with an ambition to be Northern Ireland’s national center for Advanced Manufacturing. This will provide companies with unprecedented access to the latest manufacturing technologies and professional engineering expertise. Companies will be able to use the Factory of the Future to experiment with advanced manufacturing processes and materials before implementing these in their own factories. It will also allow start-ups to prototype ideas before investing in their own high-end equipment.

AMIC will also work with partners, including colleges and universities, to support the skills needs of the manufacturing industry in Northern Ireland and will deliver programs in executive education and leadership, continuous professional development, apprentice training, and engineering doctorates.

If we are to succeed in competing in the next economy, then we need to embrace the reality that we will only be able to do this through a collaborative partnership approach. The Centre for Competitiveness has, over many years, stimulated this Collaborate/Innovate/Achieve mindset in the organizations that we support. We encourage our clients to adopt a “3-eyes” approach to improving competitiveness: look in (regularly self-assess performance), look out (observe what your customers and suppliers are doing), and look around (monitor what peer companies in your area are doing – can you learn from them?).