



DUBLIN BELFAST ECONOMIC CORRIDOR NOW ON TRACK

Eight local authorities from both sides of the border have launched the Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor to promote investment and co-operation in response to challenges facing the region, which have been identified in a joint report from Dublin City University and Ulster University, writes Grace Heneghan.

In 2018, the eight local authorities located along the Corridor [Dublin City Council, Fingal County Council, Louth County Council and Meath County Council in the south, with Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council, Belfast City Council, Lisburn, Castlereagh City Council, and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council in the north] worked collectively with Dublin City University (DCU) and Ulster University to find ways of realising the potential benefits of further development of the Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor (DBEC).

This led to the establishment of a Partnership Steering Group made up of the chief executives from the eight local authorities and the presidents of the two universities who committed to meeting quarterly.

The Steering Group's immediate objective was to leverage the network's resources in areas, which could have a positive

impact and add significant value to the economic development of the region at a time of great economic and social uncertainty. A working group of local government and university staff was subsequently formed and tasked with developing a series of co-operative initiatives and projects to begin to realise this objective.

The final report '*The Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor: Current Profile, Potential for Recovery & Opportunities for Co-operation*' by DCU and Ulster University contains the output from their collective work over the past three years.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

According to the report, "this an opportune time to create a north-south economic corridor given the challenges the region faces as it comes to terms with the impact of the UK's exit from the EU and the Covid-19 pandemic".

During the recent online launch of the DBEC and the publication of the report, Prof Deiric O'Broin, Dublin City University, and Dr Eoin Magennis from University of Ulster, outlined the opportunities arising from the research and development of the Corridor.

The 100-mile east coast route between Dublin and Belfast is Ireland's most important economic region and boasts the best possible environment for businesses to grow and thrive.

They pointed out that the region has a population in excess of two million people, is younger and more diverse than any other part of Ireland with 15% born off the island. It also has the best educated workforce with 34% of the population holding third

level qualifications, thereby creating an excellent pipeline for concentrations of jobs requiring graduates.

They noted that 125,000 firms are located along the corridor with entrepreneurship and survival rates higher than elsewhere in Ireland, with more people employed in mid-sized and large businesses than anywhere else on the island.

Key sectors include Advanced Manufacturing, ICT, Agri-Food, Professional Services, Financial Services, Constructions and Tourism, while the challenges facing the region in the coming years include adapting to Brexit, climate change and transformation to a low carbon economy, low population density and an ageing population.

PARTNERSHIP AND CO-OPERATION

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Leo Varadkar TD, and Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Darragh O'Brien TD, were joined by Northern Ireland's Minister for Finance, Conor Murphy MLA, at the online launch of the Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor (DBEC) on 24 March. Also in attendance were the chief executives from each of the eight councils, councillors from across the region and as well as members of their senior management teams.

In welcoming the initiative, Owen Keegan, Chief Executive of Dublin City Council, said it is fundamentally about increased partnership and co-operation between participating local authorities in an effort to accelerate economic development along the corridor for the benefit of the communities and citizens.

"A number of factors have contributed to the development of this initiative, such as the enhanced role given to the local authorities to co-operate on cross-border economic development, and we're keen to do more in this space.

"The launch was delayed until there was greater certainty regarding the outcome of Brexit, while the Covid pandemic further delayed matters. However, it has highlighted the potential for remote working, which has further promoted the case for a cross-border corridor approach in the promotion of



The online launch of the Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor on 24 March was hosted by economist, broadcaster and author David McWilliams, pictured here with Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Leo Varadkar TD, and Northern Ireland's Minister for Finance, Conor Murphy MLA.

economic development," he said.

POTENTIAL OF POOLING ASSETS

Reflecting on how Dublin was twinned with Barcelona, Beijing and Nablus in Palestine, Leo Varadkar TD, Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, wondered why Dublin is not twinned with Belfast.

"There should be so much more contact between the two cities and all places along the route. There are real opportunities for further growth and further development. Even when marketing the region as one area internationally, and in fighting for investment, there are two million people and seven universities along the corridor to offer a much stronger proposition to our competitors," the Tánaiste noted.

With partition having caused the interruption of the corridor 100 years ago, Northern Ireland's Minister for Finance, Conor Murphy MLA, noted that attempts had been made ever since to get some synergy back into the relationship between two main cities on the island.

"The potential of pooling those assets between both Dublin and Belfast, the university supports, the infrastructure and population globally in terms of marketing is a hugely important tool, but also domestically in terms of a growth driver

for the island as a whole.

"Let's progress with the machinery for north-south co-operation at local government level and also between the Northern Ireland Executive in Belfast and the Government in Dublin to develop action points, supported with investment and driven forward by both governments and local government. In five years' time we want to see plans such as this one, moving into the implementation phase, and let's start to put timelines on investment that is needed into these plans," Minister Murphy added.

LOCAL AUTHORITY INTERACTION

Local authorities along the Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor are interacting and working with each other on a daily basis and the potential is colossal, in terms of the infrastructural projects we can continue to improve on, noted Darragh O'Brien TD, Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

"The ties between north, south, east and west are effectively unbreakable both socially and economically, so the potential is vast, and is being realised, but we can also go a lot further. For example, our national planning framework 'Project Ireland 2040' recognises this corridor as an area of potential future growth," he added.

DUBLIN BELFAST ECONOMIC CORRIDOR



David McWilliams hosted the panel discussion, which looked at opportunities for co-operation, featuring AnnMarie Farrelly, Chief Executive, Fingal County Council, Niall McEntegart, Facebook (Meath), Margaret Hearty, InterTrade Ireland, Trevor Lockhart, Fane Valley Food Co-operative (Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon) and Prof Daire Keogh, President, Dublin City University.

He said that in real terms to move forward it's necessary to look at both investment and tangible projects, under the Shared Ireland fund, and adding that relations can always be improved upon between north and south, east and west.

"In terms of Brexit, for example, it's an opportunity to re-set the relationship between Britain and Ireland, and north and south to further enhance those relationships."

GLOBALLY SIGNIFICANT CORRIDOR
Suzanne Wylie, Chief Executive of Belfast City Council, said that the opportunity exists now to create this globally significant corridor, which she claimed will create competitive advantage in those key sectors with a real focus in innovation, world leading science and technology, and education skills.

"This corridor will add significant value to what's been happening here already with real success in FDI, but also the investment being made through the Belfast City Regional Deal (co-investment of £1bn by the UK Government, the Northern Ireland Executive and the six councils, some of whom sit along this corridor). This investment will go into R&D hubs building our digital capabilities

and more tourist attractions and additional infrastructure."

She pointed to other international corridors as examples of success stories, such as Northern Powerhouse (UK Government's vision for a globally-competitive northern economy), Malmö-Copenhagen Tech Region (a Swedish-Danish technology hub), Brainport Eindhoven (technology region in the Netherlands), and the UK's Oxford-Cambridge Arc (a scientific research area between Oxford, Milton Keynes and Cambridge).

"Discussions have taken place since 1992 between many mayors, politicians, business leaders and organisations on both sides, who have been real advocates of this corridor for many years. Let's not waste this opportunity to create a globally significant corridor which will create competitive advantage in the key sectors with a real focus on innovation, world-leading science and technology, and educational skills," she noted.

OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNANCE
Following the launch of the Dublin Business Economic Corridor, the next step will be to establish working governance structures to balance oversight and day-to-

day activity.

An Oversight and Governance Board will comprise of 24 councillors, three from each council, and they will elect a chair and develop a programme of works at their first meeting.

Meath County Council's Cathaoirleach Cllr David Gilroy (one of three councillors to represent Meath County Council on the Oversight and Governance Board), pointed to an awareness among all those involved in the Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor Project that developing a strong ethos of co-operation will require time, energy and support. "However, this co-operation will in time deliver tangible economic, social and environmental benefits for our communities, our counties and the region as a whole," he added.

And Meath County Council's Chief Executive Jackie Maguire has claimed that "opportunities exist to grow indigenous business, establish clusters of key sectors, foster collaboration and innovation and use the Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor as the driving force for future sustainable economic development in the wider region."

The following eight local authorities from both sides of the border launched the Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor:

- Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council
- Belfast City Council
- Dublin City Council
- Fingal County Council
- Lisburn Castlereagh City Council
- Louth County Council
- Meath County Council
- Newry, Mourne and Down District Council



For further information on DBEC visit www.dbec.info