

An infrastructure advisory body for Northern Ireland

Executive summary

Northern Ireland's (NI) ability to be globally competitive and to sustain its own economy depends on reliable and resilient infrastructure networks.¹

However, there are several issues with regard to infrastructure provision in NI, notably capacity in water and energy networks and a legacy of underinvestment. Additionally, NI is behind GB when it comes to introducing policies to tackle climate change – a pressing need with a 2050 target to reach net-zero emissions.²

It is well established that infrastructure plays a role in boosting the economy and helping communities to flourish, while also addressing challenges such as climate change and social inequality. Continued investment in infrastructure is needed to meet these challenges, and to provide essential services and support economic activity, yet governments are constrained by limited finances, which can inhibit progress.

The articulation of clear strategic need and infrastructure options that meet a national vision will enable confidence to grow among infrastructure owners, both in the public and private sectors, as well as investors, infrastructure financiers and the wider supply chain. YouGov polling conducted on behalf of ICE found that 84% of NI adults agreed that NI requires a national strategy for its infrastructure, while 86% believed that decisions on NI's infrastructure requirements should be informed by an independent advisory body made up of industry experts.³

ICE considers that there is a pressing need for the Executive to develop an infrastructure strategy and investment plan that will prioritise investment over a long time period in the areas of water, waste, energy, transport and communications, including mobile coverage and broadband.

ICE considers that this is best facilitated by establishing a panel of independent experts in the form of an advisory body to audit existing assets and determine what infrastructure requirements will be required to allow NI to improve its economic competitiveness and the wellbeing of its population while meeting its environmental ambitions. This model has been successfully used in other countries, which we explore further in this paper.

Recommendations

- The Executive should articulate a clear vision for NI and establish an independent infrastructure advisory body to provide advice and recommendations on how best to prioritise long-term investment in NI's infrastructure.
- The advice provided must be evidence based and long term in nature, recognising demographic challenges, including population projections as well as urban and rural needs, climate change, existing infrastructure

¹ ICE (2016) [ICE Northern Ireland Manifesto 2016: Building our Quality of Life](#)

² Committee on Climate Change (2019) [Reducing Emissions in Northern Ireland](#)

³ YouGov (2020). Total sample size was 502 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken 10–13 March 2020. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all NI adults (aged 18+).

asset condition and performance, cross-border collaboration, technological trends and productivity in the region. This advice should take a whole-life-benefits approach and be framed within a systems context.

- The advisory body should report to the Executive and suitable governance arrangements should be established that allow an independent advisory body to undertake long-term holistic needs assessments, updated on a rolling five-year basis. The Executive, in response, should establish and regularly update an infrastructure strategy for NI.

What benefits will an independent infrastructure advisory body bring?

Good-practice approaches to the criteria and principles for investment prioritisation are those that take into consideration a full range of infrastructure demand drivers; in other words, they are both evidence led and strategic.

Infrastructure need is not simply a question of numbers. It is not even about the increasingly interdependent networks of buildings and transport, water, waste, energy and communications assets. What matters is that people can access the services and outcomes made possible by infrastructure. New communication links open up economic opportunities for whole populations, while electrification of transport systems will be central to bringing down global emissions of greenhouse gases and avoiding the most damaging impacts of climate change.

The discipline of strategic infrastructure planning is moving quickly, with new learning emerging all the time. ICE's Enabling Better Infrastructure programme, launched in December 2019, aims to capture and share these lessons for the betterment of society.⁴

The programme outlines that converting infrastructure aspirations into fully functioning, sustainable infrastructure networks is not easy. Lengthy project life cycles mean that decision-makers must deal with very high levels of uncertainty. Short-term political considerations can exert too great an influence, and there can be an over-reliance on narrow, sectoral plans at the expense of cross-network integration. Inflexible or underdeveloped legal and regulatory frameworks can hinder rather than enable progress, as does a lack of reliable data.

Governments globally have been exploring ways to ensure they can secure the greatest long-term social, economic and environmental value out of their infrastructure investments. Primarily, this has focused on assessing needs, setting a national vision and objectives, creating an infrastructure strategy, and prioritising investments and policy interventions.⁵

By putting in place an entity that can gather evidence, consider options and identify a clear rationale for infrastructure projects in line with NI's ambitions, the Executive will be able to obtain better value from its infrastructure investments.

Building an evidence base

The data gathered should focus on demographics, including population projections as well as urban and rural needs, climate change, existing infrastructure asset condition and performance, technological trends and productivity. Together with suitable governance arrangements being established, this allows a holistic needs assessment to be conducted, evaluating the options available to a government to meet its ambitions within an agreed financial envelope. By making this

⁴ ICE (2019) [Enabling Better Infrastructure](#)

⁵ Ibid

evidence base widely available, a range of stakeholders and the public can better understand the options for infrastructure.⁶

Some 93% of NI adults believe that decisions on NI's infrastructure should consider all available evidence (such as data and research on population, technological changes, etc.), while only 17% agree with the statement that previous infrastructure decisions have been made on the basis of strong evidence.⁷

Investing in infrastructure inevitably has long lead-in times, but this investment does not always have to be new projects – improving the efficiency of existing assets through maintenance and improvements, or by repurposing them, can often be a more cost-effective and preferred option, which an independent body will be able to identify.⁸

Impartiality and long-termism

An infrastructure advisory body can help manage competing needs for departmental funding. This will help the Executive navigate spending rounds, feeding its evidence into an overall strategy that best serves the region's long-term needs.

Building a resilient infrastructure system requires forethought, planning and buy-in from the public and private sectors, and, importantly, the general public themselves. As noted later in the paper, a number of capacity constraints in NI's infrastructure have become particularly acute in recent years and this will continue unless strategic action is taken to alleviate them. Short-term investment in these assets, while clearly vital, is essentially a sticking plaster, with constraints likely to manifest in the future unless a long-term investment and maintenance approach is taken.

As noted earlier in this paper, in YouGov polling conducted on behalf of ICE, 84% of NI adults agreed that NI requires a national strategy for its infrastructure (i.e. a long-term plan based on evidence that prioritises investment in its infrastructure). Furthermore, 91% believed decisions on NI's infrastructure should be long-term and planned to go beyond election cycles, while 86% believed those decisions should be informed by an independent advisory body made up of industry experts.⁹

A longer-term infrastructure strategy and investment plan will have an important role in helping NI improve its economic competitiveness. By bringing together a multitude of views and a wealth of data, an independent infrastructure advisory body will be able to consider all available evidence and be able to make robust recommendations on future infrastructure provision, prioritisation and delivery on a cross-sectoral basis that can cut across political cycles.

A holistic approach

Infrastructure sectors should not be viewed in isolation, particularly when the interdependencies between them become clear. For example, NI Water is the region's biggest consumer of electricity and also one of the largest landowners.¹⁰

Cross-sector evaluation and assessment are important given the inherent interdependencies between many of the core economic infrastructure sectors. ICE's National Needs Assessment sets out a number of these interdependencies, all of which apply in a NI context.¹¹ They include:

- the electrification of heat and transport to meet carbon-reduction targets
- the impact of the digitisation of communications on electricity demand
- growing demand for water from the energy sector for cooling

⁶ ICE (2016) [National Needs Assessment](#)

⁷ YouGov (2020)

⁸ ICE (2016) [National Needs Assessment](#)

⁹ YouGov (2020)

¹⁰ NI Water (2019) [Draft Strategy 2021–2046](#)

¹¹ ICE (2016) [National Needs Assessment](#)

- the relationship between core economic infrastructure and housing demand
- flood-risk mitigation as a form of demand management for wastewater.

In order to effectively plan infrastructure provision across NI, these key interdependencies need consideration in formulating a long-term infrastructure strategy for the region.

The island of Ireland itself displays features which create a number of infrastructure-related challenges and opportunities. For example, the subsidised water system across parts of the island, a continued dependence on fossil fuels for home heating, and the all-island Integrated Single Electricity Market (I-SEM), which means energy policy must enable an efficient, interconnected energy market to operate.

There is, then, a clear need to plan for infrastructure in an evidence-based and collaborative manner, particularly with regards to technology, climate change, demographics and cross-border cooperation. Within this context, existing infrastructure also needs to be maintained and upgraded to cope with changes in demand.

Infrastructure demand drivers

Economic context

As far back as 2014, ICE identified that elements of NI's infrastructure were at capacity and decisions needed to be taken quickly to improve and enhance infrastructure performance.¹² In YouGov polling conducted on behalf of ICE in 2020, only 11% of NI adults agreed that the level of investment in NI's infrastructure over the last ten years (i.e. since 2010) has been adequate for the region's needs and growth.¹³

The Institute of Directors estimates that political stasis over recent years has paused or slowed down up to £2 billion worth of projects since January 2017.¹⁴ In a 2019 survey of the construction sector in the region, conducted by the Construction Employers Federation (CEF), 60% of firms stated they had put off growth plans as a result of the Stormont impasse.¹⁵ With the Executive now restored, these issues can start to be relieved.

AECOM, in its 2020 industry spotlight on NI, stated that the political uncertainty over the past few years had held back investment in private capital projects, but that the volume of public sector work still coming to market had been positive. Indeed, infrastructure investment in NI grew strongly throughout 2019 and was 27.6% higher than in 2018.¹⁶

Both capital investment and long-term maintenance spending are key components in ensuring NI's citizens and businesses have access to high-performance and reliable infrastructure networks.

¹² ICE (2014) [The State of the Nation Northern Ireland: Infrastructure 2014](#)

¹³ YouGov (2020)

¹⁴ Belfast Telegraph (2018) [Northern Ireland Business Chief's Fears over £2bn Infrastructure Projects Stuck in Limbo by Lack of Executive](#)

¹⁵ CEF (2019) [Growing Fears of Local Construction Recession, Say Firms](#)

¹⁶ AECOM (2020) [Industry Outlook Northern Ireland](#)

Demographics

NI's population is currently projected to reach 1.946 million by 2023, with a marked increase in the size of the population at older ages.¹⁷ One in five people of working age currently live with a disability¹⁸ and the population has seen a 30.8% increase in the 85-and-over age group in the last decade.¹⁹

Demographic and social changes are fundamental to influencing the location and informing the capacity needs of key transport networks, while technological innovation is more likely to facilitate their optimum performance. An infrastructure advisory body able to be sensitive to these interdependencies is more likely to deliver an inclusive and low-carbon economy.

While NI has a large rural population that in itself presents different demand drivers, population increases in key urban regions will place upward pressures on utilities and transport networks. With economic growth, demand for infrastructure will increase – the public and businesses will consume more energy, travel more and demand better digital communication networks. Indeed, a recent survey of construction professionals in the region highlighted growing concern that increased economic activity is beginning to place a strain on current infrastructure, particularly in Belfast.²⁰

Climate change mitigation and resilience

The Committee on Climate Change (CCC) has warned that NI is falling behind GB when it comes to introducing policies to tackle climate change.²¹ While agriculture accounts for a large portion of NI's emissions, infrastructure sectors such as transport, power and heating must have policies put in place if the UK's wider net-zero target is to be achieved.

An additional driver for any advisory body to consider is resilience. Demographic changes (including population growth and an ageing population), long-term environmental impacts and increased risk of extreme weather events brought about by climate change will place unprecedented demands on NI's core infrastructure networks.²² Rainfall increases or more extreme rainfall events could cause increased water volumes in NI's wastewater network, for example, leading to environmental health and flooding problems.²³

In polling conducted by YouGov on behalf of ICE, 81% of NI adults agreed that successfully achieving climate-change targets in NI through infrastructure investment will require a long-term strategy.²⁴

Challenges to address

NI has the most wide-ranging set of devolved infrastructure-related powers of any of the devolved administrations.²⁵ This is important, as effective policies implemented by the Executive can deliver on long-term ambitions and strategic objectives.

¹⁷ Department for Regional Development (2010) [Regional Development Strategy 2035](#)

¹⁸ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) (2019) [Quarterly Labour Force Survey Tables – November 2019](#)

¹⁹ NISRA (2019) [Estimates of the Population Aged 85 and Over, Northern Ireland, 2018](#)

²⁰ AECOM (2020) [Industry Outlook Northern Ireland](#)

²¹ Committee on Climate Change (2019) [Reducing Emissions in Northern Ireland](#)

²² Ibid

²³ Scotland and Northern Ireland Forum for Environmental Research (2007) [Preparing for a Changing Climate in Northern Ireland](#)

²⁴ YouGov (2020)

²⁵ Northern Ireland Office (2019) [Devolution Settlement: Northern Ireland](#)

There are, however, several prominent issues in infrastructure provision in NI – both immediate and long-term – that must be addressed.

Energy

Encouragingly, NI exceeded its 2020 target for 40% of power to be generated by renewables a year ahead of schedule.²⁶ Increasing deployment of renewable generation and addressing power storage issues will further reduce reliance on fossil fuels and go some way to addressing security of supply concerns. However, it has been identified that NI currently has limited routes to market for low-cost renewables, reducing the ability of the region to scale-up renewable electricity generation.²⁷

The gas network in NI is limited in its coverage, with around three-quarters of homes heated by oil or electric sources.²⁸ In addition, an estimated 18% of all households in NI were classified as fuel poor in 2018, with those reliant on oil-fired boilers also vulnerable to oil price instability.²⁹ While the expansion of the gas network has progressed in recent years,³⁰ the number of homes still heated by oil-fired boilers presents a significant challenge, but also an opportunity, in terms of decarbonisation. Future policy decisions should include options which have the potential to cut householders' costs, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and improve quality of life. The region's current energy situation presents a unique chance for some households and communities to avoid the need to connect to the gas grid altogether and transfer from oil to green energy, while prioritising energy efficiency.

Water and wastewater

There are fundamental issues with NI's water infrastructure. NI Water, a non-departmental public body, is declining new connections in areas where treatment works fail to meet compliance and capacity, and where the ageing water network is unable to cope with new homes.³¹

In August 2019, NI Water identified 72 wastewater systems at or near full capacity, with Belfast itself predicted to reach full capacity in April 2021.³² NI Water has also warned that half of the region's larger treatment plants will reach full capacity by 2027.³³

This is affecting not just the infrastructure network, but also the region's ability to house its population, identify and develop land for economic development, and create new communities. Belfast City Council, for example, aspires to increase city centre living to 70,000 people and develop an additional 37,000 new homes in the period to 2035.³⁴ Without the necessary infrastructure in place, these ambitions risk being severely curtailed, affecting the economic prosperity of the region.³⁵ Indeed, ICE's National Needs Assessment identified that £750 million of investment will be required between 2020 and 2026 to address wastewater capacity and water-quality issues around Belfast alone.³⁶

²⁶ Department for the Economy (2019) [40 Per Cent Electricity Consumption from Renewable Sources by 2020 Achieved Ahead of Schedule](#)

²⁷ Committee on Climate Change (2019) [Reducing Emissions in Northern Ireland](#)

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Northern Ireland Housing Executive (2019) [Estimates of Fuel Poverty in Northern Ireland in 2017 and 2018](#)

³⁰ Utility Regulator (2019) [Annual Report 2018–2019](#)

³¹ NI Water (2018) [Funding Restraints Curb Development](#)

³² NI Water (2019) [Wastewater Areas At or Near Capacity, August 2019](#)

³³ Belfast Telegraph (2020) [NI Water Warns Half Northern Ireland Treatment Plants Will Reach Full Capacity by 2027](#)

³⁴ Belfast City Council (2019) [Belfast Agenda](#)

³⁵ Agenda NI (2019) [No Drains, No Cranes: Enabling the Development that Northern Ireland Needs](#)

³⁶ ICE (2016) [National Needs Assessment](#)

The recently agreed New Decade, New Approach deal that restored the Executive saw commitments to ‘invest urgently in wastewater infrastructure’.³⁷ While this is a positive step and recognises a critical issue, long-term strategic investment is required to fully ensure NI’s water and wastewater infrastructure is resilient long into the future.

Transport

NI’s road network was estimated to have a net worth of £32 billion in 2016.³⁸ However, the impact of years of underinvestment, combined with increases in the weight and volume of traffic, has taken its toll, especially on minor rural roads. In 2016, ICE estimated that the ongoing deterioration of the network and a growing backlog of maintenance exceeded £1 billion.³⁹

In the period between 2015 and 2019, the number of passenger journeys on NI’s public transport networks increased by over 4.5 million.⁴⁰ This increase occurred in the context of NI receiving the lowest amount of funding for public transport (£84 per person) compared to England, Scotland and Wales.⁴¹

NI’s relatively small geographic size presents an opportunity for more rapid uptake of electric vehicles compared to other regions, primarily as consumers will have fewer concerns about range anxiety. However, this does come with challenges, including availability of charging infrastructure in rural areas and the need for common charging infrastructure across the entirety of Ireland.⁴²

Waste

ICE has previously called for leadership and focused policies based on scientific data in order to efficiently manage NI’s waste infrastructure.⁴³ Energy from Waste (EfW) facilities can help meet the region’s waste management needs, not only negating the cost of exporting waste, but also contributing to a more circular economy and creating economic activity.⁴⁴

Digital

NI lags behind GB when measured on key broadband and connectivity indicators.⁴⁵ Long-lasting underinvestment in digital connectivity has resulted in a rural-urban divide – in 2019 there were 44,000 homes, some 6% of the total number, that did not have access to minimum broadband speeds of 10Mbps, 41,000 of which were in rural areas.⁴⁶ In terms of 4G coverage, outdoor services are available across 75% of NI’s landmass, which again lags behind GB.⁴⁷

However, there are some reasons for optimism. Recent investment means NI compares favourably to GB when it comes to full-fibre broadband connections – 232,000 homes in 2019 (31% of the total) had access to full fibre, compared to 10% on average across GB.⁴⁸ This upward trajectory must continue, particularly with regard to the next stage of network deployment aimed at meeting future needs to support economic growth, such as wider full-fibre roll-out and 5G coverage.

³⁷ Northern Ireland Office & Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2020) [New Decade, New Approach](#)

³⁸ ICE (2016) [ICE Northern Ireland Manifesto 2016: Building our Quality of Life](#)

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Grant Thornton (2019) Economic Impact of Public Transport in Northern Ireland

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Committee on Climate Change (2019) [Reducing Emissions in Northern Ireland](#)

⁴³ ICE (2016) [National Needs Assessment](#)

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Federation of Small Businesses (2019) [Lost Connection](#)

⁴⁶ Ofcom (2019) [Connected Nations 2019 – Northern Ireland Report](#)

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid

Funding

Concerns have been raised over how future infrastructure will be funded, notably in a post-Brexit environment.⁴⁹ These issues will no doubt be compounded in a post-Covid-19 environment. NI infrastructure projects have benefited from low-interest loans from the European Investment Bank (EIB), including the M1 Westlink and the M2 motorway.⁵⁰ ICE has previously called for alternative funding sources, such as a UK Investment Bank, to replace the EIB.⁵¹

NI currently relies heavily on the funding provided by the UK Government, via the Block Grant, to pay for infrastructure. While it is likely that this will remain the case, there is no doubt potential to explore what alternative and innovative finance and funding mechanisms are available to the region.

The aforementioned wastewater capacity issues are exacerbated by NI Water's inability to borrow from non-government sources or charge domestic customers to fund improvements, relying instead on non-domestic water charges and subsidies and borrowing from the Department for Infrastructure to fund its infrastructural programme.⁵² There are serious questions to address around the future funding regime for some infrastructure sectors if necessary upgrades are to take place.

What structure and remit should an independent infrastructure advisory body have?

There are two ways to consider any infrastructure advisory body. One is delivery-plan based, identifying investments and projects to build and maintain to achieve the country's social, economic and environmental aims. The other is an options-based approach. This is often the preferred approach taken by governments worldwide, establishing a body that provides evidence-based recommendations to develop a national vision and assess infrastructure needs, providing the basis for the government to form a robust and deliverable strategy.

Any such advisory body will require a set of guiding principles to be in place to steer advice along those lines, acting as a foundation for evidence-based information to be communicated. Independent advisory bodies that provide impartial information on infrastructure decisions assist in easing tensions between spending priorities, setting out full objectives and project appraisal on a consistent basis.

Learning from others

A variety of approaches, both strategic and less so, are taken around the world to evaluate and assess infrastructure need.

In England and for non-devolved UK infrastructure policy, the National Infrastructure Commission (NIC) publishes evidence-led, impartial and expert advice to the government in the form of its National Infrastructure Assessment (NIA).⁵³ The NIC is required to publish the NIA once every Parliament, while it also undertakes specific studies on pressing

⁴⁹ Ulster University (2018) [Brexit and Northern Ireland's Infrastructure](#)

⁵⁰ Northern Ireland Assembly (2014) [European Investment Bank – Potential Financial Assistance Opportunities for Northern Ireland](#)

⁵¹ ICE (2019) [What Should be in the National Infrastructure Strategy?](#)

⁵² Deloitte (2019) [The State of the State 2018–19 Northern Ireland](#)

⁵³ National Infrastructure Commission (2018) [National Infrastructure Assessment](#)

infrastructure challenges as set by the government. Scotland and Wales have their own respective commissions that operate on a similar basis.⁵⁴

The Republic of Ireland's National Development Plan 2018–2027, part of Project Ireland 2040, sets out strategic infrastructure priorities, learning from past National Development Plans and setting investment outcomes in the context of long-term growth, development and sustainability.⁵⁵ While the plan has not been informed by an independent infrastructure advisory body, it is fully integrated with the National Planning Framework, ensuring spatial planning and infrastructure investment are aligned.

Infrastructure Australia's Infrastructure Plan is an example of a strategic, needs-based approach.⁵⁶ Infrastructure Australia (IA) was created to address an inconsistent approach to planning infrastructure and its necessary investment. Prior to its establishment, attention was focused at the level of individual projects, without an adequate assessment of need or defining infrastructural problems from a national perspective.

IA provides long-term and strategic advice on the prioritisation of nationally significant infrastructure projects. In 2016, this culminated in the publication of the Australian Infrastructure Plan, which set out priorities and investable opportunities on a 15-year horizon.⁵⁷ Infrastructure New Zealand operates in a similar manner, publishing its Thirty Year New Zealand Infrastructure Plan in 2015.⁵⁸ Each sets out a range of strategic drivers that are critical within the context of investment prioritisation, such as population growth and changing demographic profiles, climate-change mitigation, adaptation and resilience, innovation and low-carbon policies, economic considerations and the depreciation of capital stocks. The Armit Review of long-term infrastructure planning found that IA had notable success in promoting a more evidence-based approach to appraising infrastructure projects.⁵⁹ ICE's Enabling Better Infrastructure report revealed that independent infrastructure bodies are becoming increasingly prevalent globally, though they must be designed to function within the political system they operate in and have a clear mandate and remit.⁶⁰

Remit and cost

It is important for the government to set the remit of an advisory body at an early stage in order to better focus its attention and meet a national vision. While economic infrastructure – water, waste, energy, transport and communication – will naturally be included within the remit, there are questions about the role of social infrastructure. Indeed, the recently formed Infrastructure Commission for Scotland (ICS) includes housing, healthcare and education within its remit, as per the Scottish Government's definition of infrastructure.⁶¹

A clear remit outlining exactly what an independent infrastructure body is there to do can help achieve both political consensus and public understanding about its role. Additionally, establishing what the body is not able to do can have a similar effect and avoid situations where the body may go beyond its original focus.⁶²

Another consideration for an independent advisory body is the cost. The Armit Review, looking at the examples of IA and the UK's Office for Budget Responsibility and Committee on Climate Change, found that the resources of an independent body can be relatively streamlined if evidence is drawn from existing bodies and departments, and if the government

⁵⁴ [Infrastructure Commission for Scotland](#) (2020); [National Infrastructure Commission for Wales](#) (2020)

⁵⁵ Government of Ireland (2018) [National Development Plan 2018–2027](#)

⁵⁶ Infrastructure Australia (2016) [Australian Infrastructure Plan 2016](#)

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Infrastructure New Zealand (2015) [The Thirty Year New Zealand Infrastructure Plan](#)

⁵⁹ Sir John Armit (2013) [The Armit Review](#)

⁶⁰ ICE (2019) [Enabling Better Infrastructure](#)

⁶¹ Infrastructure Commission for Scotland (2019) [Importance of Infrastructure](#)

⁶² Sir John Armit (2013) [The Armit Review](#)

machine is effectively coordinated to produce the evidence base.⁶³ Five years after its establishment, IA – which covers the whole of Australia – was supported by a relatively small secretariat of ten people.⁶⁴

Lessons can be learnt from bodies in similarly sized countries, including how they have been paid for and appropriately resourced. Notably, the ICS utilises secondments for its secretariat of three people, while its ten commissioners are not paid a fee for their involvement.⁶⁵ The running costs associated with the ICS include travel and subsistence expenses for commissioners, a budget for research, and secretariat costs. The non-staff running costs of the ICS are estimated to be between £150,000 and £200,000 in 2019/20.⁶⁶

Interactions with existing NI government functions

In 2010, the Executive developed its Regional Development Strategy 2035, a spatial strategy for the region.⁶⁷ This is a long-term plan that aims to ensure all areas in NI benefit from economic growth and investment, but it has not been updated or reviewed in almost a decade. The strategy is not a masterplan or fixed blueprint, instead providing a framework that establishes the strategic context for where development should happen. Infrastructure does form part of the strategy, notably at a spatial level, but the strategy does not provide policy options or evidence-based recommendations as to the types of infrastructure needed.

The Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011–21 (ISNI) sets out the forward programme for investment in NI's public services, including its infrastructure.⁶⁸ It establishes a framework for this investment and identifies priority areas, intended to assist the government and the private-sector partners to plan ahead to deliver the region's investment programme. While the current document plans ahead to 2021, the investment allocation was only established to 2014/15, with the next six years then using an indicative allocation model based on assumed increases in the Block Grant.

Developing and maintaining ISNI is one of the Strategic Investment Board's (SIB) core responsibilities. The primary objective of SIB is to set out a clear framework for investment in major capital projects in order to assist in their planning, financing, procurement and delivery. While the exact relationships are yet to be determined between an infrastructure strategy for the region, ISNI, the SIB and the Regional Development Strategy, it is important that they are informed by independent evidence from an infrastructure advisory body.

In order for NI to achieve greater economic competitiveness, improve the wellbeing of its population and meet environmental ambitions, ICE recommends that the Executive should establish an independent infrastructure advisory body to provide advice and recommendations on how best to prioritise long-term investment in NI's infrastructure. The next Programme for Government should be reinforced by this approach, aligning investment with long-term inclusive economic growth and low-carbon objectives.

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Infrastructure Commission for Scotland (2019) [Secretariat](#); Scottish Government (2019) [Infrastructure Commission Associated Setting Up and Running Costs: FOI Release](#)

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Department for Regional Development (2010) [Regional Development Strategy 2035](#)

⁶⁸ ISNI (2012) [Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011–21](#)

About ICE Northern Ireland

ICE Northern Ireland represents around 2,200 civil engineers working and living in the region. ICE NI helps influence infrastructure policy, exchanges knowledge and best practice and promotes the civil engineering profession.

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