

INVEST NORTHERN IRELAND BOARD MINUTES 2026

January 22, 2026

**TWO HUNDRED AND THIRTY SECOND MEETING OF THE
INVEST NORTHERN IRELAND BOARD, 22 JANUARY 2026
MEETING HELD AT INVEST NI HEADQUARTERS, BELFAST**

Present:

Invest NI Board

John Healy (Chair)

Melanie Dawson

Patrick O’Gorman (On Teams)

Scott Ritchie

Dawn McLaughlin

Dominic Darby (On Teams)

Marie-Therese McGivern

Julie-Ann O’Hare

Ciaran Mulgrew

In Attendance: Alison Currie, Anne Beggs, Kathryn Hill.

Minute Taker: Wendy Savage

The Board meeting commenced at 10:12.

The Chair welcomed Michelle Scott, DfE, as an observer at today’s meeting.

The Chair also welcomed Alison Currie to her first Board meeting, since very recently taking up her role as Chief Development Officer.

The Chair suggested that now the recruitment of the Executive Team is complete, there should be enhanced communications to reflect the organisational changes, which in turn should strengthen engagement with our partners, clients and stakeholders.

BOARD STANDING ITEMS

APOLOGIES

Apologies received from Colin Coffey, Michael McQuillan and Kieran Donoghue.

i. DECLARATION OF CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

It was confirmed that there were no conflicts with any of today’s Agenda items. All members

Registers of Interest were confirmed as being up to date.

ii. RAISING CONCERNS

The Chair reminded Board members of their obligations under the Raising Concerns policy and procedures.

1. MINUTES

The minutes of the November 2025 Board meeting were agreed and will be published online.

2. ACTIONS & UPDATES

Wendy Savage updated the meeting on the Actions list, and the following was noted:

Action 146: Data Centre Strategy: CEO to provide an update, outlining Invest NI's position with respect to Data Centres. This has been deferred to the February 2026 meeting.

Action 153: North West Region Deep Dive: ExCo to consider and a date is to be confirmed.

Action 158: Streamlining of Casework: Currently being explored and will be shared when an example is ready. Scheduled for update by April 2026.

Action 159: Entrepreneurship: Update to be provided to the Board. Tentatively scheduled for February 2026.

Action 160: LEP Update: CEO to discuss next steps with DfE Permanent Secretary. Board has also requested a "State of the Nation" report from Invest NI Heads of Region. Timing to be confirmed.

The Chair asked that any slippages in Action due dates should be carefully considered and monitored.

3. CASEWORK FOR APPROVAL

Julie-Ann O'Hare, BFC Chair, brought forward recommendations to the Board for approval of two projects and one thematic business case. After discussions on the three proposals, they were approved by the Board.

The Chair asked that the Business Funding Committee (BFC) consider, in conjunction with the Economics Team, how the thematic business cases are grouped, for example, should all offerings under the Innovation theme be considered together?

4. COMMITTEE CHAIR UPDATES

Due to time constraints, this agenda item is to be scheduled for a future Board meeting.

5. INDEPENDENT REVIEW ACTION PLAN – SKILLS UPDATE

Graeme Wilkinson, Head of Skills in Industry, DfE and James McEvoy, Project Management Office, Invest NI joined the meeting at 10:43.

Graeme provided an update on skills-related actions and wider reforms. Key areas covered included:

- Progress on the Skills Action Plan and implementation of recommendations from the Lyons Review.
- Movement towards sector-based approaches and closer alignment with Invest NI.
- Challenges relating to duplication across the wider skills system.
- The need for strengthened employer engagement, modernised curricula, and coherent regional delivery.

Members emphasised:

- The strategic importance of skills to investment and indigenous business growth.
- The need to standardise language relating to the integration of the Lyons Review into the Skills Action Plan and the monitoring role of the Internal Oversight Group (IOG), to ensure accurate external and internal communications
- The need for clear governance and communications around skills responsibilities.
- The importance of addressing future-skills demands (e.g., automation, AI, apprenticeships).

Graeme left the meeting at 11:04.

6. IMPLEMENTATION OF INDEPENDENT REVIEW ACTION PLAN – PROGRESS UPDATE

James provided an update on progress against the Action Plan. The majority of actions have now been completed, with only four remaining open at the time of reporting. Of these, three

were confirmed as on track for completion by April, with work continuing in line with agreed timelines.

Members were advised that delivery of the Action Plan continues to be overseen through established assurance arrangements. James highlighted that this ongoing engagement is supporting readiness for forthcoming audit activity and helping to embed strengthened governance and control arrangements across the organisation.

During discussion, members emphasised the importance of ensuring that the outcomes are clearly communicated internally, so that staff understand both the changes implemented and the improvements achieved. The Board noted that visibility of progress and lessons learned would be important in demonstrating sustained compliance beyond formal closure of the Action Plan.

James left the meeting at 11:11.

OPERATIONAL ITEMS

7. FINANCE REPORT TO BOARD

Kathryn Hill provided a brief update to supplement the Finance Report to the Board.

The Board noted the Finance Report and discussed the organisation's financial position. Members noted that the organisation is forecasting a position close to break-even for the current year, with financial pressures being actively monitored. The Board acknowledged the actions in place to maintain financial control and manage emerging risks.

Discussion focused on the challenging financial outlook for future years, recognising constraints arising from flat or reducing budgets and a high level of committed expenditure. Members emphasised the importance of continued prioritisation of activity, alignment of resources with strategic objectives, and early engagement with the Department on emerging pressures.

The Board highlighted the need to maintain market confidence, noting the importance of

clear and consistent communication with stakeholders in a constrained funding environment.

8. CEO REPORT TO BOARD

The CEO Report was taken as read.

Discussion focused on regional performance and perceptions of delivery, particularly in relation to the Northwest. Members acknowledged ongoing external scrutiny regarding investment levels in the region and emphasised the importance of clearly articulating both activity and impact, rather than relying solely on headline investment figures.

The Executive team advised that enquiry levels and engagement activity in the Northwest are increasing, and that work is underway to strengthen regional leadership and deepen engagement with local stakeholders. Members highlighted the need for improved communications and storytelling across all regions, including the use of case studies and clearer narratives, to ensure that regional delivery and outcomes are better understood by stakeholders and partners.

The Board agreed that maintaining a consistent and evidence-based regional narrative will be important in reinforcing confidence, supporting accountability, and demonstrating Invest NI's contribution to balanced economic growth across all of Northern Ireland.

SPECIFIC ITEMS

9. EPIC FUTURES – NI OVERVIEW

Professor Kristel Miller and Professor Martin McCracken joined the meeting at 11:32.

The Board received a detailed presentation including an overview of research underway to better understand and address Northern Ireland's persistently high levels of economic inactivity. Epic Futures NI, funded by UKRI, aims to build an evidence base and develop practical interventions to support inclusive employment.

Epic Futures has funded a wide portfolio of research, including studies on:

- supported employment for people with disabilities
- women's economic inactivity and childcare barriers
- experiences of young people transitioning into work
- the effects of conflict on employment outcomes
- and employer perspectives on inclusive recruitment

Reports from the first phase of research are nearing completion, with further outputs expected throughout the year.

Board members welcomed the research and discussed several issues:

- the role of the education system, particularly careers guidance, in preventing future economic inactivity
- the need to understand the "grey economy"
- cross-border discrepancies between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland's inactivity rates, and the contribution of differing welfare supports
- opportunities to link findings to Invest NI's future productivity and skills work, especially in emerging sectors such as green technologies and automation

Members also emphasised the potential value of incentivising employers to recruit and develop economically inactive individuals, drawing comparisons with more generous employer supports available in the Republic of Ireland.

Epic Futures will release a series of evidence reports and demonstration tools from March onwards. The Board requested continued visibility of emerging findings, particularly where they relate to employer engagement, skills development and regional labour-market challenges. Epic Futures offered to share forthcoming publications and involve Invest NI in future events.

Kristel and Martin left the meeting at 12:39.

PAPER TO NOTE

10. LESSONS LEARNED

The Board noted the contents of the paper and the need for:

- The need for casework papers to be internally authored and synthesised, rather than relying primarily on verbatim consultant outputs, to improve clarity and relevance.
- Clearer distillation of key insights and improved readability of papers
- Business Funding Committee to consider the lessons learned within the broader discussions currently taking place on casework process.

11. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Members raised future Board member induction, emphasising the need for clear and considered onboarding based on previous experience. The Chair confirmed that planning is already underway. No additional business was raised.

12. DATE OF THE NEXT BOARD MEETING

The next Board meeting will commence at 09:45 on Thursday 26 February 2026 and will be held at Invest NI Headquarters, Belfast.

The Board meeting ended at 12:45.

Wendy Savage, January 2026

Chair
