

Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee Inquiry - Developing the Northern Ireland Economy through Innovation, Research and Development

Technology Strategy Board – working with Northern Ireland

The Technology Strategy Board is the UK's national innovation agency and is a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department of Business Innovation and Skills. Launched in July 2007, our role is to support innovative businesses and to stimulate technology-enabled innovation in those areas and technologies which offer the greatest scope for boosting UK growth and productivity.

We provide a range of practical and financial support, helping businesses of all types and sizes to invest in research and development, to develop their ideas or technologies, to transform these into the growth products and services of tomorrow and to bring these successfully to market. We develop national technology strategies and provide advice and support to government on policies relating to technology and innovation, commercialisation and knowledge transfer.

In Northern Ireland we work closely with the Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), with InvestNI, with Matrix and many other partners and businesses.

We are currently supporting over 5000+ businesses across the UK, including many from Northern Ireland. These include major manufacturers such as Bombardier, Wright Bus and Seagate, through to financial services businesses such as L. Hughes Insurance in Newtownards, and also with a number of smaller and start-up businesses. We have strong links with both Queen's and Ulster Universities, and with the Northern Ireland Science Park, and are involved in and supporting a number of technology centres including the NI Advanced Composites Centre (NIACE) and the Centre for Secure Information Technologies (CSIT).

To find out more about the Technology Strategy Board, our strategy and the programmes that we deliver, please go to our website at: www.innovateuk.org

Northern Ireland Engagement in Technology Strategy Board Programmes

Businesses from Northern Ireland are actively participating in all of the major programmes that we deliver, although the actual levels of engagement do differ for each one.

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Under our Collaborative Research Development programme, we have to date funded around 60 projects in Northern Ireland, with a total value of £15m, including investing £2.8m supporting aviation projects with Bombardier. Northern Ireland is well represented on our Knowledge Transfer Partnerships programme, with around 30 current live KTP projects, representing 4.4% of the UK total. To date these has been a low take-up of our Smart programme in Northern Ireland, although this is largely because InvestNI already offers a similar and well-funded programme.

In summary, although a number of businesses are engaged in and benefitting from our programmes and the funding that we offer, overall we would like to see a greater share of applications and successful bids coming from Northern Ireland, and we are working with our colleagues in InvestNI and DETI to raise awareness and increase take-up of our various programmes by local businesses.

Small Business Research Initiative (SBRI)

The Technology Strategy Board is particularly keen to promote SBRI in Northern Ireland, as this offers real opportunities to small and medium enterprises and is ideally suited to the local economy and the business base here.

SBRI uses the power of government and public sector procurement to drive innovation. It provides new and innovative solutions to public sector challenges whilst at the same time creating business opportunities for technology companies, most frequently for micro-businesses and SMEs.

SBRI is a simple and fast process that enables government departments and other public sector bodies who are looking for new approaches and solutions to engage with a broad range of businesses, who may have innovative ideas and novel technologies that could be developed and adapted to meet these needs.

SBRI starts with existing problems and requirements being faced by public sector bodies which cannot be met through usual commercial markets. These are articulated as simple needs or challenges, in which the public sector body sets out what it is looking to do or achieve. Through our SBRI programme businesses are then invited to respond to these, and to put forward ideas and solutions to address them. Run as a competition, those proposals that look promising can be awarded development contracts to develop and demonstrate their ideas, product or technology (See Randox case study attached).

SBRI enables government and other public sector organisations to engage with a broad range of business and technologies that they would not have considered or encountered through normal procurement methods. At the same time it brings real benefits and

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opportunities for businesses, both to receive funding to develop their ideas and potentially opening up major new markets at home and abroad.

SBRI – take-up and progress in Northern Ireland

Since the start of 2009, the Technology Strategy Board has run over 100+ SBRI competitions, and has received around 4,000 applications to these from UK businesses, mostly but not exclusively from small and medium sized enterprises.

This has resulted in the award of over 1000 development contracts with a total value (to date) of £87.8m. About 4% of the applications that we have received have come from Northern Ireland businesses.

To date however, we have had only one Northern Ireland led and sponsored SBRI competition; although a number of suggested projects are in the pipeline and being considered. Experience both here and elsewhere has demonstrated that locally developed SBRI competitions attract more bids from local businesses, many of whom often then go on to secure SBRI contracts. **We would like to see more Northern Ireland-led competitions being launched, and more successful applications for SBRI funding coming forward from Northern Ireland businesses.**

Iain Gray, our Chief Executive met with Arlene Foster MLA, Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, with Alban Maginess MLA, former ETI Committee Chair and with David Sterling, Permanent Secretary at DETI when he visited Belfast earlier this year. Raising the profile and increasing the use of SBRI in Northern Ireland was discussed at each of these meetings. All three were very interested in SBRI, and expressed their full encouragement and support for this important programme. We have also been discussing this with Invest NI, with the Chair and members of Matrix and with the Chief Executive and colleagues at the Northern Ireland Science Park, all of whom are also highly supportive and anxious to see SBRI actively promoted and used in Northern Ireland.

Conclusions

The Technology Strategy Board has worked hard to build our links with businesses, with DETI, Invest NI and with other organisations in Northern Ireland, but we know that there is more to be done in this regard. A number of local businesses are involved with our programmes but we are keen to increase awareness and take-up of the support that we offer and to see a greater share of our funding going to businesses in Northern Ireland.

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In particular we are looking to promote SBRI, to have many more Northern Ireland led and sponsored SBRI competitions, and to see more successful bids coming from the businesses who are based here.

To help achieve this we suggest the following:

- There is an explicit public recognition and endorsement of SBRI at Ministerial level and from the ETI Committee, and encouragement to all Permanent Secretaries and leaders of other public sector organisations to consider how and where they can use SBRI.
- Holding a number of high profile events for senior managers of public sector organisations to raise awareness of SBRI and encourage them to start identifying needs and challenges that could form the basis of future SBRI competitions.
- Introduction of a continuous cycle of identifying future needs across government and other public sector organisations, and that information on these future needs are shared with industry.
- Northern Ireland looks to gain a reputation for strategic procurement, taking a lead in developing and deploying new and innovative approaches.
- Consideration is given by government to setting up a central fund to finance and facilitate these first in kind procurements to reduce the level of risk and to incentivise those willing to take the lead;

The Technology Strategy Board is keen and willing to work with and to support our Northern Ireland partners in taking this work forward, and more generally to explore other opportunities to use innovation to help to develop the business base and to grow the economy.

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