

R&D in Belfast

Participants

- Almac Group
- Global Innovation Institute, Queen's University Belfast
- Health Innovation Research Alliance, Northern Ireland
- Invest NI
- JheSOLUTIONS
- NI Science Festival
- Royal Academy of Engineering
- Ulster University

Introduction

CaSE's Discovery Decade project aims to create a more outward-facing vision for R&D in the UK. By helping R&D organisations and advocates to connect with a broader base of public supporters, we can ensure that R&D investment remains a political priority.

We're working closely with organisations across the R&D sector, including through a series of targeted workshops, to collate and share what's already known about reaching public audiences.

Workshop aim

To understand the role that R&D can play in the future of Belfast, and how that vision can be shared with the public.

What's working?

Belfast and Northern Ireland are building from strong foundations in R&D. The nation's research is ranked highly in research assessment exercises, while the Belfast Region City Deal, agreed in 2021, represents a significant investment in Belfast's economic infrastructure, set to be worth more than £1 billion. Both offer opportunities to engage the public with innovation and its impact their communities.

Many R&D organisations are already embracing new opportunities to bring the public closer to research. **Ulster University's** new Belfast campus has not only created spaces for interdisciplinary research and collaboration with businesses; it has given R&D an unmissable footprint in the city.

Northern Ireland also benefits from a strong record of successful public engagement. Before the pandemic, the **Northern Ireland Science Festival** attracted around 70,000 people a year and helped the public see behind the closed doors of R&D. This brought people closer to the research itself; letting them see proof, feel pride and glimpse potential.

Organisations like **Health Innovation Research Alliance Northern Ireland** are already engaging with educators and students to generate interest in R&D careers and support future skills. It aims to show graduates what is possible from an R&D career and offer them in-person networking opportunities.

Northern Ireland can also draw on deep historical associations with research and innovation. **JheSOLUTIONS**, which provides business and manufacturing solutions for other businesses, noted that Northern Ireland's tangible links to manufacturing could be better leveraged by drawing attention to world-famous inventors like Harry Ferguson, the mechanic behind the modern tractor.

"It relates to pride and seeing what's happening behind the scenes in your local area; we had people say, 'I can't believe this is on my doorstep'."

Discovery Decade Workshop: Engaging the public in R&D

R&D In Belfast

What's challenging?

A fundamental challenge facing R&D in Northern Ireland is political will. At the time of the workshop, the Northern Ireland Executive had not been fully functional since February 2022 and many participants were concerned about the impact on strategic decision-making. Stronger and more visible public support for R&D could be one way to gain political interest.

Without strong political support, some participants were concerned that Northern Ireland could miss out on a share of the promised £22bn of public R&D investment across the UK. There was discussion on the merits of greater devolved funding that could be owned and directed locally, and the **Royal Academy of Engineering** stressed that engagement also needed to be more local if it was to feel tangible to people.

Invest NI commented that small companies find it harder to win investment from large pots, but smaller investments then struggle to gain the media pick up that drives public awareness. However, businesses that do connect to colleges and universities can become advocates for research investment. The power of cross-sector support was also emphasised by others: **Almac Group** stressed that industry had a responsibility to engage as advocates, and the **Global Innovation Institute at Queen's University Belfast** wanted to better link R&D and entrepreneurship in the public's mind.

Further challenges included how to increase awareness and pride of R&D in Belfast. Tangible, relevant examples are essential, but these stories must reach the public. For instance, participants felt the innovation behind Belfast's fleet of Net Zero buses hadn't cut through, despite local universities' leading role in developing the technology and local businesses building the buses.

"We need to work hard to find good stories that relate to locals, to engender a sense of pride and understanding. Where R&D has been an enabler and driver we should communicate this."

What's next?

- **Local connections to R&D and its impacts should be emphasised.** Making the most of visible local infrastructure, whether buildings or buses, could help draw the public's attention to the research on their doorstep.
- **Different parts of the R&D system must champion each other to bring benefits to all.** It is essential to demonstrate that R&D is a team activity and find stories that can celebrate the contributions of different people across all parts of the R&D sector.
- **R&D advocates should open their doors to the public to let them see research first-hand.** Within Northern Ireland, the public's appetite for seeing behind the scenes should be encouraged with practical actions adopted across sectors, for instance through industry and academic open days.
- **Engaging and activating voters can help build political will.** R&D investment and politics are inherently linked, and advocates must be aware of this two-way relationship. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach for different parts of the UK, the support of voters carries weight with political decision-makers everywhere.