

The Northern Ireland Life & Health Sciences Launchpad

The Northern Ireland Life and Health Sciences Launchpad provided an effective model of innovation support, combining targeted funding with people and place-based ecosystem development.



Delivered through a partnership between Innovate UK, Invest NI, and the Health Innovation Research Alliance Northern Ireland (HIRANI), and Belfast City Council, the programme went beyond funding but to actively shape how innovation is developed, de-risked, and adopted within a regional ecosystem.

More than £7.5 million in funding was allocated to over 35 Northern companies, supporting a diverse portfolio of innovations across diagnostics, therapeutics, MedTech, and digital health. Launchpad has provided grants ranging from £25,000 to £1 million, enabling both early-stage innovation and collaborative R&D projects.

A Place-Based Model for Innovation Growth

The Launchpad programme was part of a £75 million Innovate UK programme to develop globally competitive innovation clusters. In Northern Ireland, this has meant aligning funding with regional strengths and system priorities.



Belfast
City Council



As a Cluster Management Organisation, HIRANI acted as a central coordinating body, connecting companies with expertise, infrastructure, clinical expertise, and investment pathways. This approach addressed key facilitators to life and health science innovation, including a more joined up ecosystem, regulatory support, and access to commercial skills development. The result was a system that supports innovation across the full lifecycle, from early concept to real-world adoption.

A key feature of the programme was the integration of wraparound support designed to reduce friction and accelerate progress.

This included:

- 1:1 Innovation Clinics providing tailored, strategic guidance
- Structured mentoring networks connecting innovators with experienced leaders
- Regulatory pathway support to navigate approval processes
- Commercial readiness diagnostics to strengthen business models
- Investor engagement and capital strategy support
- Cross-sector partnership brokerage, linking SMEs with academia, NHS, and industry

This model reflected a move from more light-touch support to high-engagement, capability-building.

Over 300 mentoring hours and more than 90 advisory clinics have been delivered during the Launchpad programme, demonstrating the depth of engagement required to support life sciences innovation.

Strengthening Capability Through Mentoring

Mentoring has emerged as a critical feature of the Launchpad programme. The HIRANI mentoring network provides structured, goal-oriented support to innovators navigating complex technical, regulatory, and commercial challenges.

Evaluation of the mentor programme highlights important outcomes:

- 89% of participants reported a valuable overall experience
- 85% found mentoring support effective
- 91% indicated willingness to participate again

Beyond quantitative metrics, qualitative insights demonstrate the impact of the mentoring support.

Mentees reported increased confidence, improved strategic thinking, and expanded professional networks, while mentors benefited from knowledge exchange and exposure to emerging technologies.

Importantly, the programme has also generated learning around structure and engagement. Challenges such as mismatched expectations and time constraints have informed the design of a more structured, scalable mentoring model, reinforcing the importance of clear goal-setting and continuous feedback.

Driving SME Growth and Job Creation

Launchpad delivered measurable economic impact through SME growth, job creation, and investment attraction.

Final programme data indicated:

- Approximately 30 new jobs created across companies
- Significant follow-on investment and commercial traction
- Increased revenue generation and market entry for SMEs
- These outcomes are consistent with broader programme objectives, which focused on enabling companies to:
 - Develop new products and services
 - Progress through Technology Readiness Levels (TRLs)
 - Secure regulatory milestones
 - Access new markets

The emphasis on capability building ensures that these impacts extend beyond individual projects, contributing to long-term sustainability and regional economic growth.

Enabling Cross-Sector Collaboration

A defining feature of Launchpad was its ability to facilitate meaningful collaboration across sectors. More than 12 cross-sector partnerships have been established, linking SMEs with academic institutions, healthcare providers, and industry partners.

These collaborations enable:

- Clinical validation of new technologies
- Access to real-world testing environments



- Shared expertise in regulatory and commercialisation pathways
- Accelerated routes to adoption within health systems

This aligns with evidence that strong partnerships are essential for successful R&D funding and innovation outcomes, particularly in complex sectors such as life sciences. By embedding collaboration into the programme design, Launchpad ensures that innovation is not developed in isolation but is connected to real-world needs and systems from the outset.

From Innovation to Impact: Company Case Studies

The impact of Launchpad is best illustrated through the progress of supported companies across different innovation pathways.

- **Diagnostics and Sensors:** Companies such as Causeway Sensors have achieved commercial traction, including securing global pharma contracts and establishing local supply chains, and a successful photonics cluster.
- **Therapeutics and Advanced Biology:** Klas Therapeutics has advanced its melanoma treatment through in vivo validation and IP development, establishing a foundation for clinical progression.
- **Digital Health and Care Delivery:** 6D Dementia has developed a scalable workforce capability model, demonstrating potential system-level impact through reduced care escalation.
- **Spin-out Growth:** DiaBeta Labs has progressed from early-stage research to securing over £2 million in funding and creating new jobs, illustrating the pathway from innovation to commercialisation.

These examples highlight the diversity of innovation journeys supported by Launchpad, from early validation through to market entry and scale-up.

Building a Sustainable Innovation Ecosystem

Beyond individual company success, Launchpad strengthened the Northern Ireland life and health sciences ecosystem.

Key contributions included:

- Ecosystem coordination across academia, industry, and healthcare
- Increased visibility of Northern Ireland as a life sciences hub
- Attraction of external investment and partnerships
- Development of skills and workforce capability
- Integration of innovation into health system pathways

The programme also supported long-term sustainability through initiatives such as cluster mapping, networking events, and policy engagement, ensuring that innovation is embedded within a broader system of support.

A Model for Future Innovation Programmes

The Northern Ireland Launchpad demonstrates that effective innovation support requires more than funding alone. By combining financial investment with structured ecosystem support, mentoring, and collaboration, the programme is accelerating both company growth and system-level impact.

This integrated approach aligns with wider UK innovation priorities, including regional growth, productivity, and the translation of research into real-world outcomes.

As the programme concludes, its legacy will be measured not only in jobs created or funding secured, but in the strength and resilience of the innovation ecosystem it has helped to build.