

ICE Northern Ireland Roundtable - summary

Infrastructure priorities, challenges and strategic actions for Northern Ireland

December 2025, Titanic Hotel Belfast

Background

ICE Northern Ireland regularly convenes industry stakeholders to gather input on priorities and alternative approaches that could be taken to address the myriads of infrastructure related challenges the region faces.

This summary sets out the key insights emerging from the ICE Northern Ireland roundtable, chaired by ICE President David Porter, bringing together expertise from across the broad built environment, infrastructure and business sectors including clients, consultants, contractors, members of the Northern Ireland Construction Group (NICG) and other professional bodies.

The participants outlined the systemic challenges facing the region, identified opportunities for reform, and suggested some measures to support long-term resilience, economic competitiveness, and progress toward net-zero. The recommendations below are based on the comments made during the roundtable event.

The discussion was framed by the themes in ICE's State of the Nation report and explored the wider challenges and opportunities shaping Northern Ireland's built environment. The discussion touched on long-term strategic planning and system resilience, alternative funding models, skills, decarbonisation, and the need to better articulate the value of infrastructure to society.

There was a clear commitment to infrastructure and collaborative working during the discussion. It is also clear that there is both the expertise and the ambition to deliver the infrastructure our communities and economy need. However, it was equally clear that long-term plans, particularly to support our net-zero journey, are needed.

Northern Ireland's infrastructure system is under acute pressure. Maintenance backlogs, climate adaptation, and funding constraints are converging at a time when political engagement is limited and public trust is fragile. Without decisive action, there is a significant risk that improvements to our infrastructure and its maintenance fall further behind, undermining resilience, economic growth, and societal wellbeing.

Discussion points:

- System resilience, maintenance and renewal
- Long-term strategic planning
- Funding and financing models
- Skills and capacity
- Decarbonisation and net-zero
- Public narrative and political engagement

Maintenance and Renewal: A Non-Negotiable Priority

Maintenance is of utmost importance and needs to be viewed as an unavoidable challenge.

Key points:

- Maintenance is chronically underfunded and politically unattractive.
- NI Water requires £400m simply to maintain current service levels, with an additional £200m needed for strategic improvements such as helping to tackle the water quality issues in Lough Neagh.
- Climate change is accelerating asset deterioration.

- The energy sector faces end-of-life assets with long payback periods, requiring new funding and communication approaches.
- The public narrative must shift from “cost” to “value” and clearly articulate health, environmental, and economic benefits.

Underlying issue

Maintenance is essential for safety, resilience, and economic continuity, yet it is consistently deprioritised in favour of new capital projects which are perceived to deliver short-term political wins.

Strategic Planning and Governance

The absence of a long-term infrastructure plan was repeatedly highlighted as a major barrier.

Key points:

- The industry lacks certainty due to short budget cycles and political instability.
- Access to political decision-makers was reported by some to be limited; long-term thinking is often displaced by tribal politics.
- There appears to be some political support for an independent Infrastructure Commission or Council to provide continuity, expertise, and credibility.
- Combined authorities in England offer a model for linking long-term plans to funding.
- Public willingness to pay more appears to exist but requires clear communication of personal and societal benefits.

Underlying issue

Northern Ireland lacks a stable, independent mechanism to plan, prioritise, and oversee infrastructure investment over a 10–30 year horizon.

Funding and Financing Models

Current funding levels are insufficient to meet even basic needs.

Key points:

- Infrastructure starts from a “very low base” in public consciousness and political prioritisation.
- The narrative is dominated by negative stories about waste rather than reflecting the positive outcomes.
- Revenue generation should be presented as an investment in better public services.
- A combination of funding sources will be required, including:
 - Public investment
 - Private capital
 - Revenue-raising mechanisms
 - Long-term institutional investment
- PPP models are being reconsidered elsewhere but require guaranteed revenue streams and strong governance.
- Water charging remains politically sensitive, and it may be better to reframe this into an infrastructure fund.

Underlying issue

Northern Ireland needs diversified, long-term, and politically credible funding mechanisms to unlock investment and deliver essential upgrades.

Skills, Capacity and Industry Sustainability

The construction and infrastructure sector faces a shrinking local pipeline of work due to stagnant political decision making and repeated legal challenges to certain types of projects.

Key points:

- Local firms increasingly rely on work in GB or overseas to remain viable.
- Apprenticeships and skills development are undermined by inconsistent investment.
- Without a stable pipeline, Northern Ireland risks losing talent and delivery capacity.
- Industry feels a responsibility to “make it work” even when political leadership is lacking.

Underlying issue

A weak and unpredictable project pipeline threatens the long-term health of the local industry and its ability to deliver future infrastructure.

Low Carbon and Net-Zero

Despite changes to political support for Net-zero across the globe, it remains a core priority, but delivery is inconsistent.

Key points:

- Carbon measurement and reduction must be embedded early in project planning.
- PAS 2080 and the RICS carbon calculator provide a consistent framework which ICE endorse.
- Net-zero messaging has been diluted in political debate; ICE’s independence is vital to keep it high on the agenda.
- Retrofit and adaptation projects offer major societal benefits but require new funding models.

Underlying issue

Northern Ireland risks falling behind on net-zero without consistent measurement, early-stage intervention, and political commitment.

Recommendations

1. Prioritise Maintenance and Resilience as Core Investment Streams

Actions:

- Ring-fence maintenance budgets across sectors should be introduced
- Publish transparent asset condition reports
- Adopt a “maintenance first” principle in budget planning
- Communicate the societal value of maintenance such as health, safety, and economic continuity.

2. Establish an Independent Infrastructure Commission for Northern Ireland

Purpose: Provide long-term strategic oversight, continuity, and improve decision-making.

Functions:

- Develop a 10–30 year infrastructure strategy
- Advise on prioritisation and sequencing
- Provide independent scrutiny of delivery
- Engage the public on the value of infrastructure

- Support cross-departmental coordination

3. Develop a Diversified, Long-Term Funding Framework

Actions:

- Explore blended funding models
- Reassess revenue-raising options with appropriate social safeguards
- Reintroduce well-designed PPP-style models with strong governance
- Create stable multi-year budgets (minimum 3–5 years)
- Introduce an Infrastructure Levy to support long-term investment

4. Strengthen Skills, Capacity and the Local Delivery Pipeline

Actions:

- Publish a rolling pipeline of infrastructure projects
- Expand apprenticeships and technical training aligned to net-zero and digital skills
- Support SMEs and local contractors through procurement reform
- Encourage collaboration across the island of Ireland and with GB markets

5. Embed Net-Zero and Climate Adaptation in All Infrastructure Decisions

Actions:

- Mandate PAS 2080-aligned carbon measurement for all major projects
- Prioritise early-stage carbon reduction interventions
- Invest in climate adaptation such as flood resilience, energy system upgrades, and improvements to water quality.
- Reframe net-zero as a long-term economic and societal opportunity

6. Reframe the Public Narrative Around Infrastructure

Actions:

- Shift messaging from “cost” to “value” and “public good”
- Highlight health, environmental, and economic benefits
- Use ICE’s independence to build trust and counter misinformation
- Engage communities early and consistently

Conclusion

Northern Ireland stands at a pivotal moment. The challenges are significant; aging assets, climate pressures, funding constraints, and political instability, but the expertise, ambition, and societal need are undeniable. The roundtable made clear that NI cannot afford to continue “doing three things badly.” It must prioritise, plan strategically, and invest with purpose.

By prioritising maintenance, establishing an independent Infrastructure Commission, diversifying funding, strengthening skills, and embedding net-zero principles, Northern Ireland can build a resilient, sustainable, and prosperous future.

ICE Northern Ireland stands ready to support government, industry, and society in delivering this vision.