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Towards an inclusive innovation ecosystem for Belfast. QCAP research briefing

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**QUEEN'S
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BELFAST**

**COMMUNITIES
AND PLACE**

2024

Towards an Inclusive Innovation Ecosystem for Belfast

QCAP RESEARCH BRIEFING

DR GARETH ROBINSON

26TH APRIL

QUEEN'S COMMUNITIES AND PLACE (QCAP) AIMS TO DEVELOP AN INCLUSIVE INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM. THIS APPROACH SUPPORTS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATIONS AND RESIDENTS TO PARTICIPATE EQUITABLY IN URBAN INNOVATION, ENHANCING SKILLS AND CAPACITY, AND ENABLING COMMUNITIES TO SHAPE INNOVATION PROJECTS.

Our Focus:

- **Inclusive Innovation Ecosystem:** Establish a collaborative environment where communities, industry, academia, and policymakers equitably participate in urban innovation projects, ensuring that the benefits of the knowledge economy are widely shared.
- **Community-Centric Models:** Implement educational pathways and citizen science initiatives to empower residents as community researchers, enhancing their skills and capacity to address local issues.
- **Policy Alignment:** Promote the integration of regional economic policies with local strategic frameworks to bridge the gap between the intentions and implementation of civic-led, inclusive innovation.
- **Sustainable Funding:** Encourage the tech community to fund community innovation models through social value commitments, creating inclusive spaces for innovation and fulfilling corporate social responsibility.
- **Scalable Solutions:** Support the replication of community innovation models across inner-Belfast, facilitating a city-wide inclusive innovation ecosystem that links innovative solutions to local challenges.

The growth of advanced industries in Northern Ireland—those based on knowledge-intensive activities and intellectual capital—has created opportunities for broader societal progress. However, as this knowledge economy expands, the most divided and disadvantaged of our communities have been pushed further to the margins. Critics of the knowledge economy highlight the disproportionate risks to those already in areas of high deprivation in terms of skills gaps, poverty, political alienation, and poor social mobility. QCAP is collaborating with community stakeholders to address community-based disadvantage and the barriers that preclude their participation in a knowledge-based society. Our strategy is to establish an *inclusive innovation ecosystem* in which community development organisations and their residents are supported to participate equitably in the development of large-scale urban innovation projects; our approach ensures that citizens have opportunities to develop skills and build capacity, but also to give them the means of utilising their learning to benefit their community, themselves, and wider society. In other words, it's not enough to enable participation in urban innovation, QCAP intends to support communities to shape it.

CONTEXT

Our work operates in a space well-defined by regional economic policy and local strategic frameworks for urban innovation and workforce development. We seek to influence and promote the equitable implementation, discussion, and development of this suite of policies in ways that represent working-class communities. Innovation is seen as a key driver of growth in NI, the ambitions of which are detailed through 10X economy, a strategic vision published in 2021 by the Dept for the Economy calling for the “inclusive growth” of priority sectors. This is reflected in Smart Belfast: Belfast urban innovation framework 2022-2026, which lays out a foundation for the future development of the city by co-designing it with urban communities, via a citizen's opportunities for digital innovation (CODI), living labs, and a skills agenda. Central to this

framework, is the design and delivery of a ‘Smart District’, ‘Innovation District’, and ‘Smart Port’ all of which neighbour our community partners or incorporate them within their footprint. It is the stated intention of Innovation City Belfast to design and deliver a ‘programme of *Inclusive Innovation* to support communities to access and benefit from the success of a growing innovation economy’, across these projects. However, there is limited evidence of how this suite of urban innovation initiatives, beginning in late 2017, has impacted on inner-Belfast communities. There is also a recognised need to nurture talent for priority sectors and future-proof the supply of competent labour. In 2017, The Belfast Agenda, which set out some key challenges in relation to the development of Belfast City, also highlighted skills and training as a priority area; this is restated in drafts of an updated plan for the city.

In short, the NI policy landscape recognises that innovation, skills & training, and economic growth all coalesce, and that an integrated approach is required. The challenge for Belfast is in how these policy frameworks are implemented—there remains a significant gap between the intentions of civic-led, inclusive innovation and actually involving citizens, particularly those residing in areas of urban deprivation.

“...inclusive innovation refers to new products, or processes, that strive to improve the lives and livelihoods of problem-owners, marginalised individuals, and often excluded groups (by those actors, rather than for them).”

“...inclusive innovation places problem-owners as problem solvers, and in so doing, strives to increase participation in, and benefit from, innovation...”

Klingler-Vidra et al (2022:3)

COMMUNITY INNOVATION MODEL

QCAP is developing a model for inclusive innovation built around the citizen and their communities (figure 1). Our aim is to provide each inner-Belfast community with an educational pathway specifically for building their capacity and skills for innovation. The foundational approach to this is through citizen science, in which residents become researchers, similar to experts-by-experience, and investigate issues relevant to themselves and their local context. Those embedded within the communities we work are perceived as problem-owners and therefore should be supported to have an equitable role in defining the problem and working towards its resolution. Our entry point for this approach is a programme called *Smart City-zens* from which residents graduate with newly found research skills as community researchers, into a pool of volunteers, that becomes a resource for the local community organisation to draw from as they undertake community-led research projects. To date, our participants have looked at environmental issues and had opportunities to enhance their digital skills. As the community organisations generate local knowledge, we offer them two mechanisms by which they can share this information and learn from others by connecting them to other urban communities in Belfast, through our *Community Research Network*, and with counterparts in Dublin, through our *Connected Communities* programme. The assumption is that disadvantaged communities will generate city-wide learning through cycles of local inquiry.

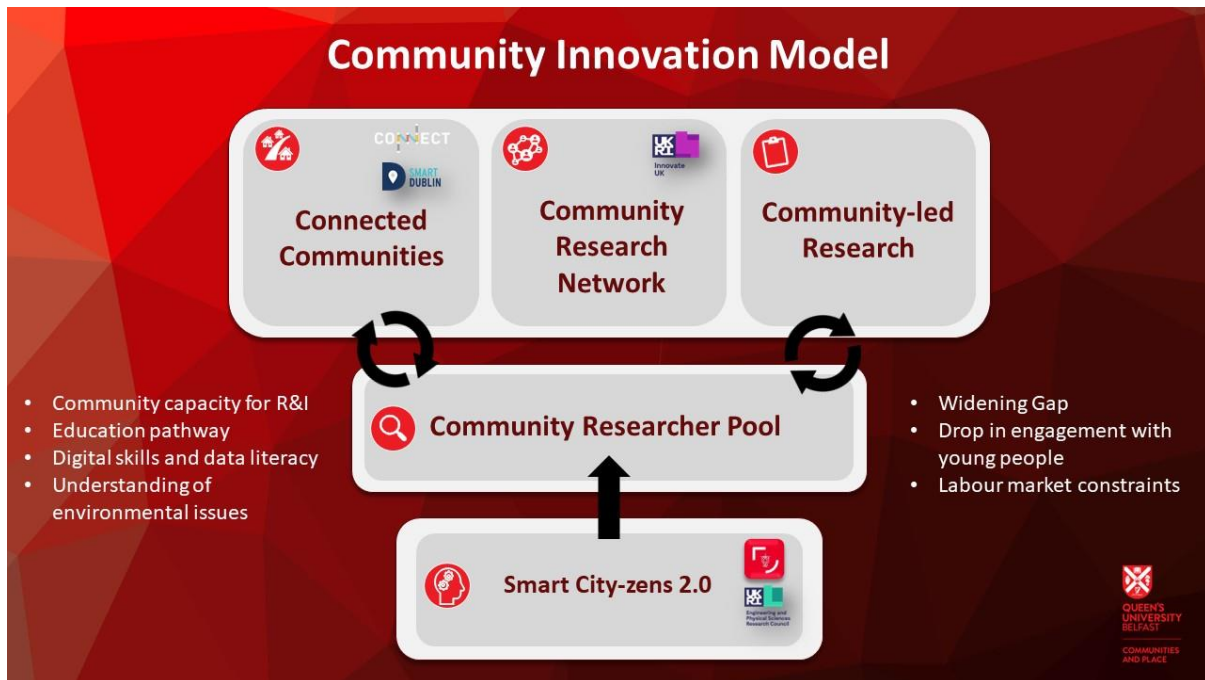


Figure 1 Community Innovation Model

BUILDING BLOCKS

The following gives an overview of each component within the community innovation model:

Smart City-zens (EPSRC & GII) is a pilot citizen science project involving ‘community sensing’, co-created and carried out with and by the Market community in South Belfast. Central to the project is the use of low-cost sensor technologies, to gather data on issues of concern to residents, and which impact on health and wellbeing. The broader objective, in the context of developing Smart Belfast, is to support ‘intelligent, innovative communities’ that can achieve agency over their own data and leverage it in different ways to tackle familiar urban problems. Smart City-zens is intended to offer an educational pathway for residents to engage with ideas around urban innovation and to develop the specific literacies required for civic-led engagement with related technologies.

Connected Communities (Agility Fund)—managed by QCAP in collaboration with CONNECT at Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and our partner community organisations—is a transdisciplinary, pilot research project with the purpose of exploring grass-roots participation and inclusive innovation in the context of ‘Smart City’ projects. Representatives from inner-Belfast community development organisations are working with us to understand how these types of urban innovation projects affect their communities in terms of both the advantages and disadvantages. Participating communities attend a series of workshops on topics related to smart cities with counterparts in Dublin. The objective is to empower under-resourced, urban communities by connecting them locally and regionally, enabling them to collectively enhance their conditions, achieve common objectives, and address shared challenges—large-scale urban innovation projects are typically done to local communities rather than with them. It also serves the purpose of bridging the gap between those managing Smart City projects (usually academic, municipal, and commercial consortiums) and the citizens living and working in the “opportunity areas”—managing entities are also characteristically super-networked, while local communities are often disconnected. Whilst also addressing the absence of a North-South dimension in both Smart City

projects, by supporting relationships between community groups in Belfast and Dublin. Activities include workshops involving senior representatives from communities within Smart Belfast's Innovation District, SmartD8, and the Dublin Docklands. These meetings are intended to assess the potentials, challenges, and concerns of creating a CC network and its relationship with existing smart cities management structures.

Community Research Network (Innovate UK). QCAP along with our partner the Market Development Association (MDA) are currently developing a *Community Research Network* (CRN), as part of a UKRI - InnovateUK funded scheme. The CRN connects several inner-Belfast communities with the intention of building research capacity and developing 'self-renewing' communities that can identify, analyse, and intervene in local place-based challenges using data and evidence in a sophisticated way; shifting how community organisations respond to residents' issues from away adaptation and reaction towards mitigation and being proactive; enabling communities to articulate and share these processes with one another across inner-Belfast.

SCALING UP

Our ambition is that each community within inner-Belfast is supported to implement their own community innovation model, serving as a local facilitating structure within an overall *inclusive innovation ecosystem* for the city (see figure 2). With sustainability in mind, we think there is an opportunity for the tech community to fund community innovation models through social value commitments. In doing so, they will 'buy' their way into an inclusive space for innovation, where communities, industry/commercial stakeholders, academia, and policymakers can equitably participate in innovation plans and projects—what we're calling the *Innovation Collaboratory*.



Figure 2 Inclusive Innovation Ecosystem

For communities, this space offers opportunities for co-design, further building their skills and capacity, and linking innovative solutions to their local challenges. For the tech community, it offers a test environment for their products, it enables them to meet corporate and social responsibility (CSR) commitments, access to new markets, build brand loyalty and trust, and also develop more creative and effective solutions. For policymakers in Belfast, the space would tick

boxes for inclusive growth and inclusive innovation, thereby growing the innovation economy, with opportunities for connecting it to labour market partnerships and various other policy agendas. At present this is a conceptual workup and the function of an innovation collaboratory would require input from a wide range of stakeholders.

The development of this ecosystem (see figure 3) is a long-term commitment by QCAP with each layer building until 2027.

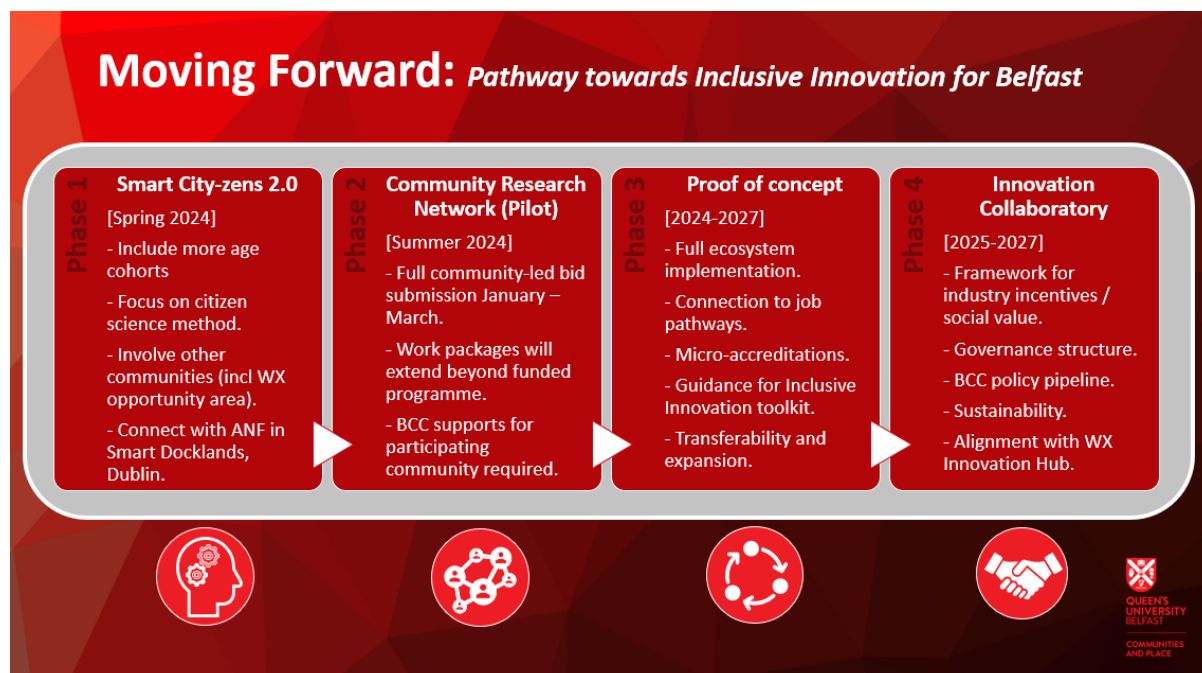


Figure 3 Overview of Inclusive Innovation Ecosystem Development Phases

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

QCAP is exploring and documenting the processes and impacts of inclusive innovation in Belfast. Our research focuses on understanding how urban innovation affects individuals, community organisations, and the broader community development infrastructure. Our approach is place-based, rooted in collaboration with community stakeholders, ensuring that our research is co-designed, community-driven, and that the voices of the most disadvantaged and marginalised are at the forefront.

Evaluating Community Participation in Urban Innovation:

QCAP seeks to assess the degree to which inner-Belfast communities can equitably participate in urban innovation projects. Through programmes like Smart City-zens and the Community Research Network, we investigate how residents engage with urban innovation, focusing on their roles as problem-owners and problem-solvers. We aim to understand the barriers that hinder their participation and identify strategies to overcome these obstacles.

Enhancing Skills and Capacity Building:

A key objective is to examine the effectiveness of educational pathways in building the skills and capabilities of residents. Again, through our initiatives like Smart City-zens and the Community Research Network, we aim to determine how these programmes help participants acquire digital and research skills that empower them to address local issues and contribute to larger urban

innovation efforts. A further interest is in how these pathways connect to economic destinations and work.

Impact on Community Organisations:

QCAP is analysing how inclusive innovation initiatives influence community development organisations. We aim to understand how city-wide urban innovation acts upon the infrastructure available to these grass-roots organisations, and in turn, how any changes have an effect on organisational processes, behaviours, and norms.

Developing a Sustainable Inclusive Innovation Ecosystem:

Our research seeks to document the potential of QCAP's Inclusive Innovation Ecosystem for facilitating equitable participation from communities, industry stakeholders, academia, and policymakers. Our objective is to identify best practices for creating sustainable, collaborative environments that support inclusive growth and innovation.

Assessing Policy and Strategic Frameworks:

QCAP aims to influence and promote the equitable implementation of regional economic policies and local strategic frameworks for urban innovation. By studying the alignment of our initiatives with policies such as the 10X economy and Belfast's urban innovation framework, we seek to provide evidence-based recommendations for enhancing policy frameworks to better support inclusive innovation.

Research Questions:

- How do urban innovation projects impact the skills, capacities, and engagement levels of individuals in disadvantaged communities?
- What are the measurable outcomes for community development organisations participating in inclusive innovation initiatives?
- How can community-driven research and data collection influence urban policy and planning?
- What are the key components of a sustainable inclusive innovation ecosystem, and how can they be effectively implemented in Belfast?

By addressing these objectives, QCAP intends to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of inclusive innovation in Belfast, contributing to the broader discourse on equitable urban development, leading to a more inclusive knowledge economy.

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Find out more about our work:

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This work has been produced by QCAP with input from community partners, involving the participation and co-design of local residents.



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