



# CONTRACTS FOR INNOVATION

Solving challenges across the Belfast Region

**Contracts for Innovation  
Readiness Module  
Participant Information Pack**

**BELFAST REGION  
CITY DEAL**



# Contents

This information pack is designed to help prospective participants understand the Cfl Readiness Programme and the opportunity it offers to play a leading role in a major new regional initiative.

It explains what Contracts for Innovation is, what the Challenge Owner role involves, and how the development sprint will support participants to build the confidence and capability needed to tackle important local challenges in new ways.



What	Page(s)
What is Contracts for Innovation (Cfl)?	3
The Contract for Innovation lifecycle	4
What is the Cfl Readiness Module?	5
The Challenge Owner Development Sprint	6-8
Commitments and Expectations	9
Who should apply?	10
Any other questions?	11
Register your interest	12

# What is Contracts for Innovation (Cfi)?

This is a new £4.3 million Belfast region programme designed to tackle major public sector challenges.

Funded by Belfast Region City Deal and managed by Belfast City Council on behalf of the six councils of the region, Cfi will help the councils identify important public sector challenges and then to collaborate with private sector innovators to create effective solutions.

A 'Contract for Innovation' is a way for the public sector to use procurement more effectively as a route to innovation. Rather than starting with a predefined, specified solution, the approach instead focuses on building a detailed understanding of the problem. Private and business sector innovators are then invited to collaborate directly with the public sector on developing and testing effective solutions to that problem.

As these approaches start to show promise, the innovators receive increasing levels of funding to progress towards solutions that can be implemented.

This structured route allows councils to move from a clearer understanding of a problem through to building and buying a solution that is right for them and more likely to achieve impact.

You can find out more at UKRI's website:

<https://www.ukri.org/what-we-do/browse-our-areas-of-investment-and-support/innovate-uk-contracts-for-innovation/>



## What do we mean by a 'Challenge'?

A **challenge** is a clearly defined problem that matters to your organisation and that could benefit from a new approach. It is identified through an **iterative problem definition**, working with multiple stakeholders and data to build a shared understanding of an issue, why it matters, and who it affects.

In the context of *Contracts for Innovation*, this helps build consensus around the nature of the challenge and creates a stronger foundation for solution development.

# The Contracts for Innovation programme...

5

Challenge  
Competitions  
2026- 2029

£640+

Support funds for  
each council to  
tackle a challenge



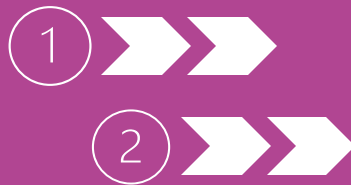
Builds Council  
Innovation  
Capacity



Increases Regional  
Collaboration &  
Learning

3yr

Programme  
delivery window



Phased solution  
development



New digital tech  
solutions adopted  
& procured



Provides practical  
tools and  
resources

# The Contracts for Innovation Lifecycle

Step-by-step journey from a well-developed challenge to a procured solution



Taking part in the Cfl Readiness programme

Only approved challenges receive funding to proceed

Run your own challenge call competition with support and guidance



# What is the Cfl Readiness Module?

The Readiness module is designed to help council officers prepare for their role in the Cfl programme, develop and share a challenge and ensure that the programme contributes to successful outcomes for your council.

Delivered in partnership with PPL, a social impact consultancy with experience of complex innovation and systems change programmes, the module will **support prospective 'Challenge Owners'** and key colleagues to build the skills, confidence and practical understanding needed to shape strong challenges and run their own Cfl competition.

## The module includes:

- Understanding the Contracts for Innovation model and how it works in practice
- Exploring the Challenge Owner role, including what it means to lead a challenge from early definition through to delivery
- Developing challenges that are suitable for Cfl, including those that may benefit from digital, data or AI-enabled solutions
- Considering 'data readiness', including what information and datasets may be needed to shape and progress a challenge
- Working with the right internal colleagues, including digital, data, procurement and service leads, to strengthen the quality and feasibility of challenges
- Building confidence in how to engage leadership, secure sponsorship and create the organisational conditions needed for success
- Strengthening understanding of the journey from challenge development to competition, solution development, procurement and implementation

The logo for PPL, consisting of the letters 'PPL' in a bold, purple, sans-serif font.The logo for Contracts for Innovation, featuring a colorful network of nodes and lines above the text 'CONTRACTS FOR INNOVATION' and the tagline 'Solving challenges across the Belfast Region'.

## What is a Challenge Owner?

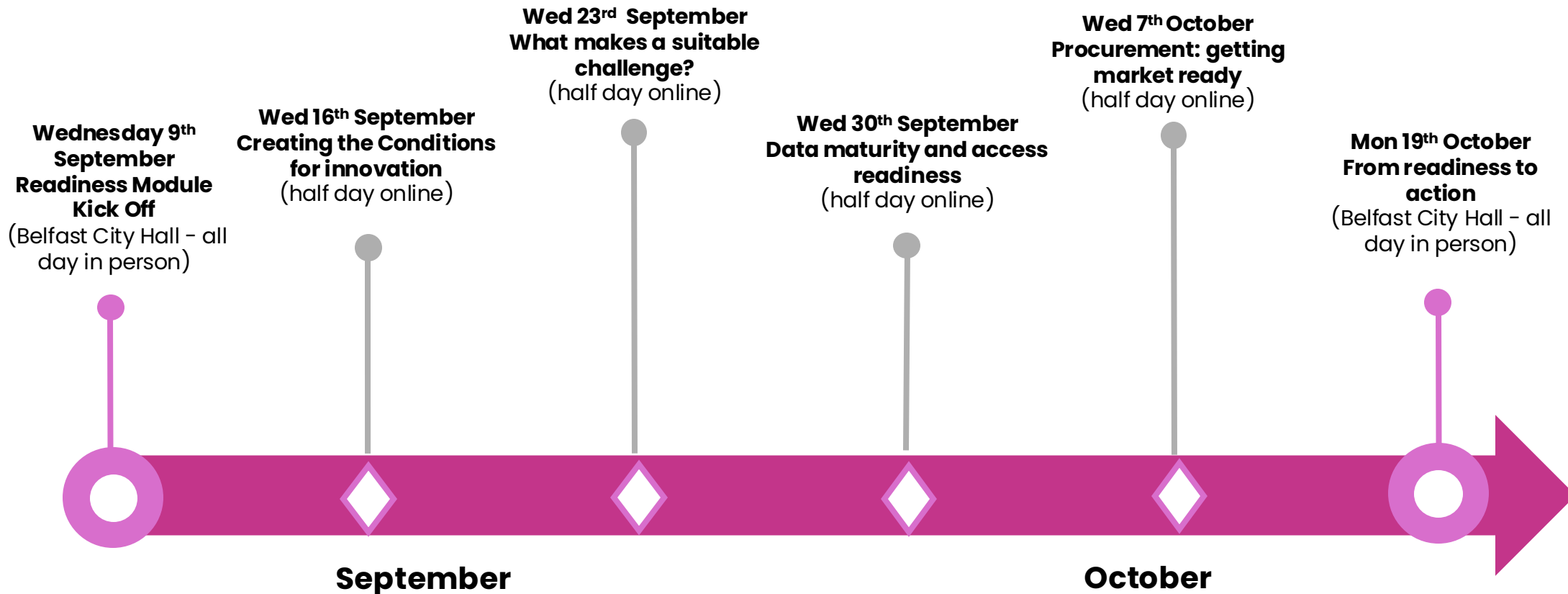


A **Challenge Owner** is the person who helps lead the development of a challenge from within their organisation. They play a key role in working with others to define the challenge clearly, build consensus around why it matters, and shape it into something that could be taken forward through Contracts for Innovation.

If approved, the Challenge owner will then run the end-to-end process on behalf of their council, including developing the Challenge Call competition, working with the participating SMEs, and exploring routes to further development and procurement for promising interventions.

# Contracts for Innovation Readiness sprint

Prospective Challenge owners will be supported through a six-week structured development sprint, combining facilitated in person and online sessions, practical tools and frameworks, peer learning and expert support. By the end of this sprint, **participants will have developed a departmental or organisational challenge aligned to the contracts for Innovation process.**



# The Contracts for Innovation Readiness sprint

Here we provide further detail of what will be covered in each session, as well as an indication of associated learning outcomes.

Session	Description	Duration	Session outcome
<b>Week 1: Readiness Module Kick Off</b>	An introduction to the regional ambition behind Contracts for Innovation, the opportunity it presents for councils, and the overall journey ahead. This session will help participants understand the end-to-end Cfl process, explore what it means to think and act like a Challenge Owner, and begin identifying challenge areas that may be worth developing through the sprint.	All day – in person	Participants will leave with a clear understanding of the Cfl opportunity, the role they may play within it, and an initial sense of which local challenges could be ripe for development.
<b>Week 2: Creating the Conditions for innovation</b>	A session focused on what needs to be in place for innovation to succeed within councils, from leadership support and organisational readiness to the wider conditions required to sustain and scale new approaches. Participants will reflect on their own context and consider what it will take to create the right conditions for success.	Half day - online	Participants will have a clearer view of the conditions needed to move their challenge forward and the key people they need to engage with, relationships they need to build and enablers they need to identify within their council.
<b>Week 3: What makes a suitable challenge?</b>	This session will explore what makes a strong challenge, including how to move from a broad issue to a clearly defined focus for innovation. It will introduce problem definition as an iterative process and support participants to take the first practical steps in shaping their own challenges.	Half day - online	Participants will leave with a more focused and credible challenge area, a stronger understanding of what will be needed to make the case for it internally, and greater confidence in the next steps required to develop it further.

# The Contracts for Innovation Readiness sprint

Here we provide further detail of what will be covered in each session, as well as an indication of associated learning outcomes.

Session	Description	Duration	Session outcome
<b>Week 4: Data maturity and access readiness</b>	This session will explore the role of data and digital readiness as key ingredients for innovation. Participants will consider what data may be needed for their emerging challenge areas, what readiness looks like, and how to begin engaging council colleagues to better understand challenges and measure impact.	Half day - online	Participants will have a clearer understanding of the data, insights and internal input needed to strengthen their challenge and make the case for it to be further developed.
<b>Week 5: Procurement – getting market ready</b>	An introduction to the procurement landscape for innovation, including what the Procurement Act means in practice for councils and how to think about engaging the market in the right way. The session will help participants understand how challenge development and early procurement thinking and engagement go hand in hand.	Half day - online	Participants will better understand what makes a challenge market-ready, what procurement colleagues will need to consider, and how to position their challenge for the next stage of the Cfl process.
<b>Week 6: From readiness to action</b>	This session will help participants draw together and showcase their learning, highlighting how their thinking has developed on their candidate challenges. Participants will present their challenges to peers and the Cfl Programme Leads for consideration for the first Cfl competition, gaining feedback that will help sharpen the challenge and identify the next steps for taking it forward.	All day - in person	Participants will leave with a clearer, more credible challenge proposition, and a clear action plan detailing how to progress it.

# Commitment and expectations

## What do I need to commit to?

We ask participants to attend all core sessions across the development sprint, including both in-person and online workshops. Each session will build on the last, so taking part throughout will help you get the most from the experience and help you develop a viable challenge for your council.

There will also be some modest ‘homework’ between sessions as you identify prospective challenges, so it will be helpful if you can set aside a small amount of time each week for follow up on actions.

## What do I have to do between sessions?

Between sessions, you will have the chance to apply what you are learning to your own context. This may include shaping a possible challenge area and testing your thinking with own colleagues.

You may also find it useful to speak to people in different roles across your council. For example, with a specific service, with service design or performance improvement colleagues, Finance, IT or Procurement teams, as well as senior colleagues who can help you connect the opportunity to your council’s key priorities.

## What other support will I receive?

There will be additional support available throughout the module:

- A number of informal drop-in sessions hosted by PPL, where you can ask questions, share reflections, and connect in with peers.
- You will also have access to support from the Cfi Programme office via the Innovation Officer: Collette McCann: [McCannCollette@belfastcity.gov.uk](mailto:McCannCollette@belfastcity.gov.uk)

## What makes a strong challenge



A strong challenge is one that is important, actionable and credible. It should:

- Address a complex issue with meaningful Belfast Region council relevance, where cross-sector collaboration can add value, and has no existing solution in the market.
- Have access to relevant data to help understand it, evidence need and measure impact.
- Be compelling enough to attract the interest of participants, partners and funders, while remaining realistic and politically and financially viable
- Has a committed or intended budget to spend on or procure the solution.

# Who should apply?

We are looking for a range of officers from across the six BRCD councils who are excited by the possibility of tackling complex public sector challenges in new ways.

This programme is particularly designed for officers who already have a mandate, responsibility or clear permission to progress a challenge on behalf of their council. Participants should be well placed to influence the development of the challenge, engage relevant colleagues, and make the case for the support, resources/budget or decisions needed to move it forward.

It is for people who can see that we need to do things differently, are willing to explore what that looks like in practice, and want to help shape how their organisation responds to challenges that matter most.

**You do not need to be an innovation, technical, digital or IT specialists to take part.** What matters is that you are curious and committed to solving problems for your council.

## As a Challenge Owner you will:

- Commit time to lead the challenge on behalf of your council, coordinate activity, and keep progress moving through each stage of the process
- Work with your colleagues to gather the insights, evidence and data needed to shape the challenge and support solution development
- Bring together the right people across your council, including procurement, finance, digital, data, service leads and senior sponsors
- Organise and contribute to key meetings, provide updates and reporting, and help ensure actions are followed through
- Work with council colleagues and external solution providers to support the development, testing and progression of potential solutions

## You may be a good fit if you:



- Have been tasked by your council to address a key organisational challenge
- You have a desire to change the way your organisation operates
- Are interested in becoming a Challenge Owner and leading a Contract for Innovation competition on behalf of your council
- Work in a transformation, innovation or improvement role
- See the value in strong, cross-sector collaboration
- Want to grow your confidence in leading change and developing new approaches within the public sector
- You see benefits in engaging with specialist SME's in finding organisational solutions

# Any other questions?

## Do I need to have a fully formed challenge already?

No.

You do not need to come with a fully developed challenge. The Readiness module is designed to help you explore what makes a good challenge, understand what would be needed to develop it into a strong opportunity for the wider Cfl programme, and potentially begin to shape a challenge area. However, we encourage you to bring existing problems, priorities or challenge areas you are already aware of; the module will help you develop these further and consider whether they could be suitable for a future Cfl competition.

## Do I need procurement experience?

No.

You do not need to be a procurement specialist to take part. The programme is intended to help participants understand the Cfl process and what good challenge development involves, while also encouraging engagement with relevant colleagues, including procurement, where needed.

## Can more than one person attend from a council?

Yes.

We expect (and hope) that there will be interest from more than one officer across each council, and there will be value in having people with different perspectives. However, final numbers will depend on overall demand and the need to create a balanced cohort across the region.

## What support will be available after the programme?

The Readiness module is intended to be the beginning of an ongoing process. After the module ends, participants will continue to have support from the **Cfl Programme office** as councils take forward potential challenge opportunities. We also hope to establish a **peer network** across the six councils, giving participants a way to stay connected, share experiences and learning, and support one another as they develop their own challenges

## Does taking part guarantee support?

No.

Taking part does not guarantee your council challenge will receive competition funding. However, it will help you better understand the opportunity, build your capability and understanding, and plan for how to develop challenges that could be taken forward through the wider Cfl programme. There will be up to 5 Challenge Competitions so we'd anticipate several opportunities for you to submit a challenge idea.

# Register your interest



If you are interested in becoming a challenge owner and taking part in the development sprint, please complete this expression of interest form:

[Contracts for Innovation | Your say Belfast](#)

If you have any questions about Contracts for Innovation or the Challenge owner role, please contact the Programme Manager: Adam Wallace [Wallacea@belfastcity.gov.uk](mailto:Wallacea@belfastcity.gov.uk) or Cfl Innovation Officer: Collette McCann [McCannCollette@belfastcity.gov.uk](mailto:McCannCollette@belfastcity.gov.uk)

