


Chief Executive
Community Foundation for Northern Ireland

To:

Phillip Brett MLA
Committee for the Economy
Northern Ireland Assembly

cc:

Committee Members
Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

30 July 2026

Dear Phillip and Colleagues,

Call for Evidence on the Regional Balance Bill: Community Foundation for Northern Ireland Response

Thank you for the opportunity to engage in the conversation on the draft Regional Balance Bill. We at the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland welcome the intention of the Bill to place a statutory focus on reducing disparities in economic performance and living standards across Northern Ireland. We support the principle of working to improve the social, economic and financial wellbeing of communities in every part of Northern Ireland and recognise the importance of embedding regional balance as a long-term, cross-government objective.

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We believe that, if implemented effectively, the Bill has the potential to support more equitable outcomes, strengthen place-based development and improve opportunities for communities that have not benefited equally from economic growth. In order to achieve these ambitions, we recommend that the Committee considers the following suggestions which we believe will further enhance the effectiveness of this legislation.

Evidence, data and measurement

A key strength of the Bill is its recognition that regional disparities extend beyond traditional economic indicators and include broader measures of living standards and wellbeing. To support effective implementation, we believe the development of the Strategic Framework should be aligned with the work currently being undertaken by NISRA to improve the linking of government datasets and to modernise the evidence base used to understand deprivation and disadvantage across Northern Ireland. In particular, the Bill presents an opportunity to ensure that future assessments of regional balance are informed by more integrated administrative data and by the development of an updated Index of Multiple Deprivation.

We would strongly encourage the inclusion of a requirement for a comprehensive baseline assessment of existing disparities before targets are established. Such a baseline should identify both regional and local variations in social, economic and financial wellbeing and provide a transparent basis against which future progress can be measured. Alongside this, there should be a clear commitment that policy design, public investment and service delivery actively contribute to reducing identified disparities over time, as well as committing to preventing them from occurring in future.

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Place-based action at every level

While the Bill rightly focuses on Executive Departments, we would welcome greater recognition of the role of local government in driving regional balance. The ambition of this legislation should be reflected at all levels of government, with councils encouraged to champion balanced development not only between regions but also within them.

Regional balance should not be understood solely as a question of differences between council areas or sub-regions. Significant disparities often exist between neighbourhoods within the same local authority area. We therefore believe councils should be supported and encouraged to use the Strategic Framework to drive progress at neighbourhood level, ensuring that communities experiencing persistent disadvantage are visible within policy and investment decisions.

Co-design, participation and democratic engagement

The Bill requires consultation on the Strategic Framework. However, we believe there is an opportunity to move beyond consultation towards more meaningful co-design and deliberative engagement processes. Communities should not simply be asked to respond to proposals developed elsewhere: residents, community organisations and local stakeholders should play an active role in shaping priorities, identifying local assets and helping to determine the outcomes that matter most in their places. Embedding co-design within the development and review of the Strategic Framework would strengthen legitimacy, improve policy effectiveness and ensure that local knowledge informs decision-making from the outset.

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This should also be viewed as an opportunity to stimulate civic participation in democratic processes more broadly, particularly among those who are least well served by existing systems and whose voices are often underrepresented in public decision-making. Deliberative approaches can help build trust, strengthen community ownership of outcomes and create more inclusive forms of governance.

Strengthening connections between communities

We believe that addressing regional imbalance is not solely a matter of investment allocation. Equal attention should be given to strengthening relationships, networks and shared learning between communities. There is a broader need to connect communities more effectively to maximise the impact of place-based investment. This includes creating opportunities for communities to share learning, build partnerships, access services collaboratively and benefit from examples of successful local development elsewhere.

Such an approach would complement growing evidence that people here, more so than in other parts of the UK, have strong attachment to and pride in their local places. The Charities Aid Foundation's research on charitable giving highlights the extent to which giving and community support are often rooted in local identity and connection. Harnessing this pride in place can help build stronger civic participation, support local leadership and enhance the long-term sustainability of investment initiatives.

Partnership and shared responsibility

The Bill correctly recognises that regional balance, like many other Executive priorities, cannot be achieved by a single department acting alone. We believe

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the development of the Strategic Framework should also stimulate a wider conversation about how the public sector, businesses and the voluntary and community sector can work together more effectively to achieve shared social and economic objectives.

Many of the most successful place-based initiatives are characterised by collaboration across sectors, combining public investment, community knowledge, business expertise and civic leadership. The Strategic Framework should encourage these approaches and recognise the contribution that non-governmental actors can make in achieving regional balance outcomes.

In particular, there is an opportunity to consider the role of philanthropy as a contributor to place-based development. Philanthropic giving is often deeply rooted in place and community identity. However, access to philanthropic resources is not evenly distributed across Northern Ireland. Greater attention should therefore be given to how government, funders and local partners can work together to encourage philanthropy and community investment in a wider range of places, particularly in communities that have historically attracted lower levels of investment.

Conclusion

The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland supports the overall ambition of the Regional Balance Bill and its focus on improving outcomes for communities across Northern Ireland. We believe the legislation will be strengthened by:

- Aligning implementation with NISRA's work on linked administrative data and the updating of measures of deprivation.

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- Requiring a robust baseline assessment of existing disparities and a commitment to reducing them through future policy and investment decisions.
- Encouraging councils and other public bodies to apply regional balance principles at neighbourhood as well as regional level.
- Embedding co-design and deliberative engagement within the development, implementation and review of the Strategic Framework.
- Using the process to widen civic participation, particularly among those least well represented in current democratic processes.
- Strengthening connections, shared learning and collaboration between communities to maximise the impact of place-based investment.
- Promoting greater collaboration between public, private and voluntary sectors in pursuit of shared outcomes.
- Recognising and encouraging the contribution of philanthropy and other forms of place-based civic investment.

Taken together, these measures would help ensure that regional balance becomes not simply a reporting framework, but a practical vehicle for creating stronger, more connected and more prosperous communities throughout Northern Ireland.

We are also sharing this submission with the Bill sponsor, Sinead McLaughlin MLA, in the hope that the legislation and its implementation might be influenced by the evidence we have included here. We would be happy to explore this further with the Committee if that would be helpful, and thank you again for the

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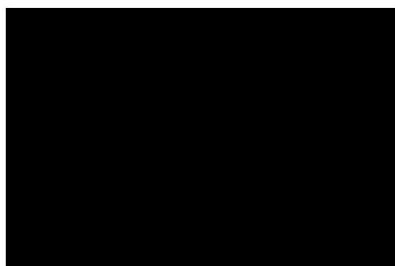
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opportunity to engage on this important piece of legislative infrastructure that could drive real and meaningful change for left-behind communities across Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely,



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