

Social Enterprise NI Response to the Regional Balance Bill

Response from Social Enterprise NI on the Regional Balance Bill (Bill 35/22-27)

Social Enterprise NI welcomes the introduction of the Regional Balance Bill and supports its central objective of tackling persistent regional disparities in economic performance and living standards across Northern Ireland. As a membership body representing social enterprises operating in urban, rural and coastal communities throughout Northern Ireland, we see first-hand the unequal distribution of opportunity, investment and public service provision that the Bill seeks to address.

General Support

Social Enterprise NI agrees with the Bill Sponsor's assessment that successive strategies and policy commitments have not sufficiently addressed regional imbalances. While regional balance has featured prominently in various economic and regional development strategies over the past decade, outcomes have not matched ambitions. Establishing a statutory framework has the potential to provide the consistency, accountability and long-term focus necessary to drive meaningful progress.

We particularly welcome:

- The recognition that regional balance is an Executive-wide responsibility rather than solely an economic development issue.
- The requirement for a Regional Balance Strategic Framework with measurable outcomes and targets.
- The emphasis on transparency, monitoring and Assembly scrutiny.
- The inclusion of living standards alongside economic performance as indicators of regional prosperity.
- The acknowledgement that different regions face different challenges and opportunities requiring a coordinated cross-departmental response.

The Contribution of the Social Economy

While Social Enterprise NI supports the Bill's objectives, we believe the legislation and subsequent Framework should explicitly recognise the role of the social economy in delivering regional balance.

Social enterprises are uniquely placed to contribute to the Bill's objectives because they:

- Operate in communities that are often underserved by both public and private sector investment.
- Create employment opportunities in areas experiencing economic disadvantage.
- Retain wealth locally through community ownership and reinvestment.
- Address social and economic inequalities through enterprise-based solutions.
- Support place-based regeneration and community resilience.
- Deliver essential services where traditional market provision may be limited.

In many rural, border and disadvantaged urban communities, social enterprises already act as anchor institutions, creating jobs, supporting skills development and improving community wellbeing. The Regional Balance Strategic Framework should therefore include measures to strengthen and expand the contribution of the social economy as a mechanism for achieving balanced regional growth.

Beyond Traditional Economic Indicators

Social Enterprise NI welcomes the Bill's broad definition of regional disparities, particularly the inclusion of indicators relating to health, education, deprivation and housing alongside traditional measures such as GDP and productivity.

We would encourage the Executive to incorporate additional indicators within the Framework that reflect community wealth-building and inclusive economic development, including:

- Levels of social enterprise activity and employment.
- Community asset ownership.
- Local procurement outcomes.
- Social value generated through public expenditure.
- Measures of community resilience and participation.
- Access to affordable and flexible skills development opportunities.

A genuine approach to regional balance should consider not only where economic growth occurs, but who benefits from that growth.

Importance of Place-Based Investment

The Bill correctly identifies that regional imbalance cannot be addressed by any single department acting alone. Social Enterprise NI would particularly encourage alignment between the Framework and:

- Community planning processes.
- Local government economic development strategies.
- The Social Enterprise Action Plan.
- City, Growth and Inclusive Growth Deals.
- Investment decisions by Invest NI and other public bodies.
- Community wealth-building initiatives.

The Framework should encourage place-based investment approaches that empower communities to play a meaningful role in shaping their own economic futures.

Invest NI and Regional Development

Social Enterprise NI notes the concerns raised regarding the historical distribution of investment and employment opportunities across Northern Ireland.

While the Bill does not directly amend Invest NI's statutory responsibilities, we support a stronger focus on ensuring that economic development interventions deliver benefits across all

regions. This should include careful consideration of how support can be directed towards community-led enterprises, social enterprises and locally rooted businesses that are often best placed to generate sustainable economic and social value within their communities.

Data, Measurement and Accountability

We support the reporting and accountability mechanisms contained within the Bill.

However, for the Framework to be effective, data collection should extend beyond headline economic measures and provide meaningful insight into community wellbeing and inclusive growth outcomes. We would encourage the Department for the Economy to work closely with local government, the voluntary and community sector, social enterprises and academic institutions to ensure that reporting reflects lived experiences within communities.

We also welcome the requirement to consider cross-border economic data, recognising the importance of economic relationships across the island of Ireland, particularly in border regions where communities often operate within shared labour, service and economic markets.

Recommendations

Social Enterprise NI recommends that:

1. The Regional Balance Strategic Framework explicitly recognises social enterprises as key delivery partners in achieving regional balance objectives.
2. The Framework includes indicators that measure inclusive growth, community wealth-building and social value alongside traditional economic metrics.
3. Departments are encouraged to utilise public procurement and commissioning practices that maximise local economic and social impact.
4. The Executive engages social enterprises and community organisations throughout the development, implementation and review of the Framework.
5. Future reporting includes assessment of how economic growth is distributed across communities and population groups, not simply geography.

Conclusion

Social Enterprise NI supports the principles and overall direction of the Regional Balance Bill. The Bill represents an important opportunity to place regional balance at the heart of government decision-making and to establish a long-term framework for reducing geographic inequalities across Northern Ireland.

For the legislation to achieve its full potential, the subsequent Strategic Framework should adopt an inclusive approach to economic development that recognises the critical contribution of social enterprise, community wealth-building and place-based regeneration. By doing so, Northern Ireland can create a more balanced economy that delivers prosperity, opportunity and improved living standards for all communities.