



Mid South West Region Response to the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for the Economy's Regional Balance Bill - Call for Evidence (September 2026)

Overview

Mid South West Region (MSW) is the 'Economic Engine' of Northern Ireland.

Mid South West Region (a collaboration between Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and Mid Ulster District Council) has a global vision to supercharge the economic growth of our region and to achieve greater prosperity for all citizens. The economy is driven by a thriving private sector that includes many world-leading companies which are major innovators and global exporters.

With diverse people and economically competitive businesses, our region has grown faster than all others in Northern Ireland (NI). In NI terms, the region accounts for over a quarter of its population, almost half of its land mass, one third of the NI business base, and has the longest proportion of the Ireland/NI Border Corridor. Many of NI's world leading companies were born here and it continues to be home to headquarters of their globalised operations.

MSW has a contrasting urban and predominantly rural landscape which includes Ireland's oldest city and ecclesiastical capital, Armagh and the towns of Enniskillen, Omagh, Lurgan, Portadown, Banbridge, Dungannon, Cookstown, Magherafelt and the "new town" of Craigavon.

Despite significant historical underinvestment in the region's basic enabling infrastructure, communication networks including broadband and mobile coverage, and utilities, our extraordinary people have created a sophisticated and unique ecosystem for businesses to thrive. Entrepreneurial spirit is a distinctive characteristic of the region. Our business mentality, reputation and dynamism has given us a critical edge over other regions demonstrated by the export of more goods and services than all other areas of NI (34% of all NI exports).

The Region specialises in the manufacturing of machinery, equipment, pharmaceuticals and food products. Our specialisms are even more pronounced when

compared to the UK average. We are a truly globally connected region that is driving NI's international dominance across many sectors.

Alongside the economic impact, we have much more to offer – not least our region's natural and cultural heritage. We are custodians of some of the most unique landscapes and internationally important nature conservation sites. From the Lakes of Fermanagh and the spires of Armagh to the earthy homeland of Heaney, we boast a rich tapestry of assets which can lead to greater economic prosperity.

Mid South West Regional Economic Strategy, launched in September 2020, clearly articulates the vision of our region and focuses on specific and targeted interventions and investment to drive growth in the longer-term. The strategy provides the primary evidence-based position of the infrastructural and connectivity deficits that prevail in the MSW Region, as well as documenting the serious gaps in several aspects of our basic economic infrastructure, particularly in roads and rail.

The Regional Economic Strategy is underpinned by the announcement of Growth Deal funding from the UK Government, and is in line with the 'New Decade, New Approach' deal which restored devolved government in Northern Ireland. The economic rationale for our Growth Deal centres around a range of interventions across four key pillar areas including: Enabling Infrastructure; Boosting Innovation and Digital Capacity; Building a High-Performing Tourism Economy; and 'Future proofing' The Skills Base.

Key Data and Facts

Below are statistics that must be taken into consideration by the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly Committee for the Economy when reviewing responses to the Call for Evidence on the Regional Balance Bill, as they are significant in terms of articulating existing economic performance and living standards experienced in the MSW region and wider Northern Ireland region as well as inclusive growth challenges.

- The MSW region makes up almost **half** of Northern Ireland's **land mass**.



- MSW's geographical position is hugely significant as it **spans five of the six** counties in Northern Ireland: Down, Armagh, Tyrone, Fermanagh and Derry/Londonderry, and has the longest proportion of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Border Corridor.
- Geography and proximity to the border means that MSW is contiguous to counties Monaghan, Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim and Cavan in the Republic of Ireland. The region forms a **central part of the North/South border corridor** with much higher levels of cross-border trade, commuting, access to services (including health and education) and recreational use than would be found in other parts of the island of Ireland. In addition, the border region has a co-dependency on tourism, movement of workers, inward investment and funding.
- MSW represents **one quarter of NI population** - combined population of over 485,761 people and a working age population of 294,000 which is forecast to grow.
- Approximately **two thirds** of all MSW residents live in **rural areas**.
- MSW created its **own sophisticated and unique ecosystem** for business to thrive and is home to a third of Northern Ireland businesses and **224,000** workplace-based jobs.
- Generated **£10Billion** GVA in 2020 (1/4 of the overall NI Economy). This figure **does not** consider contribution from **supply chains**.
- MSW is home to many world leading businesses and as such is a globalised, outward and forward looking region. This is evidenced by the fact that our businesses accounted for **34% of NI exports** and **31.1% of NI external sales**.
- **Leading the Way** in: Manufacturing, Engineering, Agri-Food, Health and Life Sciences, Tourism and Construction. Our regional specialisms are even more pronounced when compared to the UK average.
- MSW is a **significant contributor** to NI Manufacturing Innovation:
 - **42%** of Northern Ireland **employment in manufacturing** and **40% of its manufacturing GVA**.
 - **70% more** employment in high and medium tech advanced manufacturing compared to the UK average.

- Employment in the manufacture of machinery for **mining, quarrying and construction** sector is almost **four times** the size of the NI average and over **22 times** the UK average.
- Employment in the manufacturing of basic **pharmaceutical** products is nearly **3 times** larger than the NI average and **15 times** the UK average.

Key Points on MSW's Economic Geography, Infrastructure & Connectivity Relative to Addressing Regional Imbalances

- The economic geography of the MSW region is shaped by the presence of Northern Ireland strategic corridor routes - the M1, A1 Dublin/Belfast, A4 Ballygawley/Border, A5 (N2) Derry/Dublin, A6 Derry/Belfast and A29 Coleraine/Armagh - all run through the region. MSW's positioning is at the centre of important wider connections and markets. Future investment in our north/south and east/west cross border connectivity will significantly influence the functioning of trade, access to labour markets, business productivity and competitiveness. Such investment is essential and will ultimately lead to improvements in NI, UK and ROI economic output and the geographical distribution of trade.
- As Northern Ireland's 'economic engine', the MSW region is uniquely positioned to drive wealth creation, exports and innovation. With evidenced strengths in Manufacturing, Engineering, Agri-Food, Health and Life Sciences, Tourism and Construction, the region makes a significant contribution to the wider NI economy. What makes this achievement even more impressive is that it has been realised in spite of decades of underinvestment in basic economic infrastructure and connectivity, demonstrating the resilience and determination of our indigenous businesses in the region to succeed.

Our region is well-behind the 'baseline' position in terms of basic infrastructure and connectivity and thus far has not sufficiently experienced the benefits of previous policy to regionally balance the NI economy. This is despite our performance and contribution as the 'economic engine' of the NI economy. Recognising that future NI and UK policy has an increasing focus on 'economic growth' and 'regional balance', the introduction of the Regional Balance Bill represents an opportunity to significantly improve the benefits that our region can experience in future.

- Despite being a highly entrepreneurial region, productivity levels in MSW are 2% lower than the rest of NI, and 17% lower than the UK average which is in turn 29% below the Republic of Ireland average. Addressing this productivity gap represents a massive opportunity for MSW and NI regions. Doing so would generate substantially more GVA and wealth for our businesses and citizens.
- As home to a third of NI businesses, including many world-leading exporters, MSW industry has been forced to operate with substandard economic infrastructure and connectivity for decades, with consequent constraints on the efficiency of their operations and associated productivity.

The single largest barrier to the region's economic growth is the absence of the basic enabling infrastructure – something other regions of the UK and Ireland take for granted. Long-awaited projects such as the A4 Enniskillen Southern Bypass as well as bypasses for Armagh, Cookstown and Dungannon remain undelivered, further constraining economic growth and limiting the region's ability to attract investment and expand employment opportunities. Poor connectivity and decades of underinvestment in our road and rail network has left communities marginalised and isolated restricting access to jobs, education, healthcare and essential services and our businesses facing a daily battle in the movement of freight to export markets via non-classified road networks, with consequent impacts on growth, productivity and competitiveness. To address these long-standing regional imbalances, the MSW region should be afforded the same opportunity/ies as other parts of Northern Ireland to grow and prosper. Investing in modern road and rail infrastructure is not simply about improving connectivity, it is about levelling up our communities, unlocking economic potential and ensuring that businesses and residents across the region can compete on a fair and equal footing. With the right investment, the Mid South West can build on its strengths, create more and better jobs, attract new investment and make an even greater contribution to Northern Ireland's future prosperity.

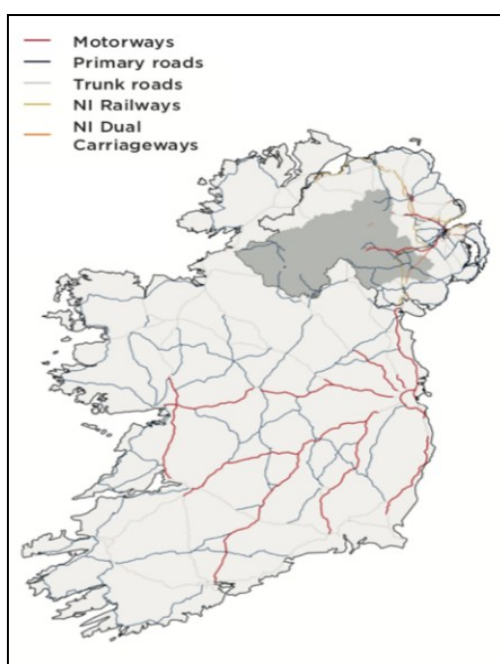
- Whilst MSW accounts for half of the land mass in NI, road infrastructure across the MSW region is underdeveloped, with motorways and dual carriageways accounting for just 1% of the regional road network.

See table below for MSW Road Infrastructure (*Length of Road by Type, 2017-2021*)

		2017	2018	2019	2200	2021
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	Lenght of Motorway & Dual Carraigeway (km)	57.1	55.6	55.5	55.4	55.4
	Percentage of all Roads	1.60%	1.56%	1.55%	1.55%	1.55%
Fermanagh and Omagh	Lenght of Motorway & Dual Carraigeway (km)	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6
	Percentage of all Roads	0.02%	0.02%	0.01%	0.01%	0.01%
Mid Ulster	Lenght of Motorway & Dual Carraigeway (km)	34.7	36.3	36.3	36.3	36.3
	Percentage of All Roads	1.02%	1.06%	1.07%	1.07%	1.06%

Source: Department for Infrastructure Northern Ireland

- The map below provides a stark illustration of the above. It shows the coverage of motorways, dual carriageways and primary roads on the island of Ireland, with an evident gap in coverage out to the West:

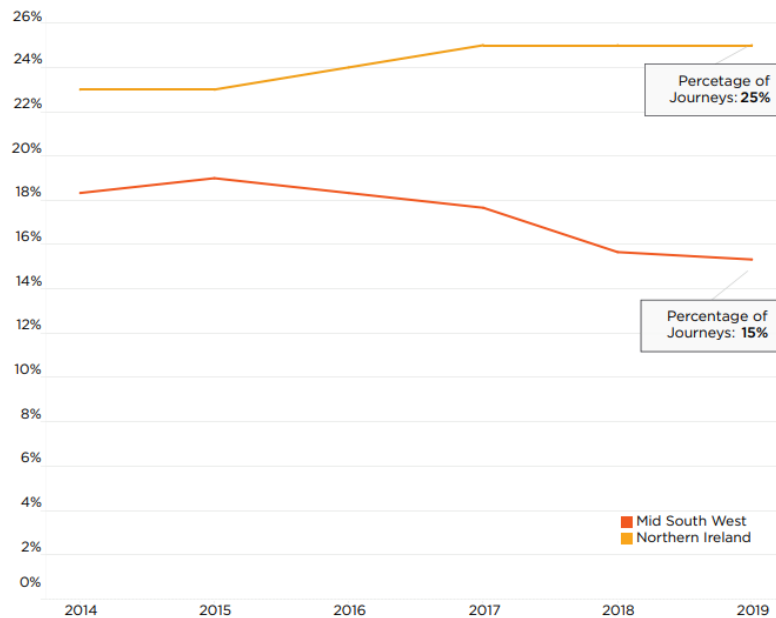


- Despite being the largest council district in terms of land mass, **Fermanagh and Omagh District Council** has no motorway and almost no dual carriageway (570 metres).
- A5 Western Transport Corridor** upgrade agreed to proceed in 2007 - remains undelivered.
- Bypasses to be prioritised/ funded/ delivered in the following areas:
 - A4 Enniskillen Southern Bypass**
 - A28 Armagh East Link**

- **A29 Cookstown Bypass**
- **A29 Dungannon Bypass**

- Public transport provision across the MSW region remains limited with more rural westerly areas particularly poorly serviced by bus infrastructure further compounding social and rural isolation, reduced accessibility and an overreliance on the private car. Poor public transport infrastructure is coupled by a downward trend in the use of public transport across the region. The chart below shows the percentage of journeys made by public transport, walking or cycling in the MSW region compared to the Northern Ireland average.

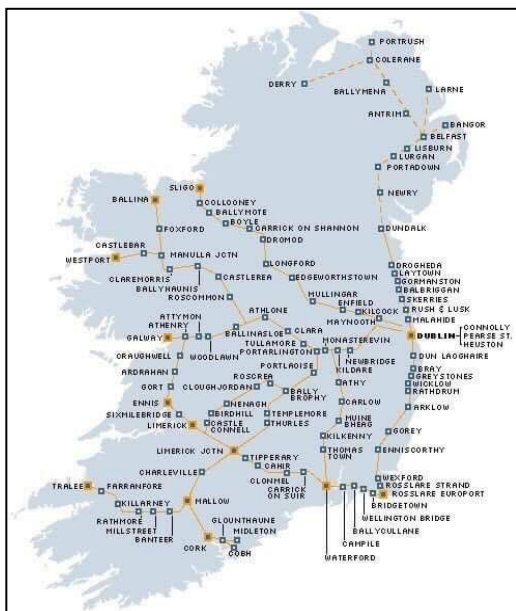
MSW Journeys by Public Transport, Walking & Cycling (2014 – 2019)



Source: NISRA

- A railway network does a huge amount for a country in transporting vast numbers of passengers and freight every day. Today's rail network across the island of Ireland covers approximately 2,300 kilometres and 27 counties. The remaining five counties (Tyrone, Fermanagh, Monaghan, Donegal and Cavan) which are all located in Ulster and positioned along both sides of the North/South border, have no connection to the rail network. The Mid South West region is in this central border region, thus devoid of rail infrastructure and connection to the wider rail network except for Portadown and Lurgan further disadvantaging our communities and people.

The first map of the rail network in Ireland below shows that the west of our region has a very striking and major gap in accessibility to rail services relative to the rest of the island economy (and expands on the previous map which only includes the NI road network). Second map shows all historic railway lines in Ireland. It confirms that most of the railways that served the MSW region and provided the necessary connectivity have been stripped away over recent decades. Acknowledging that with the publication of the All Island Strategic Rail Review, there is an aspiration to redress gaps in provision which will benefit much of the MSW region, there are currently no plans to extend the network to County Fermanagh.



Source: Translink, Open Data NI

- The absence of rail places the MSW region at a significant competitive disadvantage relative to other areas of Northern Ireland and the Republic of

Ireland. The absence of modern transport connectivity restricts inward investment, suppresses productivity growth, weakens tourism potential and limits the region's ability to contribute fully to all-island and UK economic growth. Addressing these longstanding infrastructure gaps is therefore not simply a transport issue, it is an economic imperative. Strategic investment in Mid South West road and rail connectivity would unlock significant productivity gains, strengthen cross-border trade, improve access to labour markets and support tourism growth enabling the region to make an even greater contribution to Northern Ireland's economy.

- The serious gaps in our basic infrastructure is further evidence by date which shows that a high proportion (41%) of MSW's Super Output Areas are ranked amongst the most deprived in NI for access to services. This indicator covers travel time by private and public transport and mobile network coverage to a range of 16 services. One of these services is access to healthcare/ Accident and Emergency Services. In some parts of our region the deficiencies of our road network contribute to some of the lowest performances in relation to ambulance response times in NI. Then these residents are impacted again as the travel time to a hospital with major injury treatment capabilities is over eight minutes longer than the NI average. This is the 'lived experience' of many in our region to the realities of sub-standard infrastructure and connectivity.
- Despite the evident strengths of the tourism product in our region, structural barriers to growth exist. Research by Tourism NI confirms that the main barriers to out-of-state tourism growth in MSW include the physical inaccessibility of the region. Out-of-state visitors to NI, visiting for a short period/weekend break, often rely on public transport, rather than car hire. Therefore, the absence of rail links to existing 'tourism hotspots' and gateways into NI, is a material accessibility barrier to readily accessing the world class tourism product that we have in our region some of which will be significantly enhanced through investment from the Growth Deal.
- In order to address regional imbalances and achieve levelling up of the NI economy, it is essential in the first instance, to install the basic rail and road infrastructure that will support the structure of our economy and take advantage of our distinctive positioning along the north/south and east/west border corridors. In the absence of redressing the fundamental economic problem (infrastructure gap), increasing productivity and achieving virtuous economic effects will only remain a distant possibility for the MSW region. Based on the financial contribution that the MSW Region makes to the NI and UK economies, this is an unacceptable position.

- There are also major utility infrastructure deficits in relation to the prevailing wastewater network capacity and state electricity supply in MSW. Chronic underinvestment in our major utilities is increasingly restricting the MSW Region's ability to grow and prosper. The deficit in relation to wastewater network capacity is most pronounced in Mid Ulster but arguably increasingly more prevalent in other parts of MSW. This is a major constraint on housing development (impacting on the ability to attract labour from elsewhere to MSW) and on the development of serviced industrial land, to enable our businesses to expand. For example, 41 locations across the MSW region are currently affected by wastewater infrastructure capacity issues, accounting for 35% of all development constraining wastewater issues in Northern Ireland. Our businesses have also indicated that electricity supply and the cost of energy is a real constraint on growth, and our RES contains project proposals in this regard, including an emphasis on incentivising localised and shared green energy production at new industrial estates.

The impact extends far beyond individual projects. Communities are seeing delays in the delivery of new homes, while businesses face uncertainty when looking to invest, expand operations or establish new facilities. Addressing these longstanding deficits are critical for MSW to realise its full potential. Investment in our wastewater and electricity infrastructure will not only unlock housing and industrial development but will also help create the conditions for sustained economic growth, increased competitiveness and greater regional balance across Northern Ireland.

- While broadband coverage has improved, a significant number of premises still lack access to 30Mbit/s broadband (almost double the NI average), especially in rural areas, risking digital exclusion as services increasingly move online.

MSW Response to the Regional Balance Bill - Call for Evidence Specific Questions

Clause 1 – Strategic Regional Balance Framework

Do regional economic and related disparities need legislation in order for them to be addressed appropriately?

Yes. Regional balance is not a new concept and has been specifically referenced in various Government strategies, policies and plans however in the absence of legislation, limited progress has been made to address imbalances. The proposed legislative framework will demand accountability and call out failure where efforts fall short.

The MSW Regional Economic Strategy (launched in 2020) celebrated the region's strengths and clearly articulated our vision and ambition to supercharge economic growth and ensure inclusive prosperity for our citizens. As is articulated in this response, the Strategy also identified opportunities and challenges which require targeted investment and actions and whilst much will be achieved through the Growth Deal investment, the Strategy assumed that other resources, funding and policy changes would be required to underpin the full realisation of the RES.

Forward actions arising from NI Executive and NI Government Department initiatives and programmes must fully embrace the policy imperatives of addressing regional economic and related disparities to achieve 'regional balance'. Such a focus is critical and requires legislation for success to be genuinely possible.

Should the obligation on the development of a Strategic Regional Balance Framework sit with the Executive?

Yes. Achieving regional balance and tackling regional imbalances is a strategic cross cutting issue that rightly sits with the NI Executive. A Strategic Regional Balance Framework must be an Executive priority albeit it will require a co-ordinated and collaborative approach in order to be successful.

The '*New Decade, New Approach*' Deal published in January 2020 to underpin the restoration of the NI Executive highlights that a '*top priority of the Executive will be to develop a regionally-balanced economy with opportunities for all*'. As previously stated, despite commitments to regional balance in numerous Government strategies, policies and plans, regional imbalances and disparities continue to exist and in some instances are more pronounced than ever. In the context of the Framework, forward programmes of investment, for example, in public infrastructure and connectivity, must effectively address regional imbalances boosting access to opportunities and improving people's everyday lives.

Does the Bill correctly set out what should be in the Strategic Regional Balance Framework including: the roles of Departments; the mechanisms to address disparity; the criteria and methodology for assessing regional disparities; the setting of targets and milestones; the use of cross-border data; the identification of a baseline year etc.

Yes, however recognising that the development of the Regional Balance Framework is in its infancy with further detail and specifics to be worked through, it is imperative that the Framework recognises that one size doesn't fit all, maximises the existence of sub-regional partnerships such as the MSW Region and leverages the benefits to be derived from the NI City and Growth Deal investments.

With the longest proportion of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Border Corridor and much higher levels of cross-border trade, community, access to services (including health and education) and recreational use than would be found in other parts of the island of Ireland as well as a co-dependency on tourism, movement of workers, inward investment and funding, the MSW region welcomes the use of cross-border data and evidence.

Transparency both in the development and delivery of the Framework, as well as in monitoring its impact will be key to measuring its success or indeed calling out when initiatives and programmes are unsuccessful/less successful/fall short as well as how lessons learned are applied and help to shape new initiatives and programmes of investment.

Does the Bill correctly set out the consultation process for the development of the Strategic Regional Balance Framework, its publication and revision?

Yes. Representing a quarter of the NI population and almost half the NI land mass, the MSW Region welcomes the opportunity to input and be consulted on the specifics of the Framework as it is developed.

Do you have any other comments on Clause 1 or suggested amendments for this clause?

The MSW region thus far has not sufficiently experienced the benefits of previous policy to 'regionally-balance' the NI economy. This is despite our performance and contribution as the 'economic engine' of the NI economy. No-one Department or Agency can deliver on or achieve regional balance in isolation, and it will be no different for the Regional Balance Framework - collective buy-in and ownership of the Framework will be paramount to its successful delivery.

Clause 2 – Reporting, Review and Support Functions

Is it reasonable and sufficient to require all Departments in developing, adopting, implementing or revising any policy, strategy or plan, to have due regard to the need to reduce regional disparity and to the Strategic Regional Balance Framework?

Yes. As stated earlier, the Strategic Regional Balance Framework should be an Executive priority and as such, should compel Departments to proactively consider and assess how any policy, strategy or plan in development, adoption, implementation or revision CAN reduce regional disparity/ies.

The Strategic Regional Balance Framework must not be 'optional' but be at the core of policy, strategy and plan development, investment decisions etc.

Is it reasonable and sufficient to require all Departments to exercise their functions, so far as is reasonably practicable, in a manner calculated to contribute to the outcomes and targets set in the Strategic Regional Balance Framework?

Yes,

Do you have any other comments on Clause 2 or suggested amendments for this clause?

No.

Clause 3 – Annual Reporting

Do you agree that all Departments should be required to report annually as to how they have reduced regional disparities in the preceding 12-month period?

Yes. For the public to have confidence in the Framework and recognising the lead role of the Department for the Economy, the NI Executive must hold all Departments to account. As well as recognising and reporting on successes, reporting must also reflect where a policy, strategy, plan etc has been less successful or impactful in addressing or reducing regional disparities, why this is the case as well as documenting lessons learned that can inform the development of future policy, strategy or plans.

Do you have any other comments on Clause 3 or suggested amendments for this clause?

No.

Clause 4 – Annual Reporting

Do you agree that the Department for the Economy should be required to report annually and the Minister make a related statement as to how all Departments have reduced regional disparities in the preceding 12 month period?

Yes.

Do you have any other comments on Clause 4 or suggested amendments for this clause?

No.

Clause 5 – Reviewing the Framework

Do you agreed that the operation and effectiveness of the Framework should be revised by the Executive every 5 years?

Yes.

Do you have any other comments on Clause 5 or suggested amendments for this clause?

Whilst the five-year timeframe should allow sufficient time for the implementation and delivery of the Framework and for its operation and effectiveness to be measured, it may be prudent, depending on Annual Reports and progress, to include scope to review the operation and effectiveness earlier than five years.

In the interests of transparency and accountability, the outcome of reviews, not just the recommendations should be published.

Clause 6 – Guidance and Research

Do you agree that the Department for the Economy should provide guidance and information and undertake, commission or support research on regional disparities?

Yes.

Do you have any other comments on Clause 6 or suggested amendments for this clause?

No.

Clause 7 – Defining Regional Disparity and regions

Do you agree with how regional disparity may be defined by the Bill?

Yes, broadly content.

Should regional disparity indices be specified in the Bill?

Yes, however the Bill should include scope for other indices or local circumstances to be considered where this is appropriate and can highlight disparity. Every effort must be made to ensure that the development of policies, strategies, plans and investment decisions have properly considered and assessed regional disparities and that indices are not restrictive in that sense.

What other indices should be used to define regional disparity?

Refer to previous response.

Do you agree with how the Bill may define a region within Northern Ireland?

Yes.

Do you have any other comments on Clause 7 or suggested amendments for this clause?

No.

Do you agree that the provisions of this legislation should be commenced immediately after Royal Assent?

Yes.

Do you have any other comments on Clause 8 or suggested amendments for this clause?

No.

Conclusion

MSW has for decades been 'starved' in terms of critical investment in public infrastructure. As noted at the outset of this response facilitating transport, promoting communication, providing access to land, energy and water are the bedrock of prosperity and well-being in any competitive economy. The MSW region has achieved considerable success as a globalised, outward and forward-looking region, despite serious gaps in several aspects of this basic economic infrastructure, demonstrating the vision and determination of our indigenous business champions. There is evident potential for further growth that will benefit not just our region, but NI as a whole as well as the UK and island of Ireland economies, if we are supported with the requisite public investment to unlock productivity gains.

Our ambitions for the MSW region will continue to be constrained if the basic deficiencies in our economic infrastructure and connectivity are not addressed.

The lived experience of those in the MSW Region is that the work of Government Departments is often fragmented, with little or no alignment in perspectives or approaches which ultimately constrain economic growth and do little to address regional imbalance. The introduction of the Strategic Regional Balance Framework must compel more effective joined up working to influence policy levers, better direct investment and specifically target resources where they are needed.

A rising tide lifts all boats.