

FAO The Committee Clerk
Committee for the Economy
Northern Ireland Assembly
Room 349
Parliament Buildings
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3XX



September 2026

Response to Regional Balance Bill Call for Evidence

Retail NI represents the independent retail sector in Northern Ireland, advocating for independent retailers, suppliers and wholesalers and driving tangible change in critical policy areas including planning, business rates reform and high street regeneration.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Regional Balance Bill. As an organisation representing members right across Northern Ireland, we urge the Executive to do more to deliver greater regional balance and ensure economic and social prosperity across the whole of Northern Ireland. We wish our comments to be viewed as constructive, while reflecting the frustration of many who understand the province-wide potential that exists, but also recognise our apparent inability to realise it.

At this stage, we wish to contribute our views on what needs to happen to achieve this objective. We would suggest that significant progress can be made by delivering the many major infrastructure projects currently in the 'delayed' box, while also fostering a business environment that encourages, rather than discourages, entrepreneurship and business expansion. Many of our greatest entrepreneurs historically did not come from the Greater Belfast area, and a greater entrepreneurial spirit needs to be rediscovered if we are to see meaningful change right across Northern Ireland.

We have a habit in Northern Ireland of reaching for a new strategy or forming a new working group whenever a problem is identified. We are not so good at simply fixing the problem. During the lifetime of the Northern Ireland Executive, a significant number of strategies have already been developed. The business community, in all its forms, stands ready to provide support where it is viable to do so.

We therefore question the necessity of producing more annual statistics, which are likely to tell us what we already know. Instead, there should be a relentless focus on

tackling the barriers that are forcing businesses to close, or at least curtailing investment, while undermining social cohesion. Much of this is already well researched and documented. Delivery is what will drive change.

Infrastructure and Connectivity

One of the factors that could deliver greater regional balance is the delivery of the growing list of infrastructure projects across Northern Ireland that could have a transformational impact. Too many remain stalled due to a range of political, financial and legal issues, and the lack of progress is failing many people.

Northern Ireland is geographically small. High-quality road and rail links would vastly improve the ability of residents to move around the region, helping to rejuvenate rural towns and villages by enabling people to remain living locally while accessing employment and other opportunities in our cities.

We have considered the long-term benefits that could arise if greater regional balance were to be genuinely achieved. We note that the Bill aims to stimulate job creation and improve living standards in rural and 'left behind' areas by legally mandating the Executive to address regional imbalances. We would suggest that this will only be achieved through a significant change in direction in both planning and infrastructure policy.

Historically, economic growth and infrastructure have been heavily clustered around the Greater Belfast area. People will naturally follow job opportunities, resulting in a reduced presence in other parts of Northern Ireland. We can trace this in part to the major industries that dominated Northern Ireland for much of the twentieth century.

However, changing work patterns and the growth of working from home mean that it is increasingly possible for employees to be decentralised across many sectors, particularly those in fast-growing technology fields. This presents an opportunity to support regional economies if the necessary infrastructure, connectivity and business environment are put in place.

Planning and High Street Regeneration

Planning policies over the past few decades have contributed to dereliction in many of our town and village centres. They have too often encouraged out-of-town alternatives. While it may be too late to reverse some of the damage, the High Street Task Force has developed a plan for change that could help many parts of Northern Ireland with lower economic performance. However, that work has yet to be substantially implemented.

The future of our high streets must form an important part of the regional balance agenda. Strong town centres provide employment, services and social infrastructure, while also supporting the wider local economy. Greater consideration therefore needs to be given to how planning policy can support viable town centres and independent businesses.

Invest NI and Regional Investment

A key pillar of the broader regional balance agenda is Invest NI's commitment to direct a significantly higher proportion of its support outside the Greater Belfast area.

While this funding typically targets larger inward investors or expanding indigenous companies, the downstream effects are also relevant to the retail sector. When new businesses open or expand in regional towns, they bring new employees who spend their wages on local lunches, coffees and goods, helping to keep money circulating within the local economy.

We note the comment that Invest NI has failed to sufficiently target the distribution of jobs across Northern Ireland. We would suggest that businesses themselves will ultimately lead on those decisions and will factor the quality of infrastructure into their investment decisions.

Therefore, our message remains straightforward: fix the basics and we may be surprised by a greater willingness among businesses to look beyond the capital city and its surrounding area.

Avoiding Unintended Consequences

Any legislation arising from this process must not have a negative impact on businesses in any part of Northern Ireland. Some may argue that businesses are not the target of this Bill, but unintended consequences are something local businesses have too much experience of having to deal with.

We welcome the acknowledgement of pockets of deprivation within Belfast City Council boundaries but find it too generalist to simply reference North and West Belfast. Greater analysis of the Government's own statistics would highlight parts of East Belfast, particularly Ballymacarrett, as suffering from high levels of deprivation.

Equally, many smaller towns and villages in the Greater Belfast area experience many of the same challenges as those further afield, but this does not appear to have been sufficiently taken into consideration. A genuine approach to regional balance should recognise deprivation and economic disadvantage wherever they occur, rather than relying too heavily on broad geographical classifications.

Independent Retail and the High Street

While the Regional Balance Bill suggests a hopeful framework for spreading wealth and opportunity across Northern Ireland, it is not a silver bullet for the immediate problems facing the high street.

Independent retailers will continue to rely on their agility, specialist product ranges and the unique, community-focused customer service that large multiples cannot easily replicate. However, they also require a supportive operating environment in which they can survive, invest and grow.

Regional balance therefore needs to be considered alongside the wider challenges facing the retail sector, particularly the rising cost of doing business, business rates, planning restrictions, transport connectivity and the condition of town centres.

Practical Measures

There are several practical measures that both the Northern Ireland Executive and the UK Government could take to quickly improve economic performance in every part of Northern Ireland:

- Reduce the cost of doing business.
- Reform the business rates system.
- Improve the road network.
- Invest in public transport, including serious consideration of a Northern Ireland-wide rail network.
- Address the planning system at three key points: retail planning, residential planning and agricultural planning.
- Examine how the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) can become truly Northern Ireland-embedded.
- Devolve regeneration powers to local councils, alongside an appropriate budget, to enable them to drive locally focused plans forward.

Tackling the cost of doing business would provide an immediate stimulus for economic activity right across Northern Ireland. Many of those who would benefit most are micro, small and medium-sized businesses, which are located in every corner of Northern Ireland and play a vital role in their local communities.

Conclusion

Retail NI welcomes positive steps towards growing prosperity in every part of Northern Ireland. However, we would suggest that there is already a long list of projects and policies that need to be delivered if we are to achieve this goal.

We have welcomed successive Programmes for Government but are often frustrated by the lack of progress in delivery. Coupled with this has been a relentless rise in the cost of doing business, which has further undermined the ability of businesses to invest and build for the future.

The Regional Balance Bill provides an opportunity to establish a stronger focus on addressing regional disparities. However, legislation alone will not deliver the change required. What is needed is a renewed focus on implementation, infrastructure, planning and creating a business environment in which entrepreneurship and investment can flourish across the whole of Northern Ireland.

Only a new trajectory, underpinned by delivery rather than further delay, will help boost economic performance and prosperity for everyone.

Glyn Roberts
Chief Executive
Retail NI

245 Upper Newtownards Road
Belfast
BT4 1NL

