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RE; Response to Committee Call for Evidence on the Regional Balance Bill

Introduction

Rural Community Network (RCNⁱ) welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the Committee in relation to the Regional Balance Bill.

RCN is a regional, membership-based organisation supporting rural communities across Northern Ireland. We have over 200 member groups across rural Northern Ireland and work with communities to address issues including poverty, inequality, community development, good relations and access to services. We seek to ensure that rural communities have a meaningful voice in policy development and decision-making.

RCN previously responded to the consultation on the Private Members' Regional Jobs, Skills and Investment Bill. In that response, we supported the principle of a whole-of-government approach to regional economic imbalance and identified the need to consider economic performance alongside housing, infrastructure, health, education, transport, social security, rural development and poverty. We continue to support those principles.

However, through our ongoing work with rural communities, we believe there is an opportunity to develop the concept of regional balance further.

Regional balance should not simply be about where economic activity is located. It should be about whether people, wherever they live, have a realistic and equitable opportunity to access and participate in that economic activity.

For RCN, this means understanding regional balance through the lens of regional equity.

What should regional balance mean?

Economic indicators such as employment, productivity, wages, investment and business activity are important measures of regional performance. However, they do not provide the full picture of whether a region is thriving or whether people living there have a fair opportunity to participate in society and the economy. Regional disadvantage is also shaped by access to:

- healthcare;
- education, skills and training;
- housing;
- public and community transport;
- roads and other physical infrastructure;
- digital connectivity;
- community services and infrastructure; and
- employment and wider economic opportunities.

RCN's previous response therefore called for a whole-of-government approach, identifying housing, infrastructure, climate action, schools, universities and apprenticeships, hospitals, transport, social security and economic investment as areas which need to be considered together when addressing regional imbalance. We continue to believe this is essential.

Regional balance is not simply about moving economic activity around Northern Ireland.

A region cannot be considered to have achieved genuine balance simply because economic investment, jobs or businesses are present if the people living there continue to face significant barriers in accessing the services and infrastructure required to live, work and participate fully in their communities.

This is particularly important in rural areas, where geographical distance, dispersed populations and limited transport options can create additional costs and barriers.

Regional balance should therefore consider both:

1. **the distribution of economic opportunity; and**
2. **the conditions that enable people to access and sustain that opportunity.**

This requires a broader understanding of economic infrastructure.

Regional equity, not uniformity

RCN believes it is important to distinguish between equality and equity when considering regional balance. Regional balance should not mean providing identical services, infrastructure or investment in every location. Nor should it mean applying an urban model of service provision uniformly across Northern Ireland and expecting rural communities to achieve the same outcomes through the same means.

Rural communities have different geographical, demographic and infrastructural circumstancesⁱⁱ. Delivering an equitable outcome may therefore require different approaches, different models of provision and, in some circumstances, additional investment to overcome the disadvantages created by distance, dispersed populations and limited transport options. For RCN, the objective should therefore be regional equity rather than uniformity.

The test should be whether people can realistically access and benefit from services, infrastructure and economic opportunities, rather than whether the same provision exists everywhere. For example, a service may technically be available to a rural resident but, if accessing it requires a lengthy journey, private car ownership, significant expenditure or reliance on limited community transport, the existence of that service alone does not demonstrate equitable access. Same does not necessarily mean fair. This distinction is particularly important when considering rural poverty and disadvantage.

RCN has long highlighted that rural poverty cannot be understood simply through financial measures. Geographical isolation, lower population density and dispersed settlements can create additional costs and barriers in accessing healthcare, education, employment and other essential services. A person may therefore have the same nominal entitlement to a service as someone living in an urban area while having a significantly greater cost, journey or practical barrier in accessing it. This is a regional balance issue.

Economic opportunity requires infrastructure

RCN believes there is an important economic case for improving regional access to services and infrastructure. Investment in health services, transport, education, housing, digital connectivity and community infrastructure should not be viewed as separate from economic development. These are part of the infrastructure that enables regional economies to function and grow.

The economy benefits when people can access both the services they need and the jobs available to them. A strong local employer can provide jobs, but people also need schools, healthcare, housing, transport and community infrastructure if they are to live and work successfully in an area.

Equally, education and training can prepare people for employment, but the economic benefit is greater when accessible, good-quality and well-paid jobs exist within the wider geography in which people live.

A community with poor access to healthcare, education, transport or housing may find it harder to:

- attract and retain workers;
- support families;
- sustain businesses;
- retain young people;
- encourage investment; and
- participate fully in the wider economy.

Conversely, ensuring that people can access the services they need within a reasonable distance and at a reasonable cost can strengthen the economic potential of a region. These are therefore not simply social policy considerations. They are economic conditions.

The rural dimension of regional imbalance

RCN's previous response highlighted that access to services is one of the most significant concerns raised by rural communities. The Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measureⁱⁱⁱ has previously demonstrated the significant rural disadvantage associated with access to services, with the most deprived areas on this measure being overwhelmingly rural.

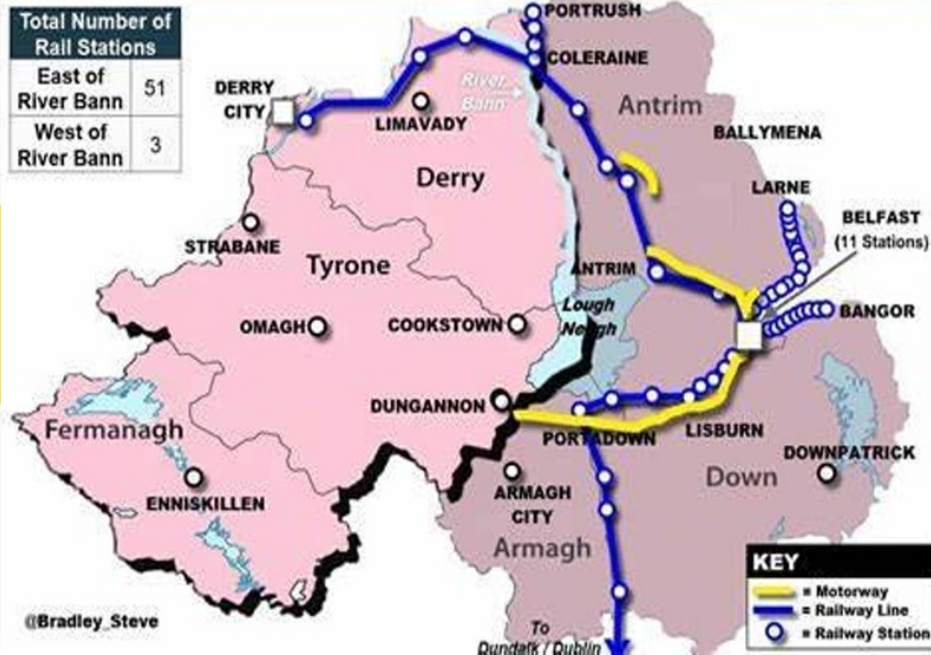
This demonstrates why regional balance cannot be assessed solely through measures such as employment, wages or business activity. For someone living in a rural community, access to employment may depend upon:

- whether they have access to a car;
- the availability and reliability of public or community transport;
- the distance to employment centres;
- childcare availability;
- the cost of fuel and travel;
- broadband connectivity;
- access to training and qualifications; and
- access to healthcare and other essential services.

The additional costs created by rurality can reduce disposable income and limit people's ability to participate in the economy. RCN has previously referred to this as a **rural premium**.

Cars, for example, are often not a luxury in rural Northern Ireland. Many of our working families describe the need for two cars in a two adult working household as an essential as they are essential infrastructure for accessing work, education, healthcare, childcare and basic services. The map below highlights the current lack of motorway and rail infrastructure across Northern Ireland.

Map 1 - NI's Current Rail & Motorway Infrastructure



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This means that a policy which appears economically neutral at a regional level may have very different consequences depending upon where people live.

Services and infrastructure should be recognised as economic infrastructure

RCN therefore believes the Committee should consider explicitly recognising services and infrastructure as part of the economic infrastructure required to support regional development.

This includes:

Health

Accessible healthcare supports economic participation. Poor access can mean additional travel, missed work, increased caring responsibilities and delayed treatment, with consequences for households, employers and workforce participation^v.

RCN is not suggesting that every healthcare service should be available on every rural doorstep. Rather, services should be located according to need, geography and clinical necessity, with appropriate primary and community care available as close to home as possible.

Where time is critical, however, distance can be a matter of life and death. Delays in accessing emergency or specialist care can affect outcomes, recovery and long-term health. The impact of service centralisation must therefore consider not simply whether a service exists, but whether people can access the right care within an appropriate timeframe^{vi}.

There is also an economic cost to travelling further for healthcare. Fuel, parking, transport, lost working time and caring responsibilities can add significantly to

household costs. These costs should be recognised when considering regional wages, disposable income and living standards^{vii}.

Equitable access does not mean identical provision everywhere; it means care that is appropriately located, accessible and responsive to the needs of the population.

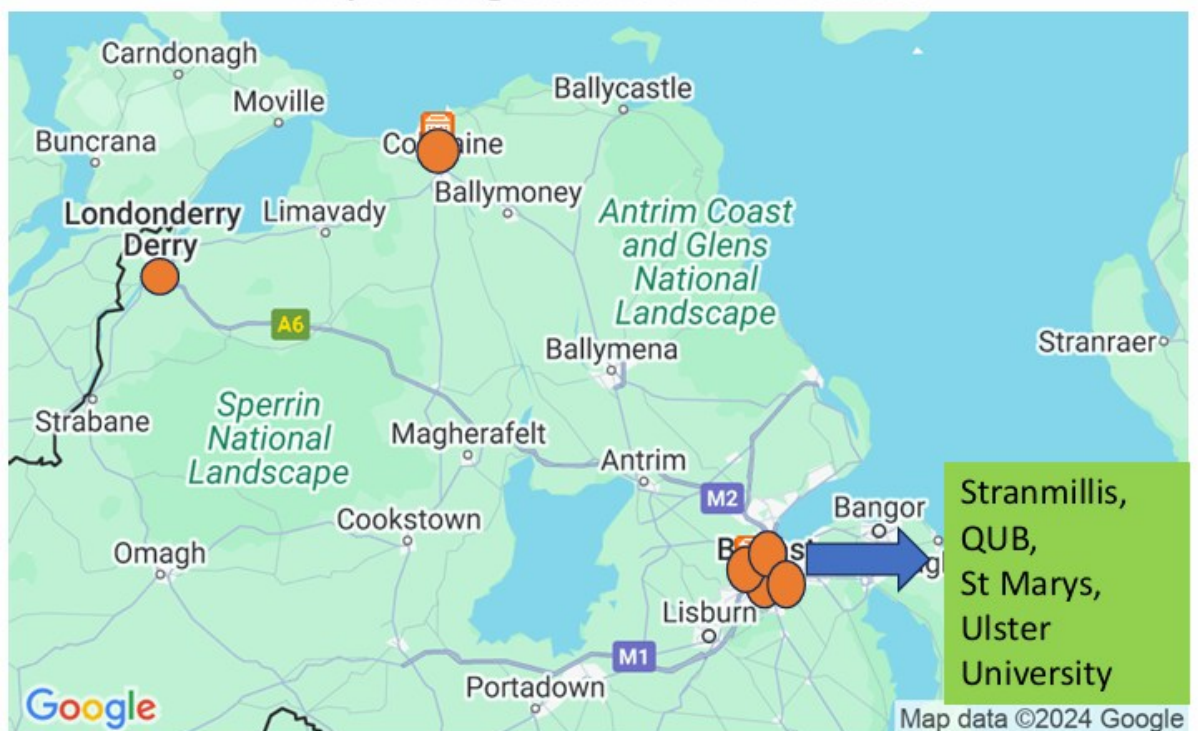
Education and skills

The availability of education and skills opportunities is only meaningful if people can realistically access them. Schools, Further Education, Apprenticeships and training opportunities are critical to developing the workforce required by regional economies, but the geographical distribution of that provision matters. For rural young people, a course that is technically available but requires a lengthy journey, multiple connections or significant transport and accommodation costs may not be a realistic opportunity.

Regional balance should therefore consider how long it takes people to access education, not simply whether provision exists. There is a need to ask what constitutes a reasonable travelling distance and, importantly, how long is too long for a young person to travel each day to access education or training? A two-hour journey each way, for example, can fundamentally change whether an opportunity is practical, particularly for young people who cannot drive or afford the associated costs.

Northern Ireland's higher education provision is concentrated around a small number of urban centres, meaning that for many rural young people accessing university involves significant travel or relocation.

Map showing locations of NI Universities



This is not necessarily a reason to replicate university provision across every rural area. It does, however, reinforce the importance of making effective use of the Regional Education College Network and other locally accessible provision, including Apprenticeships, Vocational Training, outreach and flexible delivery.

There is an opportunity to develop more place-based skills pathways linked directly to local economic need; connecting the job, the training and the place. Where there is an identified need for particular skills or occupations, Further Education Colleges, employers, communities and Government could work together to develop training locally and create clearer routes into sustainable employment within the region. This could help rural employers access the workforce they need while giving young people greater opportunity to build careers without having to leave their communities.

This also requires stronger alignment between skills planning and regional economic planning. Rather than considering education and employment separately, investment decisions should identify the skills that emerging and existing regional economies require and consider how existing education and training infrastructure can help meet that need.

Regional planning should therefore bring schools, further education, employers, communities and transport providers together to understand future skills needs and develop pathways into sustainable, well-paid employment. Please see case study below.

Regional balance should not simply measure where people gain qualifications, but whether young people can access meaningful pathways into sustainable careers and whether skills investment strengthens the economies of the places where they live.

Housing

The availability of suitable and affordable housing is fundamental to regional economic balance. It affects whether people can live near employment opportunities, whether young people can remain in or return to their communities, and whether businesses can recruit and retain the workforce they need^{viii}.

In rural areas, housing need can be less visible in official data. People may remain in unsuitable accommodation, stay longer in the family home, or leave their community because suitable and affordable housing is unavailable^{ix}. Understanding this latent demand^x requires engagement with communities alongside statutory data. RCN's work through the Rural Residents Forum^{xi} with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) demonstrates the value of this approach and the opportunities for NIHE, communities and other partners to work together to better understand and respond to local housing need.

Rural housing should not simply be planned on the assumption that residents will commute to the nearest large town or urban centre. Housing investment should support people to live, work and participate in their communities, while recognising the contribution rural areas make to the wider economy.

Housing must also be considered alongside the infrastructure required to support sustainable development. New homes require appropriate roads, water and wastewater infrastructure, broadband, schools, healthcare, transport and community facilities. There is an opportunity for government, NIHE, councils and communities to work together from the outset to identify need, address infrastructure constraints and plan for sustainable growth, rather than treating housing and supporting infrastructure as separate issues.

Housing is therefore part of the economic and social infrastructure that enables sustainable rural communities and regional economies.

Transport

Transport is integral to rural social and economic infrastructure. The geography that matters is not simply the distance between two points on a map, but the journey people actually have to make – by road, public transport or Community Transport. Rural accessibility should therefore be considered in terms of real journey times, distance, connections and cost, rather than geographical proximity alone.

Roads, public transport and community transport determine the effective geography within which people can access employment, education, healthcare and other essential services. Transport must therefore be considered alongside decisions about service provision and investment, rather than as an afterthought or mitigation measure. For example, where health reconfiguration relies on community transport to offset increased travel, the capacity and funding of that transport must be considered as part of the service decision itself. It cannot be assumed that community transport can absorb additional demand without additional support.

There is also an opportunity to take a more strategic and joined-up approach to transport and regional balance. If regional balance means bringing good jobs and economic opportunity closer to where people live, while Northern Ireland also seeks to reduce transport emissions, these objectives should be considered together. Reliable rural public transport can improve access to employment and education, reduce car dependency and support wider climate and regional development ambitions.

This requires genuine partnership between Translink, local government, Community Transport providers, employers and communities, with provision designed around where people actually live, work and access services. This should include consideration of appropriate routes, frequency, connections and journey times, rather than assuming that existing provision can respond to changes made elsewhere.

RCN also believes there is significant potential to build on community-led and community-managed transport models. Conventional scheduled public transport remains essential, but cannot always provide an effective or sustainable response in dispersed rural areas where population density, travel patterns and demand differ from urban areas. Community Transport can offer a more flexible and locally responsive model, drawing on local knowledge to connect people to employment, education, healthcare, shopping and other essential services where conventional routes may not be viable.

However, community transport should complement rather than replace mainstream public transport, and community organisations should not be expected to fill gaps in statutory provision through volunteer capacity alone. Where community-led transport is providing essential connectivity, it requires sustainable and proportionate public investment, appropriate vehicles and infrastructure, and funding that reflects the ongoing cost of delivery rather than short-term project activity.

This is particularly relevant to regional balance. A locally managed service connecting a rural community to a larger employment or service centre can expand the effective labour market, improve access to training and education, support local businesses and reduce isolation. Community-led transport should therefore be considered as part of the wider regional investment model and as economic and social infrastructure, alongside mainstream public transport.

Transport should consequently be viewed not only as a means of getting from one place to another, but as an enabler of regional development, access to opportunity and climate ambitions. Investment should reflect the different transport needs of rural places and support a combination of mainstream and locally appropriate community-led models where these provide the most effective connectivity for dispersed rural populations.

Digital Connectivity and Emerging Technologies

Digital connectivity can help overcome geographical barriers, enabling people and businesses to access markets, services, training and employment opportunities. However, digital connectivity should complement rather than replace accessible physical services.

There remain rural “not-spots”^{xii}, alongside affordability and digital skills gaps. This matters particularly in communities with an older population^{xiii}, where some people may have had less opportunity to develop the skills and confidence needed to engage with increasingly digital services and employment. Digital inclusion must therefore consider connectivity, affordability, skills and confidence, rather than simply whether infrastructure is technically available.

Regional balance should also look ahead to the economic and infrastructure changes associated with AI, emerging technologies, renewable energy and the transition to a greener economy. As these sectors develop, decisions about where investment and infrastructure are located should not inadvertently reproduce existing regional inequalities.

Rural communities have hosted much of Northern Ireland’s renewable energy infrastructure, yet there remain questions about the tangible benefits flowing back to the communities that accommodate these developments. As attention turns to new investment opportunities, including data centres, there is a need to ensure that rural communities are not simply expected to accommodate the infrastructure and its demands on local services, energy supplies, water and the environment, without sharing in the benefits.

Where significant new investment or infrastructure is proposed, rural communities should be engaged early and meaningfully, rather than presented with decisions after they have effectively been made. Regional balance should provide a framework for communities to have a genuine voice in decisions affecting their area and to share in the economic opportunities arising from investment.

This presents opportunities to strengthen community energy, local skills and employment, community benefit and public understanding of the transition to a greener and more technologically enabled economy. Investment should therefore be planned *with* rural communities, not simply *in* rural areas, with community wellbeing and environmental considerations given appropriate weight alongside commercial interests.

Regional balance should extend beyond the distribution of existing economic activity to ensure that future economic and technological change creates lasting opportunities for rural communities, rather than reproducing existing patterns of regional inequality.

Community infrastructure

The Community and Voluntary Sector is an important part of the infrastructure that enables rural communities to function and thrive. Community organisations provide transport, advice, social support, childcare, community facilities, volunteering opportunities and a wide range of locally responsive services. They often reach people and places that statutory services cannot reach in the same way.

RCN members have consistently highlighted the pressures they face in sustaining this contribution, including difficulties recruiting and retaining volunteers and challenges in securing the staffing capacity needed to deliver their work. Rural organisations can also face additional costs and capacity constraints arising from geography, while seeking to provide services across dispersed communities. Regional balance should consider not only where statutory investment is made, but the capacity of the community infrastructure that helps translate that investment into outcomes.

The Partnership Agreement^{xiv} provides an important foundation for a more consistent relationship between government and the community and voluntary sector. Regional balance presents an opportunity to build on this by establishing greater consistency, accountability and transparency in how partnership is applied across Departments, rather than relying on individual programmes or relationships.

There is also a significant opportunity to move beyond consultation towards genuine partnership. The experience of rural communities and their organisations during COVID-19 demonstrated the sector's ability^{xv} to respond quickly, adapt services, mobilise volunteers and reach people in ways that were often not possible through traditional delivery models. That capacity should be recognised as an asset within regional economic and social planning.

The question should therefore not simply be what government can deliver in rural areas, but what can be achieved by government, communities and the voluntary and community sector working together. Supporting the capacity of rural organisations to recruit, retain staff and volunteers and develop sustainable infrastructure should be seen as an investment in regional resilience, participation and economic potential.

Border rural communities – understanding lived geography

There is a particular opportunity within this Bill to think differently about border rural communities. The administrative geography used by Government does not always reflect the geography of people's everyday lives.

Communities organise themselves around place, proximity and what is realistically accessible to them, rather than Council or jurisdictional boundaries.

For a family living in a border rural community, the relevant questions are practical:

- Where is the nearest school?
- Where can children access education and training?
- Where is the nearest GP or hospital?
- Where can childcare be accessed?
- What transport connections are available?
- Where are the jobs that offer good wages and sustainable employment?
- How far do people have to travel to access those opportunities?
- What does that journey cost?
- Which towns and service centres do people actually use?

These lived geographies can cross administrative, council and jurisdictional boundaries. RCN therefore believes regional economic policy should consider the functional geography of border rural communities – the places people actually travel to for employment, education, healthcare, services and markets – rather than relying exclusively on administrative boundaries.

This does not mean ignoring administrative responsibilities or the different policy and funding frameworks that apply on either side of the border. It means recognising that people's lived experience of place can be much more fluid than the structures through which policy is delivered.

Case study – Derrylin St Aidan's High School Derrylin

St Aidan's High School in Derrylin has an established relationship with Mannok, recently renewed for a further three years. This relationship links the curriculum with areas including Business Studies, Finance, Marketing and Human Resources and helps pupils understand how classroom learning connects to future careers.¹

The school also has a relationship with Encirc, a major employer based in Derrylin, County Fermanagh. Encirc has engaged with schools across the region, including bringing students to its Derrylin manufacturing operation to learn about the business and the range of careers available. In 2024, more than 350 students from schools in Fermanagh, Tyrone, Belfast and across the border in Cavan and Leitrim visited the site¹.

There are also examples of this relationship extending beyond employment and careers, with Encirc and its IT partner supporting schools on both sides of the Fermanagh–Cavan border.

This illustrates why regional economic policy should consider how the assets within a place connect: schools + employers + skills + transport + services + communities.

Considering these individually risks missing the economic potential created by their interaction. For a young person growing up in Derrylin and its wider rural area, their economic geography is not defined simply by an administrative boundary. It is shaped by their school; the employers around them; the skills they can develop; the jobs available to them; the wages those jobs provide; transport connections; the services available locally; and the wider network of communities and settlements around them.

A whole-of-government approach

Regional imbalance cannot be addressed by the Department for the Economy alone. Decisions taken by Departments responsible for health, infrastructure, education, housing, climate, social security, rural development and economic development. All influence whether people experience opportunity or disadvantage because of where they live.

RCN's previous response therefore identified the need to consider regional imbalance alongside the Anti-Poverty Strategy^{xvi}, Childcare Strategy, Good Jobs^{xvii} and a strengthened Rural Needs Act. We continue to believe this is essential.

Regional imbalance is interconnected with poverty. An effective regional balance policy should therefore sit alongside a comprehensive, target-driven, evidence-based and population-reflective Anti-Poverty Strategy. Section 28E of the Northern Ireland Act 1998^{xviii} requires the Executive to adopt a strategy setting out how it proposes to tackle poverty, social exclusion and

patterns of deprivation based on objective need. Regional economic policy should contribute to achieving that objective.

Belfast, regional economies and sub-regional development

RCN recognises the important role of Belfast as a key economic driver for Northern Ireland. Equally, Derry/Londonderry and the wider North-West have an important role to play in the regional economy and strengthening economic activity and opportunity outside Belfast is an important part of achieving greater regional balance. However, regional economic policy should not be understood solely through Belfast, Derry/Londonderry or a simple urban–rural divide. Northern Ireland contains different sub-regional economies, settlements and economic relationships, each with their own strengths, challenges and opportunities.

It is also important that regional balance is not interpreted simply as strengthening a small number of larger urban centres outside Belfast. Derry/Londonderry, like Belfast and other regional towns, is an important economic and service hub, but its economy is connected to surrounding rural communities, smaller settlements and dispersed businesses and employers. A strategy focused primarily on the growth of individual urban centres risks overlooking the contribution and needs of the wider areas that form part of those economies.

A successful regional balance strategy should therefore seek to understand and strengthen these relationships. This means considering:

- the economic role of regional towns and cities, including Belfast and Derry/Londonderry;
- rural economies;
- border economies;
- sectoral clusters;
- commuting patterns;
- transport connections;
- education and skills relationships;
- supply chains; and
- the connections between urban centres and their surrounding rural hinterlands.

Regional balance should therefore be concerned not only with where economic activity is located, but with the relationships between places and whether people in surrounding communities can realistically access and benefit from that economic activity.

The objective should not be to weaken Belfast or redistribute economic activity arbitrarily. Rather, it should be to ensure that Northern Ireland's different regions, towns, rural areas and sub-regional economies are able to realise their own potential, and that people can benefit from the economic opportunities available across the wider region.

Measuring regional balance

RCN supports regular reporting on regional balance, including annual reporting and reporting at the end of an Assembly mandate, so that progress can be transparently assessed. However, reporting should not focus solely on lagging economic indicators such as employment, income and productivity. These tell us **where** disparities exist, but not necessarily **why** they exist or what needs to change.

A meaningful framework should therefore measure both outcomes and the conditions that shape those outcomes.

Outcomes should include:

- employment and economic inactivity;
- wages and disposable income;
- productivity;
- poverty and living standards;
- health outcomes;
- workforce participation; and
- business activity and investment.

The conditions shaping those outcomes should include:

- infrastructure investment;
- transport connectivity, journey times and cost;
- access to healthcare, education, skills and apprenticeships;
- housing availability and affordability;
- digital connectivity;
- accessibility of essential services;
- the geographical distribution of public investment;
- access to good-quality, sustainable and well-paid employment; and
- the ability of rural and border communities to access the wider economic geography around them.

This would provide a more meaningful picture of regional balance; not simply whether disparities exist, but whether the underlying conditions needed to reduce them are improving.

For border rural areas, the framework should also recognise functional economic geography; the places people actually travel to for work, education, healthcare and essential services. This means looking beyond where investment is located to whether people can realistically access and benefit from it. This approach would help Government and the Assembly understand not only where regional inequalities exist, but what is driving them and where investment could make the greatest difference.

Importantly, investment in services and infrastructure should be recognised as a leading indicator of future economic opportunity, rather than simply a cost set against economic

outputs. Accessible transport, healthcare, education, housing, digital connectivity and community infrastructure create the conditions in which people can work, businesses can grow and communities can thrive.

Community voice and lived experience

RCN believes that regional balance policy should be informed by the people who experience regional inequality. Economic statistics can tell Government **where** disparities exist. They cannot always tell us **why** they exist. For example, a high level of economic inactivity may have different causes in different places. It may relate to health, transport, caring responsibilities, childcare, skills, employment opportunities, service access or the interaction of several of these factors. Understanding those differences requires engagement with communities.

This is particularly important in rural areas where conventional datasets can mask disadvantage because dispersed populations and small settlements can make localised inequalities less visible.

RCN therefore recommends that lived experience and community evidence form part of the evidence base for regional balance policy. The voluntary and community sector can play an important role in providing this connection between communities and government.

Rural Needs Act and rural proofing

RCN believes the Regional Balance Framework provides an important opportunity to make better use of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016^{xix}, rather than treating rural considerations as a separate policy requirement. The Act already provides a statutory framework for considering the impact of policies and decisions on rural communities. Regional balance should build on this and strengthen its application.

Our previous response expressed concern that Rural Needs Impact Assessments have not always adequately reflected rural realities. Assessments can rely on data which does not sufficiently reflect rural circumstances, does not adequately differentiate between urban and rural areas, or does not capture the practical impact of geographical distance and the location of services and infrastructure.

Rural Northern Ireland is not homogeneous. A peri-urban community, a connected rural community, an unconnected rural community and a border community can experience very different levels of access to employment, education, healthcare, transport and digital connectivity. Rural proofing should therefore consider where within rural Northern Ireland impacts are being experienced, rather than treating rural communities as a single category.

This matters particularly when services are centralised or reconfigured. A service may technically remain available while becoming substantially less accessible because of distance, journey time, transport availability or cost. Regional balance should measure accessibility, not simply the existence of provision.

The recently developed Rural NI: Our New Approach 2026–2041^{xx} provides an important strategic context for this work. Regional balance should align with this approach, creating a more joined-up framework for addressing the distinct circumstances and opportunities of rural

communities. Importantly, this was a co-designed policy, demonstrating the value of involving rural communities and stakeholders in shaping the decisions that affect them.

RCN therefore recommends:

- **Regional balance is explicitly linked to the Rural Needs Act**, with rural impacts identified and addressed at an early stage, including consideration of different rural typologies and border communities.
- **Regional balance reporting uses meaningful rural and urban data** and considers practical accessibility, including travel time, transport availability and cost, rather than simply whether a service or opportunity technically exists.
- **The functional geography of rural and border communities is recognised**, particularly where people regularly cross administrative or jurisdictional boundaries to access employment, education, healthcare and other services.
- **Departments demonstrate what action has been taken in response to identified rural impacts**, ensuring rural proofing influences decisions and outcomes rather than becoming a process of assessment alone.

RCN sees an opportunity to move the Rural Needs Act from a process of demonstrating that rural needs have been considered towards a stronger focus on what difference that consideration makes to decisions and outcomes.

RCN believes there is significant potential within the existing mechanisms created by the Rural Needs Act, particularly the “due regard” duty, to make rural proofing more meaningful and outcome-focused. The question should not simply be whether rural needs have been considered, but whether that consideration has influenced decisions and led to better outcomes for rural communities. Regional balance provides an opportunity to strengthen this approach and make those impacts more visible and accountable.

Legislative and accountability mechanisms

RCN previously expressed strong support for a statutory duty on all Departments to have due regard to regional economic balance, supported by annual reporting to the Department for the Economy and reporting at the end of an Assembly mandate. We continue to support this principle.

However, the Committee should consider what the Bill is ultimately intended to achieve. A statutory duty should not become a requirement to demonstrate that regional balance has been considered; it should help drive decisions that reduce regional disparities and improve outcomes for people and communities across Northern Ireland. It is a mechanism; not a box to tick.

The experience of the Rural Needs Act is instructive. RCN members consistently tell us that they value the fact that rural needs must now be considered and that rural communities have a recognised place at the table- that is an important achievement. However, there can be a gap between consideration and action. The current framework does not always provide a clear expectation that identified rural impacts will result in mitigation, adaptation or an alternative approach.

RCN therefore believes there is an opportunity to build on the strengths of the Rural Needs Act while addressing this gap. A “comply and explain” approach could provide a practical way forward. Where a Department identifies a significant regional or rural impact, it should either demonstrate what action it has taken to address that impact, or explain transparently why a different approach has not been taken.

Departments should therefore be expected to demonstrate:

1. what regional disparities have been identified and what evidence supports this;
2. how the proposed policy, investment or decision may affect different regions, including rural and border communities;
3. what action has been taken to mitigate or address identified impacts; and
4. where action has not been taken, why, and how the impact will be monitored and reported.

This would complement the existing mechanisms under the Rural Needs Act rather than create a separate or competing process. The aim should be to move from consideration, to explanation, to action - with a clear focus on outcomes.

A regional balance duty will only be effective if it is capable of influencing decisions. Without transparency around the evidence, the response to identified impacts and the resulting outcomes, there is a risk that it becomes another tick-box exercise rather than a mechanism for reducing regional disparities.

Recommendations

RCN recommends that the Committee and Assembly consider the following principles in the development of the Bill:

1. Define regional balance through regional equity

Regional balance should encompass economic performance and living standards alongside access to services, infrastructure and opportunity. The objective should not be identical provision everywhere, but equitable access and outcomes, recognising that different places may require different approaches.

2. Recognise the infrastructure and conditions that underpin regional economies

Healthcare, education and skills, housing, transport, digital connectivity and community infrastructure should be recognised as essential conditions for economic participation and regional growth. The Bill should take a whole-of-government approach, recognising the influence of decisions across these policy areas.

3. Recognise rural, border and sub-regional economies

Regional balance should recognise the additional costs and barriers associated with rurality, including distance, dispersed populations and limited transport options. Policy should consider functional geography, rural typologies and the relationships between cities, regional towns, smaller settlements and their surrounding rural and border communities.

4. Strengthen rural proofing and the evidence base

Regional balance should complement and strengthen the Rural Needs Act, rather than create a separate assessment process. Regional indicators should use meaningful rural, urban and border data and capture accessibility, travel time and cost, as well as economic outcomes. Rural communities should not be treated as a single category.

5. Embed community voice and accountability

Lived experience and community evidence should form part of the evidence base used to identify regional imbalance and develop solutions. Departments should demonstrate how regional and rural impacts have influenced decisions, with annual and end-of-mandate reporting providing transparency and accountability.

6. Support diverse and connected sub-regional economies

Regional balance should not become a city-versus-rural exercise or focus solely on strengthening a small number of urban centres. Belfast, Derry/Londonderry and other regional towns and cities are important economic drivers, but their success is connected to the rural communities, smaller settlements, businesses and supply chains around them. Policy should support the development and connectivity of Northern Ireland's diverse sub-regional economies, enabling people to access and benefit from economic opportunity across the wider region.

Conclusion

RCN welcomes the opportunity presented by the Bill to develop a more balanced and connected Northern Ireland. Rural Northern Ireland has significant economic, social and community assets, and enormous potential to contribute to our wider regional economy.

Realising that potential requires regional balance to be understood as regional equity; recognising that different places may need different approaches to create fair opportunities. It means looking beyond where investment and economic activity are located to the infrastructure, services, skills, transport, housing and community capacity that enable people and businesses to thrive.

For rural and border communities in particular, a place-based and whole-of-government approach can help unlock this potential, strengthen connections between our towns, cities and rural areas, and ensure communities have a meaningful role in shaping the decisions that affect them.

A genuinely balanced Northern Ireland is not one where every place receives the same thing. It is one where every place has the opportunity to realise its potential, and where someone lives does not unfairly determine the opportunities available to them.

RCN looks forward to working with the Committee and wider partners to help realise that opportunity.

Your sincerely

Rural Community Network Board and Membership



CEO



Policy & Research Manager

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- ^v <https://engage.hscni.net/site/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/NI-Rural-Health-and-Care-Toolkit-Final-version-1.pdf>
- ^{vi} https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7032587/?utm_source
- ^{vii} [Report on Access to Palliative Care Services](#)
- ^{viii} <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/key-rural-issues>
- ^{ix} [Page not found - Northern Ireland Housing Executive](#)
- ^x [Testing demand for social and affordable homes in Clady - Northern Ireland Housing Executive](#)
- ^{xi} [Rural Residents' Forum - Rural Community Network](#)
- ^{xii} [Future Rural Policy Consultation](#)
- ^{xiii} [Causeway Coast and Glens Census Data](#)
- ^{xiv} [Partnership Agreement between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector in Northern Ireland | Department for Communities](#)
- ^{xv} [Microsoft Word - COVID-19 Overview \(final draft\) 27.8.20](#)
- ^{xvi} [RCN-Anti-Poverty-Strategy-Response.pdf](#)
- ^{xvii} [Consultation-on-The-Good-Jobs-Employment-Rights-Bill.pdf](#)
- ^{xviii} [Northern Ireland Act 1998](#)
- ^{xix} [Rural Needs Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2016](#)
- ^{xx} [Future Rural Policy Consultation](#)