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Response to Committee Call for Evidence on the Regional Balance Bill

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Introduction

The Fermanagh Trust welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the Committee for the Economy in relation to the Regional Balance Bill.

The Fermanagh Trust is an independent community foundation working with and supporting communities and organisations across County Fermanagh and its hinterlands. Over many years, the Trust has worked alongside local communities on issues including poverty and inequality, community development, community leadership, social enterprise, shared education, community energy, access to public services and investment in local communities.

This experience has provided the Trust with a particular insight into the challenges and opportunities experienced by people living in rural and peripheral areas.

The Trust welcomes the intention behind the Regional Balance Bill and, in particular, the recognition that regional disparities require a whole-of-government response. We support the principle that regional balance should be embedded across Executive policy, investment and decision-making rather than being regarded solely as an economic development issue.

However, we believe there is an opportunity to develop the concept of regional balance further.

Regional balance as regional equity

For the Fermanagh Trust, regional balance should ultimately be understood in terms of regional equity and equality of opportunity.

Regional balance should not simply be about where jobs, investment, businesses or economic output are located. The more fundamental question is whether people, wherever they live, have a realistic and equitable opportunity to access and participate in economic, social and civic life.

A job may exist within a region, but that does not necessarily mean it is accessible to someone living in a dispersed rural community. A health or education service may be available somewhere within a county, but distance, transport costs, journey times and digital exclusion can make it effectively inaccessible to some people.

Similarly, investment in infrastructure does not automatically produce balanced development if communities do not have the capacity, connectivity or resources to benefit from it.

The Trust therefore believes that the Regional Balance Strategic Framework should focus not only on the location of economic activity, but on people's ability to access and benefit from opportunity. This distinction is particularly important for rural Northern Ireland.

Recognising rurality and peripherality

Rurality should be recognised as an important factor in understanding regional disparity.

People living in rural communities can face additional costs and barriers associated with distance, dispersed populations and the availability of services. These can affect individuals, businesses, community organisations and public service providers.

For individuals, rurality can mean longer journeys and higher costs to access employment, education, healthcare, childcare and other essential services.

For businesses, additional transport, logistics and connectivity costs can affect competitiveness and their ability to access markets, employees and support.

For community organisations, serving dispersed populations can require greater resources and capacity, while access to funding, professional support and networks can be more difficult.

These additional costs are not always captured by conventional economic indicators.

The Framework should therefore recognise rurality and peripherality as factors that can influence people's ability to participate in economic and social life. Regional equity requires consideration of these additional costs rather than assuming that the same level of provision produces the same outcome in urban and rural settings.

Effective access matters

The Trust recommends that the Framework distinguishes between provision and effective access.

The geographical presence of a service, facility or economic opportunity is not in itself sufficient evidence of regional balance.

The Framework should consider factors including:

- distance and journey time;
- availability and frequency of public transport;
- cost of travel;
- availability of affordable childcare;
- digital connectivity and digital exclusion;
- accessibility for people with disabilities;
- opening hours and service availability;
- access to employment and training;
- and the capacity of individuals and communities to take advantage of opportunities.

This approach would provide a more meaningful understanding of regional inequality than measures based solely on the location of infrastructure or investment.

For rural communities, accessibility is often the difference between an opportunity being available in theory and being accessible in practice.

Poverty and economic participation

The Trust believes that poverty and low household income should be explicitly incorporated into the understanding of regional balance.

Poverty is not simply an outcome of regional economic disparities. It can also be a significant barrier to participation in the economy.

For example, a person on a low income may be unable to afford the transport necessary to take up employment or training. The cost of childcare can prevent participation in work. Poor housing can affect health and educational attainment. Digital exclusion can restrict access to employment, education, public services and financial opportunities.

These issues are interconnected.

The Framework should therefore consider poverty, household income, social security, housing costs and the cost of accessing services as part of the wider regional balance agenda.

This would also help ensure that regional economic development is measured in terms of its impact on people's lives and living standards rather than economic output alone.

Health, education and public services are regional economic issues

The Trust's experience has demonstrated the importance of considering health, education and public services as fundamental components of regional development.

Access to appropriate health services affects people's ability to work, care for family members and participate in community life. The availability of education and skills provision influences people's ability to access employment and enables local businesses to recruit and retain workers.

The location and configuration of public services can therefore have wider economic and social consequences.

This is particularly evident in relation to rural health provision. The Trust's work concerning South West Acute Hospital has highlighted the importance of considering accessibility, rurality and the wider role of local services when decisions about service provision are made.

The Regional Balance Framework should therefore assess not only levels of economic activity but also the availability, accessibility and sustainability of the public services which underpin that activity.

Housing as a regional balance issue

Access to appropriate and affordable housing should also form part of the regional balance framework.

Housing is fundamental to people's ability to live, work and remain within their communities.

In rural areas, pressures around housing affordability, availability and suitability can affect the ability of young people to remain locally, can constrain recruitment by local employers and can contribute to population change.

Housing policy should therefore be considered alongside employment, infrastructure, transport and economic development rather than in isolation.

Transport and digital connectivity

Reliable physical and digital connectivity are essential components of regional equity.

For many rural communities, access to public transport is a determining factor in whether people can access employment, education, healthcare and other services.

Likewise, reliable broadband and mobile connectivity are no longer optional infrastructure. They are essential to participation in modern economic and social life.

The Framework should therefore include meaningful measures of:

- public transport availability and journey times;
- transport affordability;
- road and other physical connectivity;
- broadband availability and quality;
- mobile coverage;
- and levels of digital exclusion.

Investment should also be assessed in terms of whether it improves people's ability to participate in economic and social activity, rather than simply whether infrastructure has been delivered.

Regional balance should not be a zero-sum exercise

The Trust believes that regional balance should not be understood as a competition between places for a fixed amount of investment.

The objective should not be to replicate the economic structure of larger urban centres in rural areas, nor should investment in one region be regarded automatically as a loss to another.

Different places have different characteristics, needs and assets.

The objective should be to enable communities throughout Northern Ireland to realise their own economic, social, environmental and civic potential.

For Fermanagh, this includes recognising the opportunities associated with agriculture, tourism, renewable energy, natural resources, social enterprise, community enterprise and the county's strong network of community organisations.

A successful regional policy should therefore be place-based, recognising the particular characteristics and potential of individual communities and areas.

Communities are assets and economic actors

The Trust believes that communities should not be viewed simply as recipients of government investment or as consultees in the development of policy.

Communities possess knowledge, relationships, assets and leadership which can contribute directly to regional development.

The Trust's experience of community development, community leadership, social enterprise and community energy demonstrates the potential of locally rooted organisations to identify needs, develop solutions and create economic and social value.

Community organisations can provide services, develop local assets, create employment, support vulnerable people, build skills and strengthen local economies.

The Regional Balance Framework should therefore recognise community capacity as an important component of regional infrastructure.

Investment in community leadership, organisational development and local capacity should be regarded as an investment in regional resilience and economic development.

Community ownership and local benefit

The Trust's work on community energy also highlights the importance of ensuring that communities can participate in and benefit from economic development taking place in their areas.

Regional development should not simply be measured by the scale of investment attracted to an area. Consideration should also be given to how much value is retained locally and whether communities have opportunities to participate in decision-making, ownership and benefit.

Community ownership and locally rooted economic activity can help retain economic and social value within communities.

The Framework should therefore recognise the contribution of:

- social enterprises;
- community businesses;
- community-owned assets;
- community energy initiatives;
- local enterprise;
- and other forms of locally rooted economic activity.

This would broaden the concept of regional development beyond conventional measures of private-sector investment and employment.

One great example is the closure of banks across rural communities in the last decade + . thankfully the community owned credit unions have all remained providing much needed services and support

Addressing inequalities within regions

The Trust also believes that the Framework must consider inequalities within regions as well as differences between regions.

Regional statistics can sometimes mask significant differences between communities.

For example, a county or Local Government District may perform relatively well against an aggregate indicator while containing communities experiencing significant poverty, isolation, poor transport connections or limited access to services.

This is particularly relevant in rural areas where economic activity may be concentrated in one or two larger settlements while smaller settlements and isolated communities experience very different circumstances.

The Framework should therefore use sufficiently disaggregated data to identify inequalities at local and community level wherever possible.

Quantitative data should be complemented by qualitative evidence and lived experience from communities.

The importance of local evidence and lived experience

National and regional statistics are essential, but they cannot provide a complete picture of regional inequality.

The Trust's experience of working directly with communities demonstrates the value of local knowledge and lived experience.

Community organisations are often aware of emerging issues before they appear in official statistics. They understand the practical barriers people face in accessing services and opportunities and can identify assets and potential which may not be apparent through conventional economic data.

The Framework should therefore include a structured mechanism for gathering and considering evidence from communities and the community and voluntary sector.

This should not be limited to consultation on the Framework itself. Community organisations should have opportunities to contribute to its implementation, monitoring and review.

Cross-border considerations

The Trust welcomes the recognition within the Bill of the importance of cross-border economic data.

For Fermanagh, the economic and social geography extends beyond the Northern Ireland jurisdiction.

People, businesses, community organisations and public services operate within a wider cross-border context. Employment, education, tourism, transport, healthcare, enterprise and supply chains can all have significant cross-border dimensions.

Regional balance policy should therefore recognise these realities.

Where appropriate, data and analysis should reflect the cross-border nature of economic and social activity, and the Strategic Framework should consider how investment and policy decisions affect border communities.

A whole-of-government approach

The Trust supports the Bill's intention that regional balance should be considered across government.

Regional inequality cannot be addressed by economic development policy alone.

The ability of people to participate in the economy is influenced by decisions across health, education, transport, housing, infrastructure, childcare, social security, rural development, digital connectivity and other areas.

The Framework should therefore provide a clear mechanism for ensuring that regional impact is considered across departments.

In particular, the statutory requirement for departments to have due regard to the Framework should be accompanied by sufficient guidance and accountability to ensure that this becomes a substantive consideration rather than a procedural exercise.

Departments should be expected to demonstrate how regional considerations have influenced significant policies, programmes and investment decisions.

Public investment and regional impact

The Trust supports greater transparency around the geographical distribution and impact of public investment.

However, investment should not be assessed solely according to where expenditure is recorded.

The Framework should consider:

- who benefits from investment;
- whether the investment improves effective access to opportunity;
- whether it addresses existing inequalities;
- whether it increases or reduces the additional costs associated with rurality;
- whether it strengthens local economic and community capacity;
- whether benefits are retained locally;
- and what longer-term economic and social outcomes result.

This would provide a more meaningful measure of the contribution of public investment to regional balance.

Targets, measurement and accountability

The Fermanagh Trust welcomes the Bill's emphasis on measurable targets and reporting.

Clear targets are essential if regional balance is to become a meaningful and sustained policy objective.

The Trust recommends that the Strategic Framework:

1. establishes clear baseline data;
2. identifies measurable and time-bound targets;
3. includes indicators relating to economic performance and living standards;
4. includes measures of effective access to employment, education, healthcare and other essential services;
5. incorporates measures of poverty, household income and housing affordability;
6. recognises rurality and peripherality;
7. includes measures of physical and digital connectivity;
8. identifies disparities within regions as well as between regions;
9. incorporates qualitative evidence and lived experience;
10. reports publicly on progress against each target; and
11. requires an explanation where targets are not being achieved.

The proposed five-year review should assess not simply whether the Framework has been implemented, but whether it has produced tangible improvements in opportunity and living standards.

The role of the community and voluntary sector

The Fermanagh Trust welcomes the recognition of the community and voluntary sector within the Bill. However, the sector should and must have a meaningful role throughout the life of the Framework.

This should include participation in:

- identifying regional needs;
- developing indicators;
- establishing targets;
- gathering local evidence;
- monitoring progress;
- evaluating outcomes; and
- reviewing the Framework.

The community and voluntary sector should be recognised not only for the services it provides but for its role in building social capital, developing local leadership, supporting vulnerable communities and creating the conditions for sustainable economic development.

Recommendations

Based on its experience and work with communities, the Fermanagh Trust recommends that the Regional Balance Strategic Framework:

1. **Define regional balance in terms of regional equity and equality of opportunity**, rather than solely the geographical distribution of economic activity.
2. **Measure people's ability to access and participate in economic and social life**, rather than simply measuring the presence of jobs, services or infrastructure.
3. **Recognise rurality and peripherality as structural factors** which can create additional costs and barriers.
4. **Measure effective access to services and opportunities**, including distance, journey time, affordability, public transport and digital connectivity.
5. **Explicitly incorporate poverty, household income, social security and housing affordability** into the assessment of regional balance.
6. **Recognise health, education, skills and public services as foundations of regional economic development**, rather than treating them solely as separate policy areas.

7. **Recognise community infrastructure and community capacity as essential regional assets** and support investment in local leadership and organisational capacity.
8. **Recognise social enterprise, community enterprise and community ownership as contributors to regional economic development** and consider the extent to which economic value is retained locally.
9. **Ensure that the Framework identifies inequalities within regions and communities**, rather than relying solely on regional or county-level averages.
10. **Use local and community-generated evidence alongside official statistics** to understand regional disparities and assess progress.
11. **Embed meaningful and continuing participation by the community and voluntary sector** throughout the development, implementation and review of the Framework.
12. **Reflect the cross-border economic and social realities of border communities**, particularly in areas such as Fermanagh.
13. **Require departments to demonstrate how regional balance has influenced significant policy, investment and service decisions**, ensuring that "due regard" has substantive rather than merely procedural effect.
14. **Provide greater transparency around the geographical distribution and impact of public investment**, including who benefits and what outcomes are achieved.
15. **Ensure that targets are measurable, time-bound and publicly reported**, with clear explanations where progress is insufficient.

Conclusion

The Fermanagh Trust welcomes the opportunity presented by the Regional Balance Bill to establish a more systematic and long-term approach to addressing regional disparities.

Our experience of working with communities across Fermanagh and its hinterlands suggests that regional balance is ultimately about more than where investment or economic activity is located.

It is about whether people have a realistic opportunity to participate in the economic, social and civic life of Northern Ireland, regardless of where they live.

For rural communities, this means recognising the additional costs and barriers associated with distance and dispersed populations. It means looking beyond the presence of services to whether those services are genuinely accessible. It means recognising the relationship between poverty, housing, transport, health, education, connectivity and economic participation. It means investing not only in physical infrastructure but also in the community organisations, leadership and local capacity which enable places to thrive.

It also means recognising that communities are not simply recipients of regional development. They possess assets, knowledge, leadership and entrepreneurial capacity and can be active partners in creating and retaining economic and social value.

The Trust believes that the Regional Balance Strategic Framework provides an opportunity to move towards a more place-based and equitable approach to regional development — one which recognises the different circumstances and assets of Northern Ireland's communities while seeking to ensure that people everywhere have a fair opportunity to participate and prosper.

For the Framework to achieve this, regional balance must become a meaningful consideration across government, supported by clear measures, transparent reporting, local evidence and genuine community participation.

The Fermanagh Trust would welcome the opportunity to contribute further to the development of the Strategic Framework and to share the learning arising from its work with communities across Fermanagh and the wider South West.