



Mid Ulster District Council's Response to Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for the Economy's Regional Balance Bill – Call for Evidence

September 2026

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Mid Ulster District Council (hereafter referred to as 'the Council') welcomes the opportunity to respond to the NI Assembly Committee for the Economy's Regional Balance Bill – Call for Evidence.

The Council understands this consultation is to seek views from stakeholders on the objectives, proposals and potential consequences of the Bill, and suggest any proposals for amendments.

Council understands the Bill seeks to improve the Northern Ireland Executive's response to regional imbalances and disparities in economic performance and living standards by creating a statutory duty on the Executive to deliver and renew a strategic framework to address these imbalances.

Key Goals of the Bill include the following:-

- **Strategic Framework:** Forces the Executive to create and maintain a plan that addresses regional gaps in jobs, infrastructure, and wealth.
- **Departmental Duty:** Requires all government departments to consider regional balance when they write policies and plan public services.
- **Annual Tracking:** Sets up a yearly report so the Assembly can check if left-behind areas are getting a fair deal.
- **Department Lead:** Gives the Department for the Economy the job of guiding and monitoring the framework.

This submission includes responses to the Call for Evidence questions focussing on the 8 Clauses of the Bill, but Council has also included a number of pertinent points which could not be sufficiently addressed solely using the response template provided in the consultation papers.

Mid Ulster – Our Lived Experience of ‘Regional Balance’

Over the past decades, Northern Ireland had developed an unbalanced economy with investment in jobs and infrastructure focused largely on Belfast. Mid Ulster, specifically, experienced decades of underinvestment, rurality and regional disparity, severely constraining the growth of what is one of NI’s key sub-regional economies, and its ability to realise its full economic potential. This is despite Mid Ulster’s long held position as the largest business base outside of Belfast, and the recognised manufacturing hub of NI with the fastest growing business base and contribution to NI GVA. Council has continually flagged such issues in its responses to Programme for Government and other related strategic government economic consultations. A regionally balanced approach should ensure investment in the Mid Ulster District to enable it to realise its full economic potential.

Within this context, Council welcomes the creation of a Statutory Duty Framework and Reporting, including binding obligations, as being long overdue and looks forward to increasing transparency and accountability in the development and design of government policy and the monitoring and reporting of delivery outcomes.

The lack of a meaningful and inclusive regional balance approach has and continues to stymie Mid Ulster’s economic and social prosperity – some issues are outlined below by way of example. It will take a long-term, robust and focused approach to deliver a fairer allocation of investment for Mid Ulster.

The Mid Ulster Context

- The Council area straddles two counties running from Swatragh in the north to Fivemiletown in the south and from the Sperrin Mountains in the west to Lough Neagh in the east. It comprises of an area of 1955km² with a varied landscape and a diverse mix of rural and urban communities.
- Mid Ulster is home to 9,950 businesses, the highest number of businesses outside of the Belfast area and c70,000 jobs, with productivity being £63,000, 8% above the NI average.
- Mid Ulster has a long-held reputation for entrepreneurship and business growth and is home to some of NI’s most successful companies. The area has an international reputation for manufacturing excellence, hosting several of NI’s leading advanced manufacturers, and is recognised as NI’s centre of manufacturing and engineering, where it accounts for 29% of the local economy (approx. 17,066 jobs), compared to 11% in NI.
- Mid Ulster accounts for just under one tenth of all NI businesses with a turnover exceeding £50m and is therefore home to many significant and strategically important economic contributors.
- Mid Ulster accounts for over one tenth of self-employed people in Northern Ireland. The proportion of self-employed people (of those in employment) in the district is considerably higher than the Northern Ireland average (19.2% compared to 15.6%), which is reflective of the sectoral composition of Mid Ulster and of the district’s historic strong entrepreneurial culture.
- NI Local Growth Dashboard data showed Mid Ulster had the highest incidence of high-growth firms in NI during 2019-22 (i.e. businesses with an annual average employment growth of 10% or more over three years).
- Mid Ulster’s population is 152,700 - it has increased by 30,073 since 2004 – 13 percentage points above NI’s average population growth. It has a similar proportion of working-age people to the NI average (62%), a stable labour market, and concentrations of skills and experience in sectors such as manufacturing, construction, agriculture and mining and quarrying. By 2043, the population is expected to have grown by c.10%, more

than double the predicted NI increase (+3.2% 2024 – 2043) bringing the total population to 167,305. This presents significant opportunities to drive future economic growth.

Mid Ulster is one of Northern Ireland's strongest performing local economies, characterised by strong private-sector entrepreneurship, high productivity (comparative to NI average), business resilience and population growth with significant future potential.

However, as clearly evidenced herein and detailed by Council in many previous consultation responses, governments over the past few decades have continually failed to provide the appropriate level of financial support to one of NI's highest performing economies.

Investment in Mid Ulster over the years is in no way commensurate with the billions of pounds contributed by the region's business base into the NI economy. Council seeks a commitment from the NI Executive that the new Regional Balance Bill will put in place processes to address this historic discrepancy to "level up" the area.

Council puts on record its frustration regarding the many lost and delayed opportunities to support economic growth and development in Mid Ulster, had a more meaningful regional balance approach to economic and social investment been adopted by government over the past few decades.

Outlined below are some areas where a regional balance approach is required for targeted strategic investment to optimise the potential of this high performing economy and to help "level up" the Mid Ulster region.

2.0 KEY STRATEGIC ISSUES FACED BY MID ULSTER

It's widely acknowledged that the ability of our businesses to reach their potential and drive productivity is dependent on access to good infrastructure provision. Facilitating transport, greater digital connectivity, improved infrastructure and access to industrial land, energy and water are all fundamental factors impacting on Mid Ulster's economic growth and productivity. Infrastructure has a key role to play in terms of boosting Mid Ulster and ultimately NI's competitiveness, raising standards of living and societal wellbeing.

Industrial Land, Serviced Sites and Commercial Space

There is a critical need to address chronic and long-standing shortages of industrial land for development in Mid Ulster. As well as productivity, this is also a key enabler to achieving a more regionally balanced economy. Mid Ulster has the largest business base outside of Belfast but has no industrial land holdings available for development; industrial estates in Granville, Dungannon, Cookstown and Creagh are at full capacity with no room to expand. While this situation persists, Mid Ulster is losing out on much needed economic development opportunities – new investment, business growth and job creation.

In 2023, research identified that the acute shortage of industrial and commercial land and property and Invest NI serviced sites is the single most important development constraint for Mid Ulster businesses (especially medium and large). As part of the Mid South West Regional Economic Strategy, Mid Ulster Council is working with Invest NI (strategic partner) to develop a Green Innovation Business Park. While this is a much welcome development, this one project alone is unlikely to accommodate the needs of many other businesses across Mid Ulster requiring workspace to scale and grow to facilitate increased production levels to fulfil customer orders.

There is also a shortage of flexible and affordable commercial spaces suitable for start-ups, SME's and hybrid working models. Many existing vacant buildings could be repurposed to provide working hubs, innovation spaces or mixed-use developments but barriers relating to

funding, infrastructure readiness and site assembly can sometimes delay or prevent development.

Road Infrastructure

In terms of existing infrastructure, the A29, which runs throughout Northern Ireland from north to south, is the spine of the District and the main transport corridor. The A29 also connects the three main towns in the District, or what may be referred to as the three main “hubs”, i.e. Cookstown, Dungannon and Magherafelt. Of these three towns, Dungannon and Cookstown are classed as “medium towns” by NISRA due to having a population of more than 10,000, whilst Magherafelt is considered a “small town.” The A4, which is an important east-west transport corridor, also runs through the southern part of the District, as does the A5, which is the main link between Dublin/ROI and the northwest of Northern Ireland. The A6 runs through the northern portion of the District, and this is a vital corridor which connects the two main cities in Northern Ireland.

When we consider that the Mid Ulster economy is private-sector driven; has the highest concentration of VAT-registered businesses outside of Belfast; has higher productivity per head compared to the NI average; has a GVA of £2.3bn (producing 7.3% of NI’s economic output); and an export-intensive business base, producing 12% of NI’s exports, one would expect such a strong economic contribution to the local economy to be matched by heavy Government investment but sadly the infrastructure reality tells a completely different story.

Despite years of Council’s lobbying, road infrastructure across the area remains underdeveloped, resulting from years of chronic under-investment, with motorways and dual carriageways accounting for just 1.06% of the district’s road network, and this is further exacerbated with no rail provision either. Mid Ulster’s largest sectors are manufacturing, engineering and agri-food, all of which are heavily reliant on good roads infrastructure to transport their products to customers in the national and global marketplace. Businesses seeking to scale up their productivity are facing increasing challenges in transporting goods to seaports and airports, due to the poor condition of Mid Ulster’s roads. Industry within Mid Ulster has been forced to operate with substandard road networks in Mid Ulster for a long period of time with increasing constraints on the efficiency of their operations and associated productivity.

Immediate priorities are to secure Department for Infrastructure match funding and statutory approvals for the A29 Cookstown Bypass and progressing the Dungannon Bypass. Additionally, a key project for economic prosperity of Mid Ulster is the delivery of the A5 Western Transport Corridor. This project is of strategic importance to the region, promoting increased connectivity to drive economic growth and must be progressed with the utmost urgency. These projects are of critical importance to Mid Ulster’s future economic, social and environmental vitality and offer a minimum £3 return for every £1 invested via journey-time savings and emissions cuts. The Cookstown Bypass is shovel ready but requires the necessary co-financing, alongside the major financial commitment of £43m secured by the Council through the Mid South West Growth Deal. The Council would also highlight the importance of bypasses in other congested towns and villages, most notably in Moneymore and Moy along the A29, as well as Fivemiletown and the Clogher valley villages to improve travel times along the A5 Western Transport Corridor.

Investment in sustainable transport and active travel infrastructure in rural economies such as Mid Ulster’s must also be considered for future investment, as improved accessibility is essential for connecting people to employment, education and services. Better connected and revitalised town centres are more likely to attract businesses, retain talent and support higher productivity sectors.

It is also very concerning that travel times from some parts of Mid Ulster to an A&E hospital are over 50 minutes, making the need for improved roads and infrastructure a significant priority.

Public Transport Network

Mid Ulster is a geographically dispersed population with a quarter of citizens living in the main towns, a third living in local towns and 40% of our homes located in the countryside. The district suffers from a lack of rural accessibility with sub-standard rural roads and bus services leaving many rural communities cut off, unable to access jobs and services. This situation is compounded by the absence of any rail infrastructure and connectivity in the district. The whole question of transport cannot be considered in isolation, it must be led by an environmentally friendly policy and localised to suit rural and urban areas. More public transport routes will bring some but not all the answers in Mid Ulster because the population is dispersed. Unless significant regional investment is provided public transport for rural areas such as Mid Ulster then the gap between access to services such as economic opportunities, health, education, and civic services will widen further between rural and urban districts.

Water and Wastewater Infrastructure

Council cannot emphasise strongly enough, the detrimental impact of the issue of water and wastewater capacity/management in Mid Ulster and the associated negative impact on the district achieving a number of key PfG outcomes. Many people living in the Mid Ulster area are facing significant housing stress because of house building not keeping up with housing demand. New housing developments particularly in our urban towns and key settlements are being refused by NI Water, due to lack of upgrading to Wastewater Treatment Works and new water mains not being delivered. Significant wastewater network capacity issues are emerging in our five main hub towns including Magherafelt, Cookstown, Dungannon, Maghera and Coalisland. These towns have been identified within the Area Plan for Mid Ulster for growth status. Mid Ulster is currently completing on the development of the Area Plan and has estimated a need for approximately 10,950 new houses by 2030. The outdated water and wastewater infrastructure in the district is limiting the capacity of businesses to expand and equally stifling the development of new housing stock which is critical for Mid Ulster's growing population – the workforce of the future required to support our economic growth.

Urban and Rural Regeneration

For a number of years, investment in urban and rural regeneration has significantly reduced. Failure to address this will result in the decline of our rural towns, villages and key settlements. There has been an absence of sustainable long-term funding in regeneration activities, to include addressing vacancy and dereliction which continue to undermine the economic potential of our rural towns and villages and are fundamental to driving economic growth and ultimately productivity.

Poor quality and under-used environments also deter private sector investment, reduce investor confidence and create a perception of decline that is not helpful to innovation or business growth. High vacancy levels can also contribute to reduced footfall and weaker community confidence, further limiting economic activity and place attractiveness. This could be addressed through relevant Government departments collaborating to invest in capital projects such as improving the public realm, encouraging town centre living, active travel and providing the necessary services infrastructure to support regeneration and growth. These challenges, through targeted regeneration and seismic infrastructure investment, similar to the levels provided to towns throughout the UK, would act as a key enabler to bring existing buildings and sites back into productive use.

Government Funding

The Council would highlight the issue of how funding is allocated by Government to support the growth of local areas in the absence of a cohesive regional balanced approach. For example, in March 2025, the Deputy Prime Minister announced that the Government was

launching its Plan for Neighbourhoods to help rebuild the UK and drive growth everywhere. The “Our new Plan for Neighbourhoods” is part of the Government’s plan to ensure that nowhere is left behind. It is aimed at helping revitalise local areas and fight deprivation at root cause by zeroing in on 3 goals: thriving places, stronger communities, and taking back control. Derry~Londonderry and Coleraine are two of the 75 towns across the UK to be selected to each receive £20 million over the next ten years. There was no competitive process involved and Council believes that in future Government must use an open and fair selection process (using appropriate criteria) that will allow rural areas such as Mid Ulster to compete, given Government’s historical underinvestment in our district.

Sustainable Funding Support for Businesses

The Council highlights the significant vacuum of funding in the rural west following the end of EU funding under the previous Rural Development and ERDF Programmes. The estimated EU funding loss from the EU in Mid Ulster was estimated at £28.5M – the main areas being the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) Investment for Growth & Jobs Programme (2014-20) where Mid Ulster Council lost 80% funding (£1M) for our suite of business development programmes. DAERA’s total investment under the previous Rural Development Programme (2014-2020) equated to supporting rural businesses and communities within Mid Ulster to the value of £14,192,878 made up of £11,792,878 from the EU RDP and TRPSI funding, along with £2,400,000 from DAERA.

The Shared Prosperity Fund (2023/26) and current Local Growth Fund have resourced the Go Succeed enterprise support provision, but the level of funding is significantly reduced from the previous EU level. Council would request that consideration is given to using a regional balanced approach to the provision of funding of a similar scale moving forward. Our micro and small businesses are the lifeblood of rural economies and communities and support for entrepreneurship and business growth is needed more than ever.

Public Sector Jobs Investment

Mid Ulster’s economy is private sector driven and the decentralisation of public sector jobs to Mid Ulster is highlighted as a key priority within Mid Ulster’s Community Plan. The Council would assert that public sector investment in Mid Ulster is crucial to the regional balance agenda in Northern Ireland. A proactive decentralisation policy is needed to address the public sector jobs deficit in Mid Ulster and thus create a better economic balance.

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)

Historically, Mid Ulster has received no FDI for many years. Council welcomes the Minister’s drive to reduce regional imbalance and Invest NI’s commitment in its Business Strategy 2024-27 to direct 65% of its investments outside Greater Belfast area. The inclusion of this target has the potential to direct Invest NI activity in terms of Investment and FDI projects to *Mid Ulster and Council will watch this space with interest. (**Mid Ulster had the lowest rate of new jobs from FDI over the period 2015-22*).

Rural Tourism

Tourism has been a hugely important economic sector and supports many jobs in Mid Ulster’s rural communities. A legacy of under investment in Mid Ulster in the absence of a regional balanced approach has led to inadequate tourism infrastructure and connectivity, whilst it is noted past investments in Northern Ireland have been repeatedly focused on Northern Ireland’s two largest cities, and the North Coast region. Council has previously called upon DfE/Tourism NI in their new 10-year plan, to ‘level up’ investment across the region to;

- address existing gaps / disparities that have prevailed for far too long across Northern Ireland (geographical inequality)
- ensure that Mid Ulster as a rural destination can maximise its tourism growth potential, and

- enable Northern Ireland to achieve its growth and sustainability targets by empowering Mid Ulster region to attract its fair share of year-round visitors.

City and Growth Deal Funding: Due to historic underinvestment by Government's in Mid Ulster's strategic infrastructure, the Council has been required to commit infrastructure funding in Mid Ulster towards a major roads scheme which has been in the pipeline for 40 years. As a result, Council has no additional infrastructure funding to commit to 'Tourism Projects' within Mid Ulster's Growth Deal funding allocation.

Accommodation Deficit: Over 50% of all Northern Ireland's accommodation is in Belfast and Causeway Coast and Glens which highlighted the need to encourage development that will a) support a greater balance across Northern Ireland and b) provide the visitor with a choice of places to stay, leading to greater regional dispersal.

Council believes that there is a need to reinstate long-term, sustainable tourism funding support to rural areas such as Mid Ulster, enabling strategic investment in greenways, blue ways, walking trails, and other outdoor recreation infrastructure and attractions to support the continued growth of outdoor recreational tourism, enhance the natural and cultural assets of rural communities, and contribute significantly to regional economic resilience and rural regeneration.

Education and Skills

As noted earlier, Mid Ulster is currently made up of more under-16s and fewer over-65s than the Northern Ireland (NI) average, with projections showing that this trend is set to continue. It is noted that population age patterns are becoming increasingly important indicators for developed economies. Governments face the challenge of ageing populations and the various implications this has for labour markets and public services going forward. The Mid Ulster area's relatively larger share of people aged below 16 suggests industry in the Council area will benefit from potentially large supply of future labour to draw on. Developing an effective skills-based to address industry challenges and initiatives to ensure our young people are supported to make informed career choices are key future priorities.

Mid Ulster Council has led the way by establishing the first industry-led skills partnership (Mid Ulster Skills Forum) in NI in 2017 which has since evolved into the award-winning Mid Ulster Labour Market Partnership (LMP). The demand for support from Mid Ulster's LMP's initiatives is growing year on year, with 300 residents gaining employment through employability programmes and academies delivered in the last five years. In addition, 517 residents have accessed opportunities to upskill in a wide range of subject areas. This is despite being one of the lowest funded LMPs across all Council areas. The value of this work with both residents and employers cannot be understated and Council would advocate a review of how budget allocations are calculated to ensure Mid Ulster is allocated more balanced funding to address local challenges. There is also a need to ensure funding is on a long-term basis to support employability and skills across the district as LMPs currently operate on a year-to-year basis.

Council and Invest NI helped establish the MEGA (Manufacturing and Engineering Growth & Advancement) Network in 2019, to address the immediate and medium-term skills shortages in the manufacturing and engineering industries in the area. A future approach to education and skills must ensure there is regional balance regarding rural educational opportunities that have been traditionally urban centric.

Social and Intermediate Housing Provision

Both affordable and social housing provision are key strategic issues in Mid Ulster. With the District having the fastest growing population, house building has not kept pace with growth in demand. Many people and households are currently facing major housing challenges with exceptionally high levels of housing stress and homelessness and as such, Mid Ulster has one of the highest levels of social housing need and this is reflected in the level of housing

stress. In March 2025, there were 2,335 applicants on the waiting list for Mid Ulster with 1,570 in housing stress and only 260 allocations over the year. Housing stress in rural areas has been increasing on an annual basis since 2016; as of March 2025, 432 rural applicants in Mid Ulster were in housing stress. Mid Ulster has the second lowest number of NIHE and social housing properties across all districts.

Up to March 2020, NIHE and Housing Associations have sold 7,654 units under the house sales scheme, leaving 3,875 of NIHE housing stock in the district. NIHE identified a social housing need of 876 units required for the 2024/2029 period. During 2024/25 110 units were completed, 242 units onsite and 149 units programmed for 2025/27, falling short by 375.

These challenges cannot be considered in isolation from other social issues such as poverty, regeneration, health and wellbeing and long-term unemployment and, in addition to future investment, a more joined approach to addressing such regional inequalities must be adopted across the relevant government departments.

Sub-Regional Economic Plan (SREP)

The Council welcomed the ambition of the Department for the Economy to address “regional balance” and the identified three delivery strands: formation of new Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs), enhanced Invest NI sub-regional role with local targets, and the realignment of Departmental policies and programmes to drive local growth. The initiative has empowered Councils to establish LEPs to develop evidence-based Action Plans that identify the key barriers to economic growth and set out targeted interventions to drive sustainable economic development, improve productivity and maximise local economic potential.

However, Council is disappointed by the level of funding (£3.87m) allocated to the Mid Ulster area and the methodology used to determine funding allocations. In particular, the disproportionate weighting assigned to productivity failed to adequately recognise Mid Ulster's significant economic contribution, growth potential, historic underinvestment, and the challenges associated with delivering balanced regional development. As a result, Mid Ulster received a substantially lower allocation than would reasonably be expected.

Council strongly urges that the allocation methodology be reviewed ahead of any future funding rounds to ensure that the criteria more accurately reflect regional needs, economic opportunity and the objective of reducing regional disparities. A revised approach is essential if LEPs are to fulfil their intended purpose of supporting equitable and inclusive economic growth across all regions.

Health and Social Care Provision

Due to the reduction of services and its peripheral location, as with many areas ‘West of the Bann’, much of Mid Ulster has suffered from the poorest access to acute hospital and care provision for decades. During the Council's extensive community consultations to prepare the Mid Ulster Community Plan, the issue causing most concern was the continual reduction of health and social care services and facilities in the area and the apparent lack of investment in delivering alternative provision to enable continued access to services.

Opportunities do exist across sites which are already in public sector use in Mid Ulster, where services have been removed, which would facilitate the co-location of a broad range of localised health and social care provision, while also achieving a greater integration of service delivery. These sites have the potential to deliver a comprehensive range of local diagnostic facilities, primary care and elective surgery provision, which could contribute to alleviating the pressures on Antrim and Craigavon Area Hospitals. In line with the Bengoa Report, this seeks to “provide simpler and easier access to healthcare professionals and diagnostic equipment needed to assess and diagnose conditions”. Whilst the Mid Ulster district has lost two acute hospitals, it does not have a Community Care and Treatment Centre in any of its three hub towns. Council would urge that this matter is re-considered.

A key action of Delivering Together (2017) was enhancing support in primary care, 'a new model of person-centred care focused on prevention, early intervention, supporting independence and wellbeing...our future model of primary care is to be based on multidisciplinary teams embedded around general practice'. 'Primary care is the bedrock of our health and social care system and provides around 95% of the care people need throughout their life'. However, like other rural districts, Mid Ulster is experiencing a chronic shortage of GPs, particularly in our rural practices, and calls for investment to be allocated to identify potential alternative solutions.

A further example of the lack of a regional balanced approach is in recent years is the Ambulance response times, with Mid Ulster recording response times consistently higher than the NI average and increasing year on year, and also poor access to acute provision – Mid Ulster is the fastest growing of the 11 new Council areas (projected to increase to 2043) and has a predominantly rural road network, which adversely impacts travel times. A longer-term strategy must be based on regional balance principles must ensure greater availability and more rapid deployment of vehicles in rural areas, which are furthest from acute provision. This should also include developing the capacity of existing local ambulance stations as well as exploring the potential to use Mid Ulster as a regional base for some or all parts of the service.

3.0 RESPONSES TO THE KEY CLAUSES OF THE BILL

Clause 1 - Strategic Regional Balance Framework

Clause 1 places a duty on the Executive to develop, adopt, maintain and implement a Strategic Framework for regional balance in Northern Ireland. The Framework must set outcomes, the lifetime of the Framework, Departmental roles, identify mechanisms and methodology, include provisions requiring Departments to recognise and consider cross-border economic data, and enable measurable, time-bound targets. The Framework must be consulted upon, laid before the Assembly and published within 12 months of Clause 1 coming into operation.

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

The Council strongly agrees that economic and related disparities urgently require legislation for them to be addressed properly. To date, there have been many failed attempts to address regional imbalances through non-binding strategies and policies, as clearly evidenced by Mid Ulster's experiences, detailed earlier in this Response. These make a compelling case for change and the introduction of legislation.

Furthermore, in relation to previous Strategies, the Regional Development Strategy (2012) committed to balanced regional growth and tackling regional imbalance, the Industrial Strategy 2030 (2017), Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (2022), all committed to a greater regional balance focus, yet despite the inclusion of regional balance in these and subsequent strategies, policies and plans, very little was delivered in practice, particularly in areas such as Mid Ulster. The lack of a Statutory Duty for a Regional Balance Framework has created too much scope for piecemeal and ad hoc approaches, with inconsistencies on interpretation on policy design across departments, delivery and the measurement of impact.

Given the lack of a meaningful approach to regional balance to date, Council concurs that binding obligations on delivering a Framework and reporting on its impact is urgently required going forward, to ensure future Plans and Strategies are developed, delivered and measured with a clear focus on achieving greater regional balance. All too often we have read Government Strategies that include high level aspirations and sadly very little (if any) attempt

to quantify specific targets to be achieved. A Statutory Framework will increase transparency and focus on the factors which impact regional imbalances, allowing for a sustained approach across government and increased parliamentary scrutiny of outcomes.

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

Council agrees it is indeed right and appropriate that the obligation on the development of a Strategic Regional Balance Framework sits with the Executive. Addressing regional imbalances in economic performance and living standards must be the responsibility of the whole of government and requires a fully integrated departmental and long-term coherent approach, with accountability at its core. Currently, it is generally understood to fall within the remit of the Department for the Economy, with no legislative requirements for other Departments to act or work together on strategy. However, existing deficits clearly evidence that these can only be tackled through a whole of government collaborative approach.

Going forward, to deliver meaningful impact in improving regional balance, Government Departments must be required to collaborate and improve their approach to joined up working within the context of an overall Strategic Regional Balance Framework, with the wider NI Executive acting as a key driver. To ensure accountability and effective delivery, it is important that the Framework has a clear owner, with one Department being tasked with taking the lead in monitoring, reporting, issuing guidance and undertaking research to inform and support delivery. This balance is clear throughout the Bill, for example, the recognition that different Departments will have differing levels of input into the Framework, which is catered for by the flexible duty in Clause 2.

Council concurs that this must be an Executive-wide priority, imposing a duty on Departments to achieve the Regional Balance Framework requirements when developing policies, strategies and plans and requiring scrutiny by the Assembly, with lead responsibility resting with the Department for the Economy.

Northern Ireland Councils should be closely involved in helping Government formulate a new Regional Balance Framework to ensure that key sub-regional economic disparities are addressed.

3. 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.

The focus of the Bill must be to ensure Departments move towards a duty-based approach and ensure that regional balance is a core aspect informing future Department decision making. In its past responses to previous consultations by the NI Executive and Departments on Strategies and Plans, the Council continually highlighted the long term historic regional disparities in investment which have constrained the region's economic and social wellbeing, growth and prosperity. However, while there has been much reference to promoting regional balance, this has not delivered significant changes in policy or investment decisions, and little impact has been experienced by Councils in the West of the province, including Mid Ulster.

Council welcomes Point 3 of the Bill noting the Framework must;

- identify the roles of NI Departments in developing, adopting, implementing and revising policies, strategies and plans so as to reduce regional disparities;
- identify mechanisms to reduce regional disparities, including cross-departmental actions and funding plans;

- set out the criteria and methodology for assessing regional disparities;
- measurable targets to be achieved by specific dates for reducing regional disparities.

It also concurs that the Framework should be informed by the inclusion of provisions to utilise the economic potential of cross-border economies and cross-border cooperation, in line with OECD research.

Council believes the monitoring process for the Framework must be robust and rigorous. The initial years of the Framework will be critical to its long-term impact. While 12-month structures Reviews are required, the Framework's implementation should be monitored on a more regular ongoing basis, for example, subject to review following the development of any new policies, plans or strategies to 'test' its effectiveness. This should ensure any issues regarding interpretation of the Framework, or any challenges with delivery can be resolved.

Council also believes that the Strategic Regional Balance Framework must take account of former investment into each of the various local government districts across Northern Ireland, before considering future investment. As we in Mid Ulster are only too aware, our region is not starting from a level playing field. Mid Ulster in particular, has long suffered from prolific levels of Government underinvestment, and therefore, if this Framework is to work, this region should be prioritised for investment, if Government is truly attempting to find a method of achieving meaningful 'regional balance' moving forward to 'level up' the NI economy. Mid Ulster is not asking for hand-outs, we are simply attempting to remedy the chronic deficit in Government funding directed toward our region over the last few decades, despite the area's strong economic performance as highlighted earlier in the document.

While Council welcomes the proposed approach outlined by the Bill, we would however, advise that a much more joined up and integrated approach is required across Departments overall to optimise the effectiveness of a regional balanced approach.

The new Framework presents an opportunity for a new way of delivering inclusive and effective economic and social investment.

The Council welcomes the opportunity to be involved in constructive collaborative discussions at both this stage and in an ongoing basis, which we believe can help play a key role in shaping future delivery mechanisms and improving outcomes for our citizens.

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

Council fully supports the commitment in the Bill that, 'Consultations must be undertaken with Local Councils in determining the above and to also identify the baseline to be used by each Department in the development of future Plans or Strategies'.

Councils play a pivotal role in their local communities, being the key drivers of local economic and social development and must be involved as a key partner in the design and development of policies from the outset to ensure initiatives are appropriately designed to address the local needs of the area.

Council is keen to actively engage in any future consultation exercises relating to the implementation of the Regional Balance Framework, undertaken by either the NI Executive and/or respective Government Departments.

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

No

Clause 2 - Reporting, Review and Support Functions

Clause 2 requires Departments, when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans, to have due regard to the need to reduce disparity of regional balance and to exercise their functions in a manner calculated to contribute to the outcomes and any targets set in the Framework.

6. 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?

Council strongly welcomes the Bill requiring the Departments to have due regard to the need to reduce regional disparity and to the Strategic Regional Balance Framework.

In addition to requiring Departments to take account of regional balance and weighing relevant information, we would also advise robust processes are implemented to document, for example, what measures have been considered and subsequently incorporated in each instance to reduce regional disparity, and achieve the Framework's targets and outcomes. Council would welcome input to this process.

As stated earlier, the first years of the Framework's implementation will be critical to its impact, hence there must be a focus on scrutiny of how the Framework is being interpreted and used to inform the design of policy objectives to ensure a consistent cross-departmental approach in complying with the responsibilities it sets out.

7. 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?

Council understands that this Bill creates a statutory duty for Departments to support the Regional Balance Framework. For the Framework to be effective, Departments must be held accountable if they do not take account of it in exercising their functions, as long as this does not require a Department to breach its primary statutory duties.

Like Section 75 duties, we support the Bill requiring Departments to now consider and document how every major policy or spending plan will impact regional disparities, and how these considerations have been taken on board to ensure regional balance in the delivery of the policy or plan.

The Executive and lead Department must rigorously scrutinise each Department's decision process in relation to this, particularly in the initial months of implementation, to ensure that wording "so far as is reasonably practicable" is not being used by Departments to limit their adherence to the Framework. For example, citing circumstances such as pre-standing commitments, budget cuts or conflicting priorities to claim that aligning a new policy with the Framework was simply not practicable.

What would be the Executive's approach to ensure that a Department is required to re-consider a decision if it finds regional balance has not been properly addressed?

Council would also query how this will be managed if two Departments have directly competing priorities, how would adherence to the Framework be enforced by the Executive?

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

No

Clause 3 - Annual Reporting

Clause 3 requires Departments to compile, retain and provide information to the Department for the Economy, to support annual reporting, including actions taken and evaluations of impact. It also provides the Department for the Economy with a power to issue guidance on format and timing. Furthermore, each Northern Ireland Department is required to evaluate progress made in contributing to the criteria set out in the Framework, so far as these relate to each Department's areas of responsibility.

9. 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?

Council welcomes the implementation of regular monitoring of how the NI Executive and Departments are taking actions to reduce regional disparities. To drive future prosperity across the region, the priority must be to embed regional balance as a long-term approach, fully incorporated into the process of developing and designing any new policy, plan or strategy and informing the delivery of all future policy objectives within each Department.

Council agrees with the requirement for mandatory annual reporting to ensure accountability, provide insights into progress and access to published data to evidence this. It is important that when Government Departments produce their reports annually to depict the impact on regional disparities, that they use clear quantitative data to transparently show changes from the initial baseline figure.

Of equal importance, the information emerging from the reporting process (especially in the initial stages) should be used to identify and address any emerging issues or challenges, with the findings being shared across Government, to flag good practice or areas where improvement and remedial action(s) may be required.

It is essential that this is designed to be an efficient process, capturing information required to monitor each Department's alignment to the Framework, whilst ensuring it does not become a 'tick box' exercise, focusing on compliance rather than meaningful and impactful delivery.

Given the range and scope of Executive and Departmental policies, plans and strategies, monitoring activity must be proportionate to the scale of the initiative and budget of what is being proposed, and especially its impact.

A potential challenge is the need for a flexible approach in measuring impact as proportionate to the policy, plan or strategy, which may not occur or be evidenced for some time. Additionally, as noted in response to Q7, where two or more Departments are collaborating, this should be accounted for in the reporting process.

The Bill states, 'Each Northern Ireland Department is required to evaluate progress made in contributing to the criteria set out in the Framework, so far as these relate to each Department's areas of responsibility'

What will be the process for independent evaluation or verification of 'progress'? It would be important that some form of independent validation is required to evaluate progress, rather than Departments marking their own homework.

Council strongly recommends this data is published (like Equality Screening and Rural Proofing Reports) and key relevant stakeholders, including Councils, should be involved in reviewing and providing feedback on any identified outcomes being reported.

Currently, the proposal does not outline how the Bill will operate alongside the Rural Needs Act, which places a Statutory Duty on public authorities to give due regard to rural needs. Council would welcome further details are provided on the proposed relationship between the Bill and the Rural Needs Act in the process of consulting, designing, delivering and monitoring future initiatives.

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

None

Clause 4 - Annual Reporting

Clause 4 requires the Department for the Economy to prepare, publish and lay before the Assembly an annual report on implementation of the Act, operation of the Framework and progress in reducing regional imbalances in line with outcomes and any targets.

It also requires the Minister to make a relevant statement on the report as soon as practicable following its publication.

The first report is due within 18 months of the first framework being adopted by the Executive. Subsequent reports are annual.

11. 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?

Council strongly agrees that requiring annual reporting and Ministerial statements on reducing regional economic disparities must be required and will also go some way to encouraging cross-departmental accountability and transparency. This approach effectively sets balanced regional growth as a priority for the Northern Ireland Executive.

Council refers to its response to Q9.

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

None

Clause 5 - Reviewing the Framework

Clause 5 requires the Executive to review the Framework's operation and effectiveness within five years of the first Framework being laid before the Assembly, and then at least once every five years thereafter. This enables (and, where appropriate, requires) the Department for the Economy to make and publish recommendations to the Executive, which must be laid before the Assembly.

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

Council agrees with the proposal for the Framework to be reviewed on a 5-year basis, which should promote accountability. This allows for a sufficient timeframe for data to become available to evaluate the impact of longer-term initiatives.

Council also strongly recommends this Report should also be publicly available and the lead Department must be required to consult with relevant stakeholders, notably Councils to

review and provide qualitative feedback on impact within their Districts, to inform the approach to future delivery and investment.

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

None

Clause 6 - Guidance and Research

Clause 6 confers ancillary functions on the Department for the Economy to provide guidance and information, and to undertake, commission or support research on regional disparities. Publication of guidance is required.

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

Council supports the recommendation to confer ancillary functions on the Department for the Economy to provide guidance and information, and to undertake, commission or support research on regional disparities.

Developing a strong evidence base, regular baseline studies and targeted rural typologies, must be prioritised to ensure that short and long term social, economic and physical interventions reflect local realities and emerging trends rather than applying a 'one-size fits all' approach.

While data-driven research will help support the shaping of targeted, place-based interventions to support balanced local growth, it is essential that the Department also works closely with local Councils in the collation of all relevant economic and social data on a regular basis. Council's knowledge of its local industry and communities means they are best placed to provide the Department with a comprehensive socio-economic profile of issues specific to their area.

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

None

Clause 7 - Defining regional disparity and regions

Clause 7 provides a non-exhaustive list of regional disparity indices including: gross domestic product per head of population; average and median disposable household income per head of population; unemployment rates, employment rates and economic inactivity rates; productivity, including gross value added per employee; health data, including average life expectancy; education data, including attainment rates; indices of deprivation; affordable housing; access to airports; and the regional distribution of public capital expenditure.

The clause also defines "regions" by reference to statistical geographies within Northern Ireland designated by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency including, but not limited to, Local Government Districts as well as other data catchments.

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

The Regional Balance Bill proposes to define regional disparity by linking economic performance and living standards to a range of measurable indicators (including GDP per head, disposable income, productivity (GVA), and employment rates) and as such benefits from avoiding reliance on a single metric.

Council agrees that the indicators as outlined should be included and welcomes the note that these are 'non-exhaustive'. In some instances, these may not provide take account of specific local issues or challenges affecting smaller geographic domains and should not be relied on solely to identify and address regional disparities.

Defining disparity purely through measurable metrics alone can sometimes overlook intangible and locally specific factors such as local infrastructure, connectivity, and health inequalities that can also impact regional deprivation and disadvantage.

Furthermore, as noted earlier in the previous question, we would urge Government Departments to engage with local Councils to identify areas of regional disparity and need. Councils' pivotal roles in local communities means they are best placed to provide insights and perspectives into locally specific issues.

18. Should regional disparity indices be specified in the Bill?

It is not critical to build in regional disparities within the Bill. Rather, it is more important to retain the flexibility to bring other relevant metrics and local research or insights into consideration, relevant to the issue to be addressed, and take account of changing circumstances.

Retaining some flexibility will allow a policy framework to adapt to take account of evolving local contexts and changing economic conditions, rather than setting in rigid definitions of regional disparity. This approach should allow the use of local data and emerging research as specific regional challenges vary over time.

19. What other indices should be used to define regional disparity?

While Council agrees with the indices outlined, the sole use of these, without other pertinent data and local context and research, will severely limit the Executive's ambition to address regional inequalities. Council recommends that a range of other criteria and research must be incorporated into the baselining and decision-making process, directly relating to the specific policy or funding issue being developed. A 'one size fits all' approach will not work in most instances and is in fact why regional inequality has persisted in Districts such as Mid Ulster over the past few decades.

To accurately capture regional disparity and its local impact, it will be necessary to incorporate specialised, localised indicators relevant to each policy or issue under consideration. As advised previously in this Response, Departments should be required to consult with local Councils, as a minimum, who are best placed to provide local context, data and research affecting smaller geographical areas or specific issues.

For example, the Mid Ulster District comprises an area of 1955km², is 60 miles in length with 68% of its 152,700 residents living in rural areas. In many instances, using one District-wide indicator will fail to reflect the complexity or scale of an issue which may vary across parts of the district, or occur in pockets of smaller geographies dispersed across the area.

Clearly, the development of a new rural or urban regeneration policy or investment strategy would have to adopt a very specific range of indicators and outcomes for each to reflect the priorities of different funding streams.

In addition, in terms of addressing issues such as digital and mobile connectivity, based on the Council's previous experiences, regional inequalities can only be effectively delivered by relying heavily on local consultations and research. While the regional and District picture presented by the provider suggested minimal issues, Council's local engagement flagged a high level of no/poor/intermittent connections and signals.

A further example is the historic and ongoing lack of investment in Invest NI serviced sites across Mid Ulster; this has been continually highlighted by Council as a critical issue which has stymied the growth of Mid Ulster's local economy for years. It's difficult to see how the sole use of the indices outlined in the Bill as it stands, will bring about the actions or investment required to address this challenge. However, Council has undertaken extensive consultations and research and developed comprehensive Business Cases, all of which must form part of the consideration process in the development of future investment strategies.

Furthermore, it is critical that any future process for developing policy or investment must be required to take account of the levels of previous investment, with a focus on prioritising those areas which received no or a minimal allocation, to address long standing and historic underinvestment in regions such as Mid Ulster. Council seeks a commitment from the NI Executive that the new Regional Balance Bill will put in place processes to address this historic discrepancy to "level up" the area. Another key consideration is that public sector investment in Mid Ulster is not proportionate with the billions of pounds contributed by the region's business base into the NI economy.

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

The Act notes the Regional Balance Bill defines regions (and sub-regions) flexibly using geographies designed by NISRA, (including but not limited to Local Government Districts), and includes other relevant data catchments, and functional areas which may cross administrative or jurisdictional boundaries.

Council agrees with the proposed flexible approach. The use of administrative geographies for defined areas is required on a practical level to facilitate a structured approach to baselining activity and monitoring outcomes while acknowledging that economic and social issues may not always align to administrative boundaries or borders.

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

None

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

Yes

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

No

Proposed Additions and Amendments

24. Please provide information on any other potential amendments that you feel would enhance the Bill and the rationale for those

Enhanced Focus on Joined Up Departmental Working

To deliver meaningful impact in the delivery of regional balance, Departments must be required to collaborate and improve their approach to joined up working and collaboration within the context of an overall Strategic Regional Balance Framework, with the wider NI Executive acting as a key driver. The lack of joined-up policy design and working across Government Departments has been an increasingly challenging issue impacting policy design, delivery and investment in recent years. As widely acknowledged, most economic and social issues cannot be addressed in isolation by one Department; solutions are

inextricably linked to a range of other factors, including infrastructure, regeneration, skills and education, which fall under the remit of other Departments.

Council understands the Bill recognises that Departments will have differing levels of input into the Framework, which is catered for by the flexible duty in Clause 2. However, we reiterate that addressing regional disparities and inequalities requires Departments to commit to a joined-up approach to achieve effective delivery and implementation.

This will require adopting a new approach to policy design, including the alignment of budgets, plans or funding streams, where the objectives, target sectors, outputs or issues are the same, or where there is scope for complementary delivery. More integrated working across Departments is the way forward to optimise resources and economic impact within tightening fiscal environment.

Council believes that the implementation of the new Framework presents a key opportunity to deliver this to achieve a more inclusive, sustainable and effective approach to public service delivery.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Mid Ulster District Council strongly agrees that economic and related disparities urgently require legislation for them to be addressed properly and welcomes the Bill which gives statutory recognition to regional balance. Council acknowledges the significant work already undertaken by the Departments for Economy, Infrastructure and Finance to address regional imbalance.

The Regional Balance Bill must prioritise creating conditions for improved policy design and implementation to address regional disparities and deliver sustainable economic and social outcomes for Mid Ulster, where such historic regional imbalances and inequalities are profound. Furthermore, the Bill could serve as a useful barometer to measure departmental progress in addressing regional imbalance, ensuring Mid Ulster can reach its full economic potential.

With the effective rebalancing of support and strategic investment, Mid Ulster has the potential and the ability to become more competitive economically and socially both nationally and internationally.

The Council welcomes the implementation of the Regional Balance Bill and looks forward to further engagement with the NI Executive and Government Departments to deliver investment in more positive outcomes for Mid Ulster's residents and business.