



**Armagh City  
Banbridge  
& Craigavon**  
Borough Council

Peter McCallion  
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BT4 3XX

18 September 2026

Dear Peter

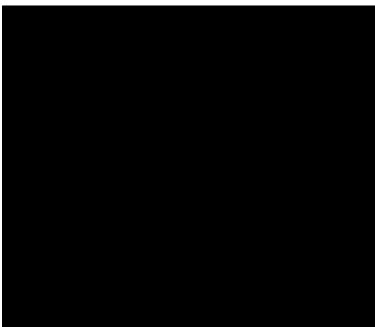
**RE: Regional Balance Bill – Call for Evidence**

Please find attached Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council's response to the Regional Balance Bill Call for Evidence.

The response reflects the Council's views on the proposals contained within the Regional Balance Bill consultation. The response also recognises the importance of regional balance and the need to ensure that future policy and investment decisions support sustainable growth and prosperity across the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough and the Mid South West Region as a whole.

We trust this will be considered as part of the consultation process and welcome any further engagement if required.

Yours Sincerely



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## **Regional Balance Bill – Call for Evidence**

### **Response from Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council**

**August 2026**

Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council welcomes the Regional Balance Bill and supports the establishment of a statutory framework to address long-standing regional disparities across Northern Ireland.

As the largest council area outside Belfast, ABC Borough has a strong industrial base, a growing business community and significant capacity to contribute to Northern Ireland's economic success. However, the Borough continues to face a range of structural challenges, including infrastructure constraints, skills shortages, economic inactivity and connectivity issues, which reinforce the need for a more coordinated and balanced approach to regional development.

The objectives of the Bill align closely with the ambitions of the Mid South West Regional Economic Strategy, which seeks to create a more productive, connected, innovative and inclusive economy. The Council believes that effective implementation of the legislation has the potential to support sustainable economic growth, improve opportunities for residents and businesses, and ensure that all regions are equipped to realise their full potential.

For the Mid South West region, this is particularly important given the legacy of historic underinvestment and the continuing need to enhance infrastructure, skills, connectivity, tourism, innovation and inclusive growth.

The Mid South West Growth Deal was specifically designed to unlock economic potential and address regional disparities through targeted investment in transformational projects. A statutory framework for regional balance could help ensure that the needs, opportunities and strategic importance of the region continue to be recognised in future Executive policies, programmes and funding decisions.

The Council welcomes the Bill's recognition of the importance of cross-border economic data in informing policy, strategy and investment decisions. This is particularly relevant to ABC Borough given its proximity to neighbouring border counties and its strategic position within the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor. The Council believes that consideration of cross-border economic relationships

The Council believes that achieving regional balance requires both targeted interventions to address inequalities and strategic investment in areas with the capacity to drive economic growth. By recognising the strengths and opportunities that exist across all regions, the Bill can help create a more resilient, productive and prosperous Northern Ireland for businesses, communities and residents.

## **Clause 1 – Strategic Regional Balance Framework**

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

**Yes**

ABC Borough Council supports the introduction of legislation to address regional disparities and ensure that regional balance becomes a long-term, statutory priority across government.

The Council recognises that while Northern Ireland has implemented a range of regional development initiatives, significant disparities remain in economic output, productivity, skills attainment, connectivity and investment. Evidence presented by Ulster University highlights that regional inequalities remain persistent and that economic growth has tended to concentrate in specific locations despite successive policy interventions. (*Ulster University Delivering balanced regional growth in Northern Ireland, summary report May 2025*)

From an ABC Borough perspective, regional balance should not only focus on reducing disadvantage but also on enabling regions with significant growth potential to make a greater contribution to the Northern Ireland economy. This aligns closely with the MSW Economic Growth Strategy, which promotes productivity, innovation, skills development and connectivity as drivers of sustainable regional growth.

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

**Yes**

Regional balance requires coordinated intervention across transport, skills, economic development, planning, housing and infrastructure policy. The Executive is therefore best placed to provide leadership and oversight.

However, implementation should reflect the place-based approach advocated within the Ulster University report, whereby local government, Local Economic Partnerships, Community Planning Partnerships and regional collaborations such as the MSW Region are recognised as key delivery partners.

**Does the Bill correctly set out what should be in the Strategic Regional Balance Framework?**

**Yes, with enhancements.**

ABC Borough Council welcomes the inclusion of measurable outcomes, targets and reporting requirements. However, the Framework should place greater emphasis on:

- Infrastructure and transport connectivity.
- Digital connectivity.
- Innovation and R&D performance.
- Labour market participation and economic inactivity.
- Skills availability and workforce resilience.
- Rural accessibility.
- Business competitiveness.

The Framework should also recognise the value of functional economic areas. The MSW Region represents a distinct economic geography that extends beyond individual council boundaries and should be reflected within future regional balance assessments.

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

**Yes**

The Council welcomes the proposed consultation arrangements and believes engagement should include local government, businesses, educational institutions, Community Planning Partnerships, Local Economic Partnerships and regional economic partnerships.

**Additional Comments on Clause 1**

ABC Borough Council welcomes the proposed Strategic Regional Balance Framework and believes it should build upon existing regional development initiatives, particularly the Department for the Economy's Sub-Regional Economic Plan (2024), which places regional balance at the centre of economic policy and recognises councils as key delivery partners.

The Council welcomes that the Bill takes a broad approach to regional disparity and considers more than economic factors such as health and education. The Local Government Act (NI) 2014 introduced a duty on Councils to initiate, maintain, facilitate and participate in community planning for their district and also places varying duties on Community Planning Partners and Departments. Community plans set long-term outcomes to improve the social, economic and environmental wellbeing, commit partners to collaborative actions and are reported on to the public every two years. It is important that the outworkings of the Bill align with and add value to community planning at a local district level.

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**Clause 2 – Reporting, Review and Support Functions**

**Is it reasonable and sufficient to require all Departments to have due regard to reducing regional disparity and to the Strategic Regional Balance Framework?**

**Yes**

**Is it reasonable and sufficient to require all Departments to exercise their functions in a manner calculated to contribute to the outcomes and targets set in the Framework?**

**Yes**

#### **Additional Comments on Clause 2**

The Council believes that one of the key strengths of the Bill is its potential to improve transparency regarding the distribution of public investment across Northern Ireland. To strengthen accountability, departments should be required to demonstrate how major policy, spending and capital investment decisions contribute to reducing regional disparities and supporting regional balance objectives.

Research highlights that regional policies often fail when they are undermined by wider government decisions that continue to favour already successful areas.

The Council therefore recommends that all departments should be required to assess and demonstrate the regional impacts of major spending, policy and infrastructure decisions.

This approach supports the MSW Economic Growth Strategy's ambition to create a more connected and productive regional economy.

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#### **Clause 3 – Annual Reporting**

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

**Yes**

#### **Additional Comments on Clause 3**

ABC Borough Council supports annual reporting and believes transparency will be vital to maintaining confidence in the Framework.

Data should be available at both Local Government District and sub-regional level to reflect economic geographies such as the MSW Region.

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## **Clause 4 – Annual Reporting**

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

**Yes**

### **Additional Comments on Clause 4**

The Council believes annual reporting should assess both progress and impact.

The report should identify whether interventions are:

- Increasing productivity.
  - Improving labour market participation.
  - Supporting innovation.
  - Attracting investment.
  - Improving connectivity.
  - Reducing regional disparities.
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## **Clause 5 – Reviewing the Framework**

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

**Yes**

### **Additional Comments on Clause 5**

The Council supports five-year reviews but recommends interim assessments to ensure progress can be monitored more regularly.

Reviews should include engagement with local government and regional partnerships such as Community Planning Partnerships and LEP to ensure local experience informs future policy development.

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## **Clause 6 – Guidance and Research**

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

**Yes**

### **Additional Comments on Clause 6**

ABC Borough Council strongly supports this provision.

The Council recommends that future research should consider a focus on:

- Innovation and R&D activity.
- Skills shortages.
- Economic inactivity.
- Infrastructure accessibility.
- Rural challenges.
- Business growth and exports.
- Productivity.

This evidence base should be used to support place-based policy interventions tailored to regional needs.

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### **Clause 7 – Defining Regional Disparity and Regions**

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

**Yes**

**Should regional disparity indices be specified in the Bill?**

**Yes**

**What other indices should be used to define regional disparity?**

ABC Borough Council would recommend inclusion of:

- Business R&D performance.
- Export intensity.
- Innovation activity.
- Economic inactivity rates.
- Labour market participation.
- Digital connectivity.
- Public transport accessibility.
- Population retention.
- Commercial property and employment land availability.

The inclusion of these indicators would better capture growth potential and competitiveness.

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

**Yes**

### **Additional Comments on Clause 7**

ABC Borough Council welcomes the broad range of indicators proposed.

The Council believes that regional balance policy should focus not only on addressing underperformance but also on supporting high-potential regions that can accelerate economic growth for Northern Ireland as a whole.

We welcome the wider view taken by the Bill to include indicators related to health and education. Having a non-exhaustive list of indicators allows for flexibility and an important part of the research function would be to monitor a wider list of indicators to scan for emerging disparities. It would be important for all indicators to be available at local district level. We note also that the deprivation statistics have not been updated since 2017.

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## **Clause 8 – Commencement and Short Title**

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

**Yes**

### **Additional Comments on Clause 8**

ABC Borough Council supports commencement as soon as practicable following Royal Assent.

The Council believes there is already a strong policy foundation through the Sub-Regional Economic Plan, Local Economic Partnerships, Community Planning structures and regional economic strategies such as the MSW Economic Growth Strategy. Immediate commencement would allow these existing arrangements to support implementation of the Framework.

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## **Proposed Additions and Amendments**

ABC Borough Council recommends that the Bill:

- Recognises local government and Community Planning as delivery partners.
- Recognises functional economic areas such as the MSW Region.

- Requires regional impact assessments for significant policy and investment decisions.
- Includes infrastructure, innovation, skills and connectivity indicators.
- Requires publication of regional public expenditure data.
- Embeds place-based policymaking principles.
- Supports long-term investment in regional growth drivers, including advanced manufacturing, innovation, skills and connectivity.

## **Conclusion**

ABC Council supports the intent and objectives of the Regional Balance Bill. The Council believes the legislation provides an opportunity to establish a long-term, evidence-led and collaborative framework for promoting balanced regional development and improving outcomes for communities across Northern Ireland.

ABC Borough is a significant economic contributor within the Mid South West region, with strengths in advanced manufacturing, agri-food, innovation, entrepreneurship and export activity. The Borough's strategic location, strong business base and proximity to key transport corridors position it to play an important role in supporting regional growth. However, challenges remain in relation to infrastructure capacity, transport connectivity, economic inactivity, skills availability and rural accessibility, all of which require continued investment and coordinated policy intervention.

The Council supports the establishment of a statutory framework for regional balance that is evidence-based, outcomes-focused and sufficiently flexible to reflect differing local circumstances and opportunities. Regional priorities should be informed by robust data and developed in partnership with local stakeholders to ensure interventions respond effectively to local needs and economic potential.

The Council believes that sustainable and inclusive economic growth can only be achieved when all regions have equitable access to investment, infrastructure, employment opportunities, public services and economic development support. The Regional Balance Bill should therefore provide a framework that both addresses regional disparities and enables areas with strong growth potential to make their full contribution to the wider economy.