

Response ID [REDACTED]

Submitted to Regional Balance Bill

Submitted on [REDACTED]

Introduction

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name:

[REDACTED]

2 What is your email address?

email address:

[REDACTED]

3 Are you providing a submission on behalf of an organisation or business?

Yes

If yes, please provide the name of the organisation or business below:

Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council

Consent

4 Please confirm that you have read the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee's Privacy Notice by clicking the button below.

yes:

Yes

5 How would you like your submission to be published?

Yes. Publish but with my personal information and any content that could be used to identify me redacted.

Regional Balance Bill

Clause 1 - Strategic Regional Balance Framework

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

Yes

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

Yes

8 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.

Yes

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

Yes

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

Clause 1:

Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council (LCCC) supports the intention of Clause 1 and the establishment of a Strategic Regional Balance Framework. A statutory framework has the potential to provide greater long-term focus, consistency and accountability in addressing regional disparities across Northern Ireland.

The Framework should, however, place greater emphasis on delivering sustainable and inclusive economic growth through the creation of good jobs. Success should not be measured solely by employment rates or economic output but should also consider job quality, productivity, skills development,

earnings, career progression and the resilience of local labour markets.

The Framework should also clearly recognise the role of local government as a strategic delivery partner. Councils have strong relationships with businesses, communities, education providers and local stakeholders and are well placed to deliver place-based interventions. However, councils should not become the primary vehicle for additional monitoring, reporting and evaluation requirements arising from the Framework.

Responsibility for developing regional indicators, establishing baselines, monitoring outcomes and evaluating overall progress should remain with the Executive and the Department for the Economy. This will ensure consistency across Northern Ireland while allowing councils to concentrate their limited resources on delivering economic development programmes and supporting businesses on the ground.

Finally, the Framework should align with existing strategies, funding and delivery mechanisms, including the Local Growth Fund, Local Development Plans, Sub-Regional Economic Plans, Community Planning, City and Growth Deals, Labour Market Partnerships and other place-based investment programmes to avoid duplication and maximise impact.

Clause 2 - Reporting, Review and Support Functions

11 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?

Yes

12 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?

Yes

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

clause 2 :

The Council supports the principle that all Departments should have due regard to reducing regional disparities and contributing to the Strategic Regional Balance Framework. Regional balance cannot be achieved by the Department for the Economy alone and requires coordinated action across government.

The Council considers that the Framework should be underpinned by evidence-based decision-making, recognising both regional need and economic opportunity. Regional balance should not be interpreted as redistributing investment away from areas that are already driving economic growth. Rather, it should seek to reduce disparities while continuing to support areas with strong economic potential, recognising that sustainable growth across all parts of Northern Ireland delivers wider regional benefits.

Implementation should remain proportionate. The introduction of additional statutory duties should not create unnecessary administrative burdens for local government or other delivery partners. Councils already provide significant evidence, monitoring information and programme reporting through initiatives including Local Economic Partnerships, Labour Market Partnerships and a wide range of economic development and regeneration programmes.

The Framework should promote effective cross-departmental and cross-agency collaboration to ensure investment decisions and project delivery are aligned. It should also recognise that achieving regional balance depends on the timely provision of enabling infrastructure, including transport, wastewater, utilities and digital connectivity, alongside economic interventions.

Where possible, Departments should utilise existing reporting mechanisms and datasets rather than introducing new reporting requirements. The emphasis should remain on improving outcomes rather than increasing administrative activity.

The Bill should make clear that responsibility for strategic monitoring, economic analysis, performance management and evaluation rests primarily with central government, with local government contributing through existing partnership arrangements where appropriate.

Should the Bill result in additional responsibilities or reporting requirements for councils, these must be accompanied by appropriate and sustainable funding and resources. Any expansion of local government's role should be fully resourced to avoid creating unfunded burdens on councils.

Clause 3 - Annual Reporting

14 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

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

If no, please explain below:

The Council supports annual reporting as an important mechanism for transparency, accountability and demonstrating progress towards reducing regional disparities.

However, reporting requirements should be proportionate and should not create unnecessary administrative burdens for delivery organisations. Local government is already delivering a significant range of economic development, employability and business support programmes, often in partnership with the Department for the Economy, Invest NI and other public sector organisations, within increasingly constrained financial and staffing resources.

Councils should be enabled to focus on delivering place-based interventions that support businesses, attract investment, create good jobs and improve local economic outcomes, rather than being required to produce extensive evaluations, bespoke datasets and multiple evidence returns. Additional monitoring and reporting requirements can divert valuable resources away from frontline delivery and direct engagement with businesses and communities.

DfE should retain overall responsibility for strategic economic monitoring, analysis and reporting, drawing upon existing administrative datasets, official statistics and evidence already held across government and its agencies, including Invest NI where appropriate. This would reduce duplication, improve consistency and ensure that reporting is based on a single, robust evidence base.

Reporting arrangements should build upon existing reporting mechanisms wherever possible and avoid creating parallel processes for councils and other delivery partners. Local government should continue to contribute evidence through established partnership arrangements, while strategic evaluation and performance reporting remain functions led by central government.

Clause 4 - Annual Reporting

16 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

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

clause 4:

LCCC supports the requirement for an annual report by DfE and welcomes the Minister making an accompanying statement to the Assembly.

Annual reporting should provide a clear assessment of progress against agreed outcomes, identify where interventions are proving successful and highlight areas requiring additional policy attention or investment.

To maximise effectiveness, the report should draw upon existing official statistics and departmental information rather than requiring significant additional reporting from councils or delivery organisations. Consistent, centrally coordinated reporting will improve comparability across Northern Ireland while allowing local government to focus on programme delivery and supporting businesses, employers and communities.

Clause 5 - Reviewing the Framework

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

Yes

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

clause 5:

The Council agrees that the Framework should be reviewed periodically but suggests that five years may be too long for a comprehensive assessment without any formal interim review.

Consideration should be given to introducing a light-touch mid-term review to assess whether the Framework remains aligned with changing economic conditions, labour market trends and emerging regional challenges. This would allow adjustments to priorities where necessary while maintaining longer-term strategic stability.

Reviews should include meaningful engagement with local government, businesses, educational institutions and other delivery partners to ensure the Framework reflects practical experience and changing local economic circumstances.

The Council also considers it important that implementation and review of the Framework recognises the role of local government as a key delivery partner. Councils are already delivering a wide range of economic development, employability and regeneration initiatives through Local Economic Partnerships, Labour Market Partnerships and other place-based programmes.

Implementation should be supported by clear governance arrangements, effective cross-departmental coordination and a consistent approach across departments and statutory agencies to minimise duplication, delays and unnecessary administrative burdens for delivery partners.

Should the Framework result in additional responsibilities, expectations or reporting requirements for local government, these should be accompanied by appropriate and sustainable funding and resources. Any expansion of councils' role should be fully resourced to avoid creating additional unfunded pressures on local government.

Clause 6 - Guidance and Research

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

Yes

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

clause 6:

LCCC supports DfE undertaking and commissioning research and publishing guidance.

Developing robust evidence, monitoring regional performance and evaluating policy effectiveness are core strategic functions that are most appropriately undertaken at departmental level. This approach promotes consistency of methodology, reduces duplication and ensures that decisions are informed by comparable data across Northern Ireland.

Guidance should be practical, proportionate and developed collaboratively with local government and delivery partners. Existing datasets should be utilised wherever possible to minimise additional reporting burdens.

The Department should also ensure that research findings are translated into practical policy recommendations and shared with delivery partners to support continuous improvement.

Clause 7 - Defining regional disparity and regions

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

Yes

23 Should regional disparity indices be specified in the Bill?

Yes

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

clause 7 :

In addition to the indicators listed in the Bill, consideration should be given to measures including:

- Good jobs, including earnings, job quality and security.
- Skills shortages and employer demand.
- Innovation and research activity.
- Digital connectivity and mobile coverage.
- Public transport accessibility and journey times to employment.
- Infrastructure capacity, including wastewater, electricity network capacity and other enabling infrastructure that supports investment.
- Commercial property availability and employment land supply.
- Childcare accessibility and affordability.
- Access to higher and further education.
- Town centre vitality and vacancy rates.
- Carbon emissions and the transition to a low-carbon economy.

The indicators should be reviewed periodically to ensure they remain relevant and reflect changing economic priorities.

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

Yes

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

clause 7:

The Council supports the use of recognised statistical geographies but believes sufficient flexibility should be retained to reflect functional economic areas rather than relying solely on administrative boundaries.

Travel-to-work areas, business clusters, city regions and cross-boundary economic relationships frequently extend beyond Local Government District boundaries and should be considered where appropriate.

Clause 8 - Commencement and Short Title

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

Yes

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

clause 7:

The Council has no objection to commencement following Royal Assent, provided sufficient time is allowed for the preparation of guidance, the development of the Strategic Regional Balance Framework and appropriate engagement with delivery partners before any statutory duties become operational.

Implementation should be phased where necessary to ensure that Departments and delivery partners are adequately prepared.

Proposed Additions and Amendments

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

Information on any potential amendments:

LCCC recommends that the Bill:

- Explicitly recognise the importance of creating good jobs and improving productivity alongside reducing regional disparities.
- Clarify the respective responsibilities of central government and local government, with strategic monitoring, evaluation and reporting led by the DfE.
- Minimise duplication by requiring Departments to utilise existing reporting mechanisms and official datasets wherever possible.
- Strengthen links with Community Planning, Local Development Plans, City and Growth Deals and Sub-Regional Economic Plans.
- Include provision for a proportionate mid-term review of the Framework.
- Recognise functional economic areas alongside administrative boundaries where appropriate.

These amendments would strengthen delivery while ensuring resources remain focused on improving economic outcomes rather than increasing administrative burdens.

Additional Comments

30 Please provide any additional comments on the Bill you feel should be considered.

additional comments:

The Council welcomes the ambition of the Bill and supports the principle of reducing regional disparities across Northern Ireland through a coordinated and evidence-based approach.

Achieving regional balance will require sustained collaboration across central government, local government, businesses, education providers and communities. The success of the legislation will depend not only on the quality of the Framework but also on clear governance, realistic expectations and appropriate resourcing.

Local government plays a vital role in delivering economic development initiatives, supporting businesses, promoting employability and shaping places. This delivery role should be protected. Councils should not be expected to absorb significant additional monitoring, evaluation and reporting requirements without corresponding resources.

Strategic economic analysis, regional monitoring and performance reporting are functions most appropriately led by the Department for the Economy and other central government departments. Allowing councils to focus on delivery while central government leads on strategic oversight will provide the greatest opportunity to improve productivity, create good jobs and reduce regional disparities across Northern Ireland.

Almost done...

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