

For the attention of Committee for the Economy

C/O Peter McCallion, Clerk to the Committee for the Economy

Northern Ireland Assembly

NILGA Response: Call for Evidence – Regional Balance Bill, September 2026

Introduction

NILGA welcomes the opportunity to provide written evidence to the Committee for the Economy on the Regional Balance Bill. Achieving regional balance is fundamental to fair access to economic opportunity, public services, infrastructure and investment across Northern Ireland. For local government, this is not only an economic objective: it is a practical test of whether regional policy, public investment and delivery arrangements can respond to the different circumstances of places and communities across urban, rural, border and peripheral areas.

Regional disparities are experienced differently across Northern Ireland, with particular pressures evident in rural, border, peripheral and historically under-invested places, including in the West and North West. Councils see the impact of these disparities every day through differences in local employment opportunities, transport connectivity, housing, digital infrastructure, access to services and community wellbeing.

As democratically accountable place leaders and delivery partners, councils have a direct interest in ensuring that growth, investment and public policy are distributed more evenly across urban, rural, border and peripheral areas. Regional balance must support communities to thrive, help sustain local services and ensure that no area is structurally disadvantaged by where it is located.

Regional balance is therefore not simply an economic issue, it is central to community planning, regeneration, local development and improving outcomes for citizens across Northern Ireland.

NILGA's Strategic Policy Network met in September 2026 to consider the Regional Balance Bill and NILGA's response to it. As part of that discussion, the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre presented and discussed its earlier research paper, *Delivering Balanced Regional Growth in Northern Ireland*, published in May 2025, which can be viewed here: [Delivering balanced regional growth in Northern Ireland](#).

The findings from UUEPC's research, NILGA Strategic Policy Network discussions and the views of councils that shared their own responses with NILGA have helped inform the key messages set out in this submission.

This submission therefore draws on three complementary sources: the statutory provisions of the Bill and its accompanying memorandum, the independent evidence base provided by UUEPC's regional balance research, and the practical experience of

councils as democratic, place-based institutions working with communities, businesses and public partners across Northern Ireland.

NILGA broadly supports the ambition of the Regional Balance Bill and the creation of a Regional Balance Strategic Framework. As introduced, the Bill would require the Executive to develop, adopt, maintain and implement the Framework; require departments to have due regard to reducing regional disparity when developing or revising policies, strategies and plans; and provide for information gathering, annual reporting, five-year review, guidance and research. NILGA's central message is that these provisions provide a valuable statutory platform, but they will only improve outcomes if they shape real decisions on policy, funding, infrastructure, public services and delivery.

NILGA's Key Message

Regional balance will only be meaningful if it is treated as a whole-system objective. This is consistent with the Bill's purpose and with the accompanying Explanatory and Financial Memorandum, which recognises that regional balance is the responsibility of the whole of government and requires a long-term approach. It cannot sit with one department or be delivered through economic development activity alone. It must be connected to the Programme for Government, Executive budgets, infrastructure planning, wastewater capacity, transport, housing, digital connectivity, the emerging Rural NI policy and existing partnerships such as City and Growth Deals, Community Planning and Local Economic Partnerships.

Councils are democratically accountable leaders, conveners of Community Planning Partnerships, local economic actors, planning authorities, regeneration partners and public-facing bodies. Councils hold detailed local evidence on need, opportunity, delivery barriers and community impact. That experience should be built into the development, implementation, monitoring and review of the Framework from the outset.

NILGA considers that the Bill provides a useful foundation, but its success will depend on delivery credibility. Clause 1 provides for outcomes, departmental roles, mechanisms, criteria and methodology, cross-border economic data, measurable targets, milestones and baseline data. These are welcome. However, the Framework must also include clear governance, defined responsibilities, delivery capacity, appropriate resourcing, meaningful indicators, robust guidance and transparent review arrangements. Without these, there is a risk that the Bill could create an administrative process rather than drive practical change.

Why the Bill Matters to Local Government

Regional imbalance is experienced locally through uneven access to jobs, skills, transport, housing, infrastructure, services, digital connectivity and community opportunity. Councillors are often the first point of contact for residents and businesses when these pressures are felt. Local government therefore has a direct interest in ensuring regional balance is not treated as an abstract economic objective, but as a practical place-based agenda capable of improving outcomes for communities.

Rural, border, coastal, urban and historically under-invested areas experience different combinations of opportunity and constraint. These include dispersed settlement

patterns, distance from major centres, lower population density, infrastructure deficits, wastewater capacity, road condition, public transport limitations, access to essential services, digital connectivity, economic inactivity, wage levels, demographic change and the distribution of public investment. The Framework must be sensitive to those different starting points while supporting balanced growth across Northern Ireland as a whole.

Regional balance should not be understood as requiring every place to achieve identical outcomes or capacity at the same pace. Across the UK, Ireland and Europe, regional policy commonly recognises that rurality, peripherality, distance from major centres, dispersed settlement patterns, weaker infrastructure and limited economies of scale can create enduring structural disadvantages and higher costs. Some disparities are amenable to policy intervention and should be narrowed over time. Others may be more deeply embedded in geography, demography or settlement patterns and cannot realistically be removed altogether. Where structural disadvantage is deeply embedded, the objective should be to enable places and communities to thrive despite it, with fair access to public services, economic opportunity and the capacity to shape their own development. That requires more than compensating for disadvantage through isolated funding decisions. In this context, equalisation should be understood broadly as the coordinated use of policy, funding, infrastructure, service design and investment appraisal across government to offset the effects of structural disadvantage and strengthen the conditions in which places can thrive. Achieving greater regional balance is therefore a long-term objective. In the meantime, government needs a proper, structured and transparent approach to recognising existing inequalities, agreeing which disadvantages require continuing equalisation, and sustaining that support while longer-term disparities are addressed.

Whole-System Delivery

NILGA has consistently argued that complex challenges require whole-system delivery. Regional balance should be approached in the same way. Economic development interventions will not address disparity if they are not aligned with infrastructure investment, wastewater capacity, transport, housing, skills, health, rural policy, poverty reduction, climate action and public service reform.

The Framework should be embedded within the Programme for Government and connected to Executive budget processes, public investment strategies and wellbeing reporting. It should also align with Rural NI, the Rural Needs Act, anti-poverty delivery, City and Growth Deals, the Sub-Regional Economic Plan, Community Planning Partnerships, Local Economic Partnerships, Labour Market Partnerships and Local Development Plans. This would avoid duplication, support better use of constrained resources and provide a clearer route from regional policy intent to place-based delivery.

The Framework should also explain how indicators and evidence will be used in practice, including whether they will inform funding allocations, policy prioritisation or impact assessment.

The Bill defines regional disparities broadly, covering economic performance, living standards and indicators such as income, employment, productivity, health, education, deprivation, housing, transport access and public capital investment. NILGA supports

this broad approach, but recommends that the Framework also reflects access to essential services, childcare, digital and transport connectivity, road quality, journey times, demographic sustainability, affordability pressures and lived experience, so that rural, border and peripheral issues are not hidden by regional averages.

Strategic Local Government Considerations

Finance and resourcing: The Bill and Explanatory and Financial Memorandum are clear that the Bill does not itself create new spending or grant programmes, and that the direct financial implications are largely indirect and administrative. NILGA recognises this, but considers that the Framework will need to be connected to funding, investment choices and delivery capacity if it is to support meaningful regional balance. A credible approach must distinguish between disparities that can be narrowed through policy and investment, and structural disadvantages that may remain deeply embedded. In the latter case, equalisation should be understood as the coordinated use of policy, funding and investment to offset the effects of disadvantage and enable places to thrive, rather than as a short-term or stand-alone grant response. This is particularly important in local government finance. The Rates Support Grant, administered by DfC, has an explicit equalising purpose: it helps address differences in councils' ability to raise the finance necessary to provide public services on a fair and equitable basis. Significant reductions in the Grant in recent years therefore illustrate the wider policy challenge. If government accepts regional balance as a long-term objective, it should also agree a structured and transparent approach to recognising existing inequalities, determining the equalisation interventions required at strategic level, and sustaining effective mechanisms in the meantime. Otherwise, councils facing the greatest structural disadvantages may have the least financial capacity to maintain services, support their places to thrive and contribute to the outcomes the Framework is intended to achieve.

Governance and accountability: NILGA welcomes the Bill's provision for departmental duties, annual reporting to the Assembly, Ministerial statements, review and guidance. However, the proposed duty to have due regard will need to be supported by clear guidance, transparent reporting and practical accountability if it is to influence decisions in a meaningful way. NILGA considers that the Committee should explore whether stronger guidance, reporting templates, audit expectations or a regional impact assessment mechanism would help departments demonstrate how policies, programmes and investment decisions have considered and improved regional balance in practice.

Capacity and delivery: Effective implementation will require analytical, policy, programme management and partnership capacity across the Executive, departments, ALBs and local government. The Explanatory and Financial Memorandum recognises that framework development, evidence gathering, reporting and research may generate additional administrative and analytical costs. Councils already operate under significant financial and workforce pressures, so any additional expectations should be realistic, proportionate, clearly defined, developed in consultation with local government and supported by appropriate resourcing.

Place-based delivery: Councils are well placed to support regional balance through community planning, regeneration, local economic development, partnership working and convening local stakeholders. The Framework should use existing local infrastructure and partnerships rather than create parallel structures, and should recognise that rural, border and peripheral areas often face higher delivery costs, weaker service access, poorer transport connectivity, infrastructure constraints and limited economies of scale.

Investment and economic development accountability: The Explanatory and Financial Memorandum recognises concerns about the historic distribution of economic development support and refers to proposals for Invest NI to develop and publish sub-regional economic targets. As part of a whole-system approach, NILGA considers that the Framework should clarify how Invest NI will contribute to regional balance objectives, how its activity will be reported and how sub-regional outcomes will be scrutinised.

NILGA Recommendations

- *Embed the Framework within the Programme for Government, Executive budgets, wellbeing reporting and public investment decisions.*
- *Treat regional balance as a whole-system agenda linked to Rural NI, the Rural Needs Act, anti-poverty delivery, infrastructure planning, City and Growth Deals, Community Planning, Local Development Plans and local economic and labour market partnerships.*
- *Use a broad basket of indicators covering economic performance, living standards, service access, connectivity, infrastructure, demographics, wellbeing, poverty, good jobs and lived experience, including rural, border and peripheral places.*
- *Report progress at Local Government District level where practicable, and explain how residence-based and workplace-based indicators will be interpreted.*
- *Clarify how evidence will inform funding, policy prioritisation, investment appraisal and regional impact assessment.*
- *Recognise equalisation as an integral part of regional balance, understood broadly as the coordinated use of policy, funding, infrastructure, service design and investment appraisal to offset deeply embedded structural disadvantage and enable places to thrive. This should include the role of the Rates Support Grant in addressing differences in councils' revenue-raising capacity, and an assessment of how significant reductions in the Grant in recent years affect councils' ability to provide public services on a fair and equitable basis.*
- *Ensure any additional asks of councils are proportionate, clearly defined, consulted upon and properly resourced.*
- *Consider a regional impact assessment mechanism for major policies, programmes and investment decisions.*
- *Strengthen annual reporting so it focuses on outcomes and impact, not activity alone.*

- *Clarify how Invest NI and other ALBs will contribute to regional balance and be reflected in reporting and scrutiny.*
- *Introduce an early implementation review, followed by the five-year review cycle required by the Bill.*

Conclusion

NILGA broadly supports the Regional Balance Bill and the proposed Regional Balance Strategic Framework. The Bill provides an important opportunity to place regional balance on a clearer statutory footing and strengthen accountability for addressing long-standing disparities in economic performance and living standards across Northern Ireland.

As the representative body for local government, NILGA stands ready to work constructively with the Committee, Ministers, departments, councils and partners to ensure the Regional Balance Framework is ambitious in purpose, grounded in evidence, practical in delivery and capable of supporting visible improvements for people and places across Northern Ireland.