

22nd September 2026

Peter McCallion
Clerk to the Committee for Economy
Northern Ireland Assembly
Parliament Buildings, Stormont
BT4 3XX

Dear Peter,

Thank you for your notification of the Committee for the Economy's call for evidence on the Regional Balance Bill. Visit Derry welcomes the opportunity to respond at this critical stage.

Visit Derry is the official destination marketing and visitor servicing organisation for Derry~Londonderry and the wider North-West. We are a not-for-profit public-private partnership representing more than 200 tourism businesses and organisations across the region. Our role includes destination marketing, visitor servicing, industry engagement, advocacy and influencing, working with Derry City and Strabane District Council (DCSC), Tourism NI (TNI), Tourism Ireland, Fáilte Ireland and other public and private-sector partners throughout the tourism sector and beyond.

Visit Derry considers tourism to be an important practical vehicle through which the objectives of regional balance can be delivered. Tourism is an export industry in which expenditure is brought into the region by visitors; it supports employment across a broad geographical area; it creates markets for Small and Medium-Size Enterprises (SMEs); it supports a vibrant cultural and heritage sector; and, when properly developed, it can strengthen the attractiveness of a place to tourists, residents, students, investors and businesses all year around.

Visit Derry therefore supports the principle that regional balance should be embedded across government policy. We believe that tourism should be explicitly incorporated into the statutory framework, associated indicators, reporting arrangements and future regional investment decisions outlined in the key provisions of the Regional Balance Bill.

To further empower regions and redress the current imbalance, Visit Derry believe the Department should establish a new **Regional Tourism Growth Fund** with multi-year funding to help rebalance the local tourism economy and better support the drive for regional economic equality in the North-West.

The North-West Disparity:

The case for a stronger regional approach is particularly compelling in the North-West. The Department for the Economy has itself identified significant regional disparities. Latest 2026 figures from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) show that DCSC has the lowest rate of employment at 64% of all local authorities in Northern Ireland,

compared with 70.5% in Belfast and a national average of 74.3%. The Department has consequently identified tourism, hospitality and manufacturing as industries with strong sub-regional potential for addressing regional imbalance.

Tourism has a particularly well-established capacity to distribute economic activity across Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland recorded approximately 5.1 million overnight trips and £1.2 billion in associated expenditure in 2025. Tourism should therefore be considered not simply as a leisure activity but as an important regional economic development tool.

The performance of DCSC area demonstrates the potential of this approach.

In 2025, Derry City and Strabane recorded:

- 399,478 overnight trips;
- 1,206,934 visitor nights; and
- £93.58 million in visitor expenditure

Crucially, for an area of such rich tourism potential these figures represent only 8% of overnight trips and visitors spend throughout Northern Ireland. There remains strong opportunity for growth given the strategic regional imbalance in comparison to the proportional share of NI tourism.

Overnight trips increased by 35% compared with 2024, nights increased by 28%, and visitor expenditure increased by 13.5%. Overnight trips across Northern Ireland increased by approximately 9% over the same period.

This is significant evidence that investment in place-based destination development, marketing, events, heritage and visitor infrastructure can generate economic growth by taking advantage of Derry's unique position as a strategic hub between the UK, Republic of Ireland and European Union as well as its natural location as a gateway to the Wild Atlantic Way and Causeway Coast.

The Committee should therefore **explicitly recognise tourism growth in the North-West as evidence of place-based economic potential**, rather than simply as a consequence of wider tourism growth in Northern Ireland.

Regional Disparities in Public Investment and Destination Marketing:

A central consideration for the Regional Balance Bill should be the relationship between public investment, destination marketing capacity and tourism performance.

Visit Derry recognises that public investment cannot simply be allocated based on equal amounts per region. Investment must take account of population, existing visitor economy, infrastructure, market opportunity and potential economic return.

For example, we welcome the recent investment in Belfast's historic Fleadh festival in August 2026 for its success in attracting visitors to Northern Ireland and promoting the destination as a welcoming and inclusive place to travel. However, we believe that there

should be transparency around the scale and distribution of public investment in destination marketing.

Belfast City Council approved a funding allocation of approximately £2.14 million to Visit Belfast for 2026/27. By comparison, Derry City and Strabane District Council's provided £425,000 in management fees to Visit Derry in the same period.

These figures are not directly like-for-like and should not be interpreted as a simple comparison of organisational budgets. Nevertheless, they demonstrate a substantial disparity in the scale of direct local-government support available to the two destination organisations. These challenges are further exacerbated by the capacity challenges faced by DCSC in the wider context of historic underfunding, underdevelopment and economic inactivity within the region.

The contrast is particularly relevant when considered alongside tourism performance. Belfast recorded approximately 1.5 million overnight trips and £469.6 million of overnight visitor expenditure in 2024. Derry and Strabane recorded almost 400,000 overnight trips and £93.6 million of expenditure in 2025. Visit Derry believes that there are significant opportunities for further growth within the city and wider North-West region if proportionate funding was available to market the destination more effectively.

The issue for regional balance is not that Belfast should receive less support. Rather, it is that high-performing regional destinations, such as the Derry and Strabane District, should be given the capacity to compete for additional economic growth commensurate with the quality of its international tourism product.

Place-Based Tourism Growth Opportunity:

The Derry and Strabane District represents a particularly strong example of the type of place-based opportunity envisaged by the Regional Balance Bill.

The city combines:

- an internationally recognised historic walled city;
- a university city with growing student population;
- a nationally and internationally significant peace and conflict history;
- a substantial cultural and festival programme;
- a strong SME and hospitality base;
- City and Growth Deal investment;
- The gateway and meeting point of the Wild Atlantic Way and Causeway Coast
- Access to the Sperrins and Donegal;
- the River Foyle and growing cruise tourism opportunities;
- a distinctive maritime and industrial heritage; and

- a strategic position at the meeting point of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, the EU / ROI border and EU / UK border city.

The Department for the Economy's Tourism Vision and Action Plan already identifies 17 core objectives and initiatives to promote regional balance, raise industry productivity, create sustainable year-round employment and lower carbon emissions.

One of its key objectives is to advance a comprehensive **Aviation Policy** in consultation with stakeholders to increase the number of air routes from key markets to increase visitor spend from these markets. The Department has previously allocated up to £3m to the City of Derry Airport with the expressed aim of safeguarding critical infrastructure and air connectivity for the North-West region.

Visit Derry supports this critical regional balance intervention to help sustain regional growth. **We feel that ongoing investment in our air, road and rail capacity is required so that the region is not constrained from a destination marketing perspective by historic underfunding in our infrastructure.**

The Department has also emphasised the development of **Peace Tourism** as one of its strategic actions. The city's experience of conflict, civil rights, peacebuilding and reconciliation provides an authentic tourism proposition that cannot simply be replicated elsewhere.

The city and district offer a natural location from which to develop this policy at scale. The historic city walls, Museum of Free Derry, the Siege Museum, the Bogside, the Guildhall, the Peace Bridge, the former Ebrington military site – soon to host the flagship DNA museum opening in 2027 – and the city's wider cultural infrastructure provide a concentration of assets capable of supporting a coherent international peace-tourism proposition.

Furthermore, Visit Derry has been working with the Department and Tourism Ireland directly to deliver a **Northern Ireland Integrated Business Events Strategy** to maximise the economic potential of business events within the city and North-West. Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE) have the potential to attract international visitors year around and at off-peak times in a market that is valued at approximately £8m per year to Northern Ireland.

From a regional balance perspective, the vast majority of this MICE market is currently channelled towards Belfast. With burgeoning hotel capacity, conferencing facilities such as the Millenium Forum, city centre location and strategic location, Derry is ideally situated to expand its MICE potential. Strategic investment in this sector from a destination marketing perspective could see a significant increase in business tourism to support local business and industry at off-season and off-peak times.

The lesson from adopting a place-based approach for regional balance is important: regional assets are not simply cultural amenities. With appropriate investment in interpretation, conservation, product development and international marketing, they can contribute to economic infrastructure.

Shared Island and Cross-Border Tourism:

The North-West is uniquely placed to demonstrate the economic value of cross-border tourism.

Derry is an international border city whose functional tourism economy does not correspond neatly with administrative boundaries. Visitors increasingly do not experience the North-West as two separate tourism economies.

This makes the city particularly well placed to act as a **shared-island tourism gateway**. Indeed, Derry hosted the inaugural Shared Island Workshop in early September 2026. Tourism Ireland attracted 50 international tour operators from across the globe to meet with industry from the Wild Atlantic Way and Causeway Coast, the Walled City tourism providers in a series of business to business (B2B) meetings with the aim of influencing international itineraries and attracting visitors from across the globe.

The Shared Island Fund has already demonstrated the potential of this approach. The Government of Ireland allocated €7.6 million to the Wild Atlantic Way/Causeway Coastal Route Tourism Brand Collaboration Project, delivered collaboratively by Tourism Ireland, Tourism NI and Fáilte Ireland.

The project is intended to create greater partnership between two major tourism routes and generate lasting benefits for the North-West and northern coastal regions.

The potential is supported by wider tourism trends. In 2025, trips from the Republic of Ireland to Northern Ireland increased by **15% to 1.3 million**, while expenditure increased by **31% to £317 million**.

This demonstrates that the all-island tourism economy is already an important driver of growth. **The Regional Balance framework should therefore require departments to recognise cross-border economic catchments and tourism flows, rather than assessing regional performance solely according to administrative boundaries.**

Recommendations:

Visit Derry believe that a new **Regional Tourism Growth Fund** with multi-year funding should be established to help rebalance the local tourism economy and better support the drive for regional economic equality in the North-West.

A regional tourism growth fund would attract more investment towards regional tourism, address the current and historic economic disadvantage within the North-West region and create opportunities for sustainable growth and prosperity through increased tourism.

The level of funding provided at the national level will begin to address underinvestment in the city and district and be commensurate with the current local investment in tourism destination marketing and visitor servicing.

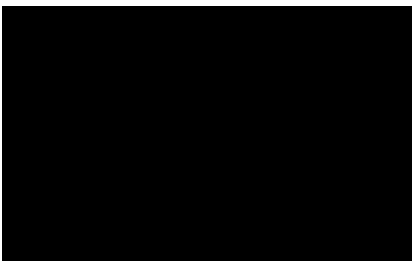
Visit Derry therefore recommends that the Regional Balance framework require government to:

- 1. Develop a multi-year Regional Growth Fund model;**

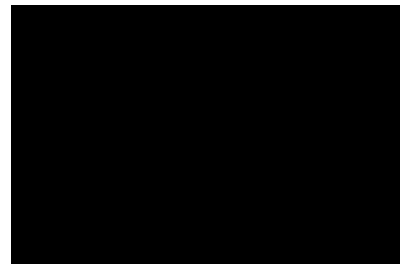
- 2. Ensure that developing regional destinations are not constrained by a lack of targeted destination-marketing resources.**
- 3. Publish cross departmental regional and sub-regional tourism KPIs;**
- 4. Provide regions with the capacity to deliver economic growth**
- 5. Make international tourism a measurable regional balance outcome**
- 6. Publish destination-marketing and tourism-development expenditure by region;**
- 7. Assess the relationship between central government funding and visitor expenditure.**

Visit Derry is pleased to submit this response to your call for evidence. We look forward to engaging with you and the Committee further throughout the legislative passage of the Regional Balance Bill and into the Review phase of the proposed Framework following its enactment.

Yours sincerely,



Chairperson, Visit Derry



Chief Executive Officer, Visit Derry