

Citizen Space Survey Questions

Overview

A Bill to make provision for:

- a statutory framework to improve regional balance in Northern Ireland;
- to impose a duty on the Executive to develop, adopt, maintain and implement a framework setting out how disparities in regional economic performance and living standards are to be addressed across government; and
- to confer functions on the Department for the Economy in relation to the preparation of the framework, its reporting to the Assembly and providing guidance and research; and for connected purposes.

Why your views matter

The Committee is seeking views from stakeholders on the objectives, proposals and potential consequences of the Bill.

Your views will help to inform the Committee for the Economy's consideration of the Bill and any recommendations it may suggest as it moves to the next stage of the legislative process.

Introduction

1. What is your name?
2. What is your email address?
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

Encirc

Consent

4. Please confirm that you have read the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee's Privacy Notice by clicking the button below.
Yes
5. How would you like your submission to be published?

Yes. Publish in full.

Regional Balance Bill

The Bill seeks to improve the Northern Ireland's Executive's response to regional imbalances 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.

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.

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, there is a need for this legislation to be cross departmental and with a whole Executive approach, alongside accountability.

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?

Answer

While the recommendations in Clause 1 are welcome, there is also a role for the business community to have a mechanism to share their experience and recommendations for supporting regional balance.

We would welcome a provision within the Bill to make a requirement for departments to be engaging with the business sector, for example through regional Chambers of Commerce, to ensure

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.

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?

Answer

Ensuring regional growth needs to be a priority for all Executive departments. This includes ensuring there is the correct infrastructure in place for businesses to want to invest in a regional location. This would include departmental plans on roads

infrastructure improvements, digital connectivity and healthcare access, to name a few areas of departmental cooperation.

By ensuring there is a regional approach to all public services and economic development, there will be greater opportunities for the economy to grow on a regional basis.

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.

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?

Answer

We recommend the annual reports include information on each of the regions identified and recommendations on how they will support regional balance in each. This report should also include the level of engagement the department has had with business representative organisations, the issues which have been raised and how the recommendations they have proposed to address these issues.

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.

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?

N/A

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.

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?

Answer

While it is welcome that this clause will ensure the Department for the Economy will review and make recommendations to the Executive, there should be consideration given to how the department engages with those who are providing jobs and employment in the regions.

We would welcome guidance for the department to be engaging with the business community, for example through the regional Chambers of Commerce and trade organisations, to ensure the voice of business is heard and recommendations are captured.

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.

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

No

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

Answer

This is a welcome clause, but we would recommend that there is a requirement for the department to be engaging in research with the regional Chambers of Commerce and trade organisations, to ensure the voice of business is heard and recommendations are captured.

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.

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?

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?

Answer

As a key business in rural Fermanagh, Encirc provides high-quality jobs and drives economic development while maintaining a strong commitment to providing employment in a rural community.

We are a highly attractive employer, offering our staff a range of benefits beyond pay, which makes us highly attractive for potential employees.

However, there are challenges we face around connectivity, energy costs and infrastructure to ensure we remain competitive. We welcome the commitment from the Executive on regional balance, and as a major employer in Fermanagh we want to play our part in delivering this.

Clause 8 - Commencement and Short Title

Clause 8 sets out that the Bill will come into operation on the day after Royal Assent is received.

Clause 8 also sets out that the Bill may be cited as the Regional Balance Act (Northern Ireland) 2026.

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?

No

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

N/A

Additional Comments

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

N/A