Belfast Chamber Re: Regional Balance Bill

Summary:

Belfast is the economic beating heart of Northern Ireland. Its continued growth, competitiveness and connectivity are fundamental to the prosperity of the entire region.

Belfast Chamber supports regional balance as articulated in the Regional Balance Policy and Sub-Regional Economic plan. However, with regard to the Bill, we believe it important to avoid measures which could constrain Belfast's growth, make the path for investing more cumbersome and add to public funded administration and failing to recognise Belfast's role in driving the regional economy.

Economic outcomes and therefore convergence are being improved elsewhere through the existing Policy. Potential exists to slow investment and development in Belfast. Limiting the region's most established economic centre risks reducing NI's overall growth potential.

We have laid out six points for consideration:-

1. Belfast is the economic engine of Northern Ireland. Generating over one-third of NI's economic output, Belfast is the region's primary concentration of high-value employment, investment, innovation and internationally competitive businesses. Its economic reach extends far beyond its administrative boundaries. Its businesses, jobs, universities and commercial ecosystem support households, suppliers and communities throughout NI.

2. We think in terms of one interconnected regional economy. NI's compact geography and extensive commuting patterns mean that Belfast functions as an employment and commercial hub for a much wider population. Regional balance metrics must reflect functional travel-to-work areas, not simply council boundaries – this travel-to-work area is home to a population of 1.13 million.

3. Connectivity to Belfast must be a strategic infrastructure priority. Continuous investment in rail, roads, public transport and integrated transport networks is essential to connect communities across NI with Belfast's employment opportunities. Improving journey times, reliability and accessibility allows more people to share in the city's economic success. Better rail frequency and capacity, improved strategic road corridors, park-and-ride facilities and affordable, reliable public transport can spread the benefits of Belfast's higher-value employment without requiring every job to be relocated. The reach of the opportunity Belfast presents could be more accessible to the entire region.

4. Protect and enhance Belfast's international competitiveness. As the second-largest city on the island of Ireland, Belfast competes for mobile capital, investment, talent and business activity globally. Its established economic clusters are strategic assets that should be strengthened rather than diluted through geographically driven investment targets. This may serve to frustrate the investment market. Cluster strengths, which include fintech, cyber security, ICT need to be nurtured and supported with talent and skills pipeline to enable further growth.

5. Leverage Belfast to grow the private-sector economy. Belfast's strengths in professional services, technology, financial services, tourism and education are important to attracting investment, increasing productivity and supporting the economic growth needed to sustain public services across NI. Belfast has much to do economically – for example business start-ups which are lowest of UK cities (2022 Core Cities).

6. Avoid legislation that creates investment barriers or additional bureaucracy. Existing regional balance policies already provide a framework for action. Any new legislation should demonstrate clear additional benefits and avoid introducing requirements that undermine investor confidence, commercial location decisions or Belfast's growth potential. Northern Ireland needs to be open for business and not burdened with additional cumbersome legislation and measures.

In addition, the legislation, as presented, presents some challenges in terms of the far-reaching and cross-departmental nature, the use of undefined terms and unclear measures. Clarity would be required on how it would operate in practice including the roles and responsibilities of each department.

Key evidence supporting this position

- Belfast accounted for 32.9% of NI GVA in 2023, demonstrating its substantial contribution to regional economic output.
- Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre found that Belfast's workplace GVA per head was significantly above the NI average, while resident earnings were much closer to that average. This reinforces the distinction between where jobs are located and where workers live.
- The All-Island Strategic Rail Review provides a framework for expanding rail capacity, frequency and connectivity through to 2050.
- NI's regional strategic transport network recognises the importance of connecting Belfast with other cities, towns and regional gateways.
- Invest NI Performance Report 2025-2026 demonstrates improved regional balance with 59% of the investment outside the Belfast Metropolitan Area amounting to £359m.
- Belfast accommodates 30% of all Northern Ireland jobs, while its GVA per capita was 78% above the NI average in 2022. Its performance therefore matters far beyond the city itself: strengthening such a substantial employment and output centre is central to strengthening the wider economy. *Evidence: UUEPC report paragraph 3.28 and Table 3.*
- The city hosts 58% of NI's tradeable-services jobs, encompassing financial services, professional services and ICT. The report identifies professional services and ICT as high-growth sectors and finds that Belfast's sector mix helped it achieve 15,451 more jobs over 2001–2022 than if it had grown at the NI-wide rate. These are regionally significant concentrations, not simply local specialisms. *Evidence: UUEPC Report paragraphs 3.29, 4.8–4.9 and the note to Figure 17.*
- Belfast's GVA per job filled was 9% above the NI average in 2022, and median workplace earnings were 14% above average in 2024. The report explains how city-based knowledge-intensive businesses benefit from specialised skills, supplier networks and shared infrastructure. Its policy recommendations emphasise connecting other places to economic hubs so people and businesses can access those opportunities. *Evidence: UUEPC Report Table 3, paragraph 4.24 and the infrastructure-and-connectivity recommendation in paragraph 6.5.*
- Belfast attracted 78% of new FDI jobs between 2015 and 2022 thereby demonstrating Belfast's ability to compete globally.

Conclusion

Belfast should be recognised as one of the principal engines through which regional prosperity can be delivered. Growth in Belfast, complemented by sub-regional growth, will generate positive socio-economic gains for more prosperous region.

The ambition should be to connect more of Northern Ireland to Belfast's economic opportunities, while growing the strengths of other regional centres — not to constrain, directly or indirectly, the capital's economic potential.

Reference sources

ONS small-area GVA statistics (2023), Belfast local authority area.
Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, research on balanced regional growth in Northern Ireland.
Department for Infrastructure / Department of Transport, All-Island Strategic Rail Review.
Department for Infrastructure, Regional Strategic Transport Network.
Invest NI Performance Report 2025-2026
Core Cities UK
Belfast City Council