

Written Evidence to the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for the Economy

Regional Balance Bill

Submission from Antrim Chamber

Summary

- 1. Antrim Chamber** welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence on the Regional Balance Bill and supports the principle of improving regional economic balance across Northern Ireland.
- 2. Antrim** is an important economic location, with proximity to Belfast International Airport, established manufacturing and logistics businesses, existing transport infrastructure and potential for further investment. Regional balance policy should recognise this economic potential as well as areas of disadvantage.
- 3. Antrim Chamber's** priorities are the use of sufficient local economic data; support for existing businesses and town centres; improved transport connectivity; transparent reporting of public investment and outcomes; meaningful engagement with local business representatives; and coordination with existing employment, skills and economic development activity.

About Antrim Chamber and Antrim Town

- 4. Antrim Chamber** represents and supports businesses in Antrim and the surrounding area. Its regular engagement with local employers provides direct knowledge of the opportunities and challenges affecting businesses and the town-centre economy.
- 5. Antrim Chamber** believes the Regional Balance Strategic Framework should identify both need and opportunity. Targeted investment can help existing businesses grow, strengthen town centres and unlock the value of established local assets.

Local Evidence Investment and Accountability

- 6.** Economic performance and public investment should, where reliable data is available, be assessed at town or similarly localised level rather than solely at Local Government District level. District-wide figures can mask significant differences between towns and communities.
- 7. Antrim Chamber** asks the Committee to consider whether Clause 7, or the requirements arising from it, should be strengthened to ensure meaningful sub-regional assessment below Local Government District level where appropriate. This should be proportionate and should not create an unnecessary reporting burden.
- 8.** Government should also publish clear, accessible information showing where relevant public investment is directed and the measurable economic and community outcomes achieved. Reporting the amount invested without reporting its local impact is insufficient.

Existing Businesses Town Centres and Skills

- 9.** Regional balance should support existing businesses and town centres alongside efforts to attract inward investment. The Framework should consider business growth, commercial vacancy, regeneration, transport connectivity and employers' access to appropriately skilled workers.
- 10.** The objective should be to create conditions in which established businesses can remain, invest, expand and create employment, while also attracting new activity.

Transport Connectivity and Town Centre Regeneration

- 11. Antrim** benefits from a railway and bus station, but the connection between the transport hub and the town centre could be improved. Castle Way creates a barrier to movement between the station and the retail core.
- 12.** Investment in pedestrian crossings, safer and more attractive walking routes, lighting, signage, cycling provision and accessibility could strengthen links between the transport hub, Castle Mall, the High Street,

Courthouse, Castle Gardens and other town-centre assets. This could increase footfall and help maximise the economic benefit of existing public transport infrastructure.

13. The Framework should therefore consider not only whether transport infrastructure exists, but how effectively it connects people with town centres, employment areas and other local economic assets.

14. Antrim Chamber recommends consideration of a dedicated Antrim Centre Regeneration and Economic Growth Fund, or an equivalent targeted intervention, to reduce commercial vacancy, return empty premises to productive use and support new and existing businesses.

15. Possible measures include incentives to occupy vacant units, small grants for business expansion, support for creative, cultural, hospitality and food enterprises, and funding for heritage, cultural and community events. These measures could complement improvements to shopfronts and the public realm.

16. There is also an opportunity to develop Antrim as a day-to-evening destination by connecting retail, hospitality, culture, heritage, business and leisure. An Antrim Centre Investment Prospectus could promote available premises, priority sites and investment opportunities to prospective businesses and investors.

Engagement and Alignment

17. Local Chambers of Commerce and other representative business organisations should have meaningful opportunities to contribute to the development, implementation and review of the Framework. Their continuing engagement with employers can provide practical local evidence.

18. The Framework should complement rather than duplicate existing initiatives. Members highlighted work through Further Education in Northern Ireland and the Antrim and Newtownabbey Labour Market Partnership Action Plan, where employment and economic activity are already relevant priorities.

19. Coordination between central and local government, education and skills providers, business representatives and established delivery structures will help translate regional objectives into effective local action.

Recommendations

20. Antrim Chamber asks the Committee for the Economy to consider the following recommendations:

- **Local data and Clause 7:** ensure the Framework uses sufficiently localised data, where reliable and appropriate, so that differences within Local Government Districts are not overlooked.
- **Businesses and town centres:** include business growth, commercial vacancy, regeneration, connectivity and access to skills alongside inward investment.
- **Transparency:** publish the geographical distribution of relevant public investment and the measurable outcomes achieved.
- **Connectivity:** recognise the quality of links between transport hubs and local economic centres, including pedestrian, cycling and accessibility provision.
- **Targeted regeneration:** consider mechanisms such as a regeneration and economic growth fund and an investment prospectus to reduce vacancy and unlock town-centre potential.
- **Engagement:** involve local Chambers of Commerce and other business representatives in developing and reviewing the Framework.
- **Coordination:** align the Framework with existing economic development, employment and skills strategies and delivery structures.

Conclusion

21. For Antrim, regional balance should recognise both need and opportunity. Local-level evidence, transparent investment reporting, targeted regeneration, improved connectivity and meaningful business engagement would help ensure that the Framework reflects the circumstances and potential of towns such as Antrim.

22. Antrim Chamber would welcome continued engagement with the Committee and would be willing to provide further information on the matters raised in this submission.

Response ID [REDACTED]

Submitted to Regional Balance Bill

Introduction

1 What is your name?

name:

2 What is your email address?

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:

Bangor Chamber of Commerce

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:

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 :

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:

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:

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:

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:

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 :

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:

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:

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:

Additional Comments

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

additional comments:

Almost done...

31 If you provide an email address you will be sent a receipt and a link to a PDF copy of your response.

email:

Derry Chamber of Commerce

Regional Balance Bill – Call for Evidence

Introduction

Londonderry Chamber of Commerce welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the Committee for the Economy on the Regional Balance Bill.

The Chamber strongly supports the principle of improving regional economic balance across Northern Ireland. Long-standing disparities between the North West and more well-resourced parts of Northern Ireland, particularly Belfast, remain a significant barrier to achieving balanced and sustainable economic growth, which would not only improve the regional economy, but the Northern Ireland economy as a whole.

The Chamber therefore supports the objectives of the Bill and the creation of a framework requiring regional disparities to be identified, addressed, and monitored. However, the effectiveness of any legislation will ultimately depend on whether it leads to meaningful changes in how public investment, infrastructure, skills, economic development, and government policy are delivered across Northern Ireland.

The Chamber's view is that regional balance should not simply mean measuring disparities. It must provide a mechanism for addressing them and ensuring that investment follows identified need and opportunity.

Clause 1

Derry Chamber supports the establishment of a Regional Disparity Framework.

The Framework should provide a clear and long-term basis for addressing regional economic inequalities and should recognise that different parts of Northern Ireland face different economic challenges and opportunities. A uniform approach to regional economic development will not necessarily address the specific circumstances of the North West.

The Chamber would therefore encourage the Framework to identify bespoke regional challenges and opportunities and to set measurable outcomes against which progress can be assessed.

The North West provides a clear example of why this approach is necessary. The region has significant economic potential, including through the City Deal, the expansion of Ulster University's Magee campus, advanced manufacturing, digital industries, the green economy, tourism, and its cross-border economic relationship with Donegal.

The Framework should consequently recognise both existing disparities and the potential for targeted public investment to unlock private-sector growth.

The Chamber also believes that public investment should be accompanied by a clear expectation that private investment follows, with a requirement placed upon arms-length bodies involved in the development of private investment such as Invest NI to direct said investment to areas in most need, such as the North West. This is particularly important in relation to major economic development projects, student accommodation, infrastructure, and emerging sectors.

Clause 2

The Chamber supports the requirement for departments to have due regard to reducing regional disparity and to the Regional Disparity Framework.

However, consideration should be given to strengthening this provision so that “due regard” results in measurable, demonstrable consideration of regional impacts when major policies, strategies, and investment decisions are developed.

There should be a clear expectation that departments explain how significant policies and capital investment decisions contribute to reducing, or risk exacerbating, regional disparities.

This is particularly important for infrastructure. Economic prosperity in the North West is inextricably linked to strong road, rail, air, and digital connectivity. The Chamber has consistently advocated investment in the A5 and A6, improved rail connectivity, the development of the City of Derry Airport, and the integration of the North West's transport infrastructure.

The Chamber also believes that essential infrastructure must be capable of supporting planned economic and population growth. The lack of wastewater capacity, for example, has restricted housing development in Derry, with a disproportionate share of homes unable to be connected to the wastewater system located in the city. This illustrates how infrastructure constraints can directly undermine regional economic development.

A Regional Disparity Framework should therefore consider not only current economic indicators but whether infrastructure provision is sufficient to enable regions to realise their future potential.

Clause 3

The Chamber supports the requirement for departments to provide information to support annual reporting.

To ensure that this information provides a meaningful assessment of regional balance, the Chamber recommends that reporting should include both expenditure and outcomes.

It should be possible to identify, where appropriate:

- the regional distribution of public capital expenditure;
- investment in infrastructure and connectivity;
- employment and skills outcomes;
- investment generated by public interventions;
- progress on major regional economic projects;
- housing and student accommodation provision;
- productivity and business growth;
- access to transport and digital infrastructure; and
- progress against agreed regional outcomes.

The reporting framework should also allow for comparison over time so that the Committee, Assembly and wider public can assess whether regional disparities are narrowing.

Clause 4

The Chamber supports the requirement for an annual report to be laid before the Assembly.

The annual report should be sufficiently detailed to demonstrate whether policy and investment decisions are producing tangible improvements in regional economic performance.

The Chamber would encourage the Department for the Economy to engage with business organisations, local government, educational institutions, and other regional stakeholders in preparing and evaluating the report.

There is considerable expertise within the North West that could contribute to this process. Greater collaboration between government, local businesses, communities, councils, universities, and further education institutions should form part of the implementation of the Framework.

The annual reporting process should therefore provide an opportunity not only to report on progress but to identify barriers preventing agreed regional outcomes from being achieved.

Clause 5

The Chamber supports regular review of the Framework.

However, a five-year review cycle should not prevent more frequent adjustments where circumstances or evidence demonstrate that an intervention is not delivering its intended regional outcome.

Regional economic development is affected by changes in population, labour markets, infrastructure costs, investment conditions, technology and public finances. The Framework should therefore be sufficiently flexible to respond to these changes while retaining long-term objectives.

Clause 6

The Chamber supports the Department for the Economy having responsibility for research, guidance, and the promotion of best practice in relation to regional disparities.

Research should recognise the distinct circumstances of different regions and should draw upon local knowledge and expertise.

The North West is a cross-border economic region, with Derry and Donegal working closely together across the island. The Chamber believes the North West should often be considered as a single economic unit, notwithstanding the different jurisdictions involved, meaning that there should be scope for collaboration in this research with the Department of Enterprise, Tourism, and Employment in the Republic of Ireland. This principle also stands to other border regions on the border such as Fermanagh and south Down.

The Shared Island Fund and the All-Island Strategic Rail Review demonstrate the potential benefits of cross-border investment and collaboration. The Chamber believes that the Regional Disparity Framework should recognise the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland's border regions and the economic opportunities presented by cross-border cooperation.

Clause 7

The Chamber supports the use of a broad range of indicators to measure regional disparity.

The proposed indicators, including income, employment, economic inactivity, productivity, education, health, deprivation, housing, airport access, and public capital expenditure, provide a useful basis for assessing regional differences.

However, the Chamber recommends that the final Framework should ensure that indicators capture the infrastructure and connectivity factors that enable regions to grow.

In particular, consideration should be given to:

- road, rail, and public transport connectivity;
- journey times to major population and employment centres;
- airport connectivity;
- digital connectivity;
- wastewater and other essential infrastructure capacity;
- university and further education provision;
- student accommodation;
- the regional distribution of public and private investment; and
- progress in delivering major economic development projects.

The Chamber also believes that statistical measures should not be considered in isolation. A region may have comparatively weaker current economic performance while possessing significant untapped potential that can be unlocked through targeted investment.

The North West's economic development provides a clear example. Investment in Ulster University at Magee, the City Deal, infrastructure, skills, and the green economy have the potential to create long-term economic benefits extending well beyond the immediate projects themselves.

Proposed amendments and recommendations

Derry Chamber believes the following amendments or additions would strengthen the Bill:

1. Require measurable regional outcomes

The Framework should establish measurable outcomes and targets for reducing regional disparities, rather than relying solely on a general duty to have regard to the issue.

2. Require regional impact assessments for significant policies and investment decisions

Departments should be required to demonstrate how major policies, strategies, and capital investment decisions are expected to affect regional economic balance.

3. Strengthen accountability for delivery

Annual reporting should identify not only actions undertaken but the outcomes achieved, investment committed, barriers to delivery, and any remedial action required.

4. Ensure infrastructure is included in the assessment of regional balance

The Framework should explicitly recognise the relationship between infrastructure and economic development, including road, rail, air, digital, and wastewater infrastructure.

5. Recognise education and skills capacity as a core component of regional balance

The expansion of Ulster University at Magee should be recognised as an important regional economic development intervention. The Chamber has consistently supported the expansion

of Magee to at least 10,000 students and believes further expansion beyond that level should ultimately be pursued. The university is an important economic driver and can help address the loss of young people from the region while providing the skilled workforce required by growing businesses.

6. Recognise the importance of private investment

The Framework should measure whether public investment is successfully generating additional private-sector investment. Public investment should provide the foundation for sustainable economic growth rather than becoming an end in itself.

7. Recognise the distinct circumstances of border regions

The Framework should account for the economic significance of cross-border relationships and ensure that opportunities arising from the all-island economy are considered when assessing regional economic performance and investment needs.

8. Provide for meaningful stakeholder engagement

Business organisations, local government, universities, further education institutions, and communities should have an ongoing role in informing the Framework and assessing its implementation.

Conclusion

Londonderry Chamber of Commerce supports the objectives of the Regional Balance Bill and welcomes the opportunity it presents to establish a more systematic approach to addressing regional disparities across Northern Ireland.

The Chamber's longstanding position is that regional balance requires more than recognising differences between regions. It requires targeted investment in jobs, infrastructure, education and skills, supported by effective policy and a commitment to unlocking private-sector investment.

The North West has demonstrated significant economic potential. The City Deal, the expansion of Ulster University at Magee, investment in skills and innovation, improved connectivity, the development of the green economy, and the region's strong cross-border economic relationships all provide opportunities for sustainable growth. The Chamber believes that these opportunities should be central to the implementation of any Regional Disparity Framework.

The Regional Balance Bill should therefore establish a framework that is measurable, accountable and capable of influencing real decisions on investment and policy. If implemented effectively, it can help ensure that regional economic potential is recognised and that public resources are used to address long-standing disparities while unlocking sustainable growth across all parts of Northern Ireland.