

CBI Northern Ireland Response: Committee for Infrastructure's Call for Evidence on the Harbours Bill

1 September 2026

The CBI Northern Ireland (CBI NI) welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Committee for Infrastructure's Call for Evidence on the Harbours Bill

The CBI speaks on behalf of 170,000 businesses of all sizes and sectors, across every region and nation of the UK. This includes over 1,100 corporate Members, plus nearly 150 trade associations. Corporate Members alone employ over 2.3 million private sector workers. The CBI NI represents hundreds of local businesses (large, medium and small) across a full range of sectors. This includes indigenous companies in Northern Ireland, as well as those headquartered in other parts of the UK that have operations locally.

Response

CBI NI has several members who will be impacted by this legislation, and this response reflects their views on the Harbours Bill.

Modernising an outdated framework

1. Northern Ireland's ports and harbours are critical economic infrastructure. They facilitate trade, underpin supply chain resilience and support investment, tourism, employment and regional growth. Yet the statutory framework within which they operate is fragmented and outdated, with elements rooted in nineteenth century legislation. Modernisation is overdue if Northern Ireland's ports are to operate efficiently and compete on a more comparable footing with ports in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland.
2. CBI NI therefore supports the Bill's practical modernising measures, including broader commercial powers, provision for harbour directions and more flexible harbour orders. These changes should strengthen ports' ability to respond to commercial opportunities while maintaining safe and effective harbour operations.

Retaining the Trust Port model

3. Our members are clear that reform should preserve the Trust Port model as the appropriate core model for Northern Ireland. Trust Ports have operated successfully as autonomous statutory bodies, managing their assets for the benefit of their stakeholders and making a substantial contribution to the regional economy.

Access to finance and investment

4. The present classification and control framework constrains Trust Port borrowing because it requires departmental capital budget cover, placing port investment in competition with other

public infrastructure priorities. Legislative reform is needed to support the intended ONS reclassification and enable Trust Ports to access a wider range of funding and borrow prudently without the same impact on departmental capital budgets.

5. Giving Northern Ireland's Trust Ports access to the tools available to their counterparts elsewhere in the UK will help unlock long-term private finance for nationally and regionally important infrastructure. This will support Trust Ports in delivering their strategic masterplans, including Belfast Harbour's 2050 Masterplan. Delivery of these masterplans will help future proof critical port infrastructure, advance net zero ambitions, and enable wider regeneration and housing delivery across harbour estates.

Delivery within the current mandate is essential

6. The economic benefit will arise only when the full legislative package is in force. The Bill as introduced provides that its substantive provisions commence on dates appointed by Departmental order. The Explanatory and Financial Memorandum also identifies four harbour orders - for Belfast, Coleraine, Londonderry and Warrenpoint - as an integral part of the reform programme.
7. CBI NI therefore urges the Committee, the Assembly and the Department for Infrastructure to treat this work as a single, time critical package. The Bill should progress through all remaining Assembly stages and receive Royal Assent within the current mandate. In parallel, the Department should prepare, consult on where required, make and bring into operation the four harbour orders and the necessary commencement order or orders within the same timeframe. A clear delivery timetable should be published and maintained so that primary legislation is not enacted without the supporting measures needed to give it practical effect.
8. Any slippage beyond the mandate would prolong uncertainty, delay investment decisions and leave Northern Ireland's ports operating under a framework that government and industry already recognise as outdated. The opportunity cost would be felt in infrastructure delivery, competitiveness, decarbonisation and wider economic growth.

Conclusion

9. CBI NI supports the Harbours Bill and the policy direction it represents: a modern statutory framework, greater commercial and financial flexibility, and retention of the Trust Port model. We ask the Committee to recommend the Bill's urgent passage and to seek firm assurances from the Department that all associated subordinate and commencement legislation will be completed and brought into force before the end of the current Assembly mandate.

I trust that you find this input helpful. Please feel free to contact me if you have any further queries.

Kind regards



Claire Sullivan
Head of Policy, Northern Ireland, CBI