

18 August 2026

FAO: Clerk to the Committee for Infrastructure**By email:** committee.infrastructure@niassembly.gov.uk

Dear Clerk,

Re: Harbours Bill (Bill 37/22–27) – Written evidence from the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance

1. Introduction and overall position

The Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance (NITA) welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the Committee for Infrastructure on the Harbours Bill.

NITA is the recognized independent voice for tourism policy in Northern Ireland, representing members across the visitor economy and acting as a bridge between industry and government. Our 2026–2029 Strategy sets out six priority areas: connectivity, competitiveness, productivity, regional growth, workforce and skills, and sustainability. The Harbours Bill is particularly relevant to the strategy's commitments on sea access, long-term capital investment, regional balance, business competitiveness and sustainable infrastructure.

NITA supports the Bill in principle and recommends that it progresses within the current Assembly mandate. Modernising the legislative and governance framework for Northern Ireland's Trust Ports should help them operate efficiently, plan with greater confidence and respond to future economic opportunities. For tourism specifically, the important test will be whether the new framework translates into reliable sea connectivity, high-quality passenger gateways, sustainable investment, regional benefit and continued accountability to stakeholders.

2. The importance of ports to Northern Ireland's visitor economy

Ports are a fundamental part of Northern Ireland's tourism infrastructure. Ferry services provide essential access for visitors travelling from Great Britain and beyond, while cruise calls bring international visitors directly into the destination. Ports also influence the first and last impression of Northern Ireland, the ease of onward travel and the ability to disperse visitors into towns, cities and rural areas.

Belfast Harbour demonstrates the scale of this contribution. Belfast is the busiest cruise port on the island of Ireland and the second busiest in the United Kingdom. Belfast Harbour has estimated that cruise tourism will contribute approximately £26 million to the Northern Ireland economy during the 2026 season. The Harbour also supports strategically important ferry and passenger services and is further investing in additional cruise capacity.

The Bill applies to the Trust Ports at Belfast, Coleraine, Londonderry and Warrenpoint. Their circumstances and tourism roles differ, but a modern framework for all four can support stronger regional gateways, investment and economic activity. The legislation should therefore be viewed not only as a reform of port governance, but as enabling infrastructure for the wider visitor economy, which NITA wholly endorses.

3. Alignment with the NITA Strategy 2026–2029**Access, connectivity and market growth**

NITA's strategy has a clear aim to secure and grow physical and market access to Northern Ireland. It commits NITA to advocating for improved air, sea, rail and road connectivity. The Harbours Bill supports that objective by giving Trust Ports a more appropriate framework for investment, commercial decision-making and long-term planning.

Sea connectivity must remain a strategic priority in the implementation of the Bill. Increased autonomy should be used to protect and improve route resilience, passenger capacity, service quality and the landside connections that enable visitors to travel efficiently beyond the port.

Regional balance and capital investment

NITA's strategy supports a three-year Tourism Capital Development Programme, alignment with City and Growth Deals, and investment that enables longer stays, regional dispersal and repeat visitation. We also advocate for a rolling three-year budget and investment cycles because tourism and infrastructure require long planning horizons.

The Bill's objective of modernising Trust Port governance, together with the intended review of their Office for National Statistics classification, has the potential to strengthen long-term investment capacity. NITA recognises that reclassification is an intended outcome rather than a guaranteed result. Nevertheless, a framework that reduces uncertainty and enables ports to finance appropriate development without competing directly with the Department for Infrastructure's capital programme would be beneficial to both transport and tourism, which NITA endorses.

Competitiveness and productivity

Efficient ports strengthen Northern Ireland's competitiveness as a destination. Reliable ferry access, modern passenger facilities, sufficient cruise capacity and effective port operations all affect the cost, convenience and quality of travel.

The Bill's proposed commercial flexibility can help ports invest, innovate and build financial resilience. That flexibility should remain connected to harbour purposes and should support, rather than displace, the core responsibilities of safe port operation, passenger access and long-term infrastructure provision.

Sustainability and inclusivity

NITA's strategy positions sustainability as a competitiveness requirement and calls for measurable sustainability indicators. The Bill's provisions for harbour directions relating to safety and environmental protection are therefore welcome.

Implementation should also consider the accessibility of passenger facilities and onward transport, alongside measurable environmental outcomes. Sustainable port development should improve the visitor experience while supporting Northern Ireland's wider climate, regeneration and place-making ambitions.

4. Comments on the principal provisions of the Bill**Clauses 1 and 2: Status, stability and operational independence**

NITA welcomes the certainty provided by removing the Department's power to initiate privatisation schemes for the four Trust Ports. The Trust Port model is intended to operate for the benefit of stakeholders, and stability of status supports long-term planning and investment.

NITA also understands the rationale for removing the Department's power to issue directions to designated Trust Ports, particularly in the context of the proposed ONS reclassification. Greater operational independence should, however, be accompanied by strong governance, transparent business planning, meaningful stakeholder consultation and clear public reporting. The objective should be greater commercial freedom without any reduction in accountability or good governance.

Clause 3: Acquisition of businesses and wider commercial powers

The proposed change from "harbour operations" to "activities relating to harbours", together with the removal of the requirement for ministerial consent, will give harbour authorities greater commercial flexibility.

NITA supports this in principle where an acquisition or investment strengthens port operations, connectivity, passenger experience, sustainability or the financial resilience needed to maintain infrastructure. Commercial diversification should remain demonstrably related to harbour purposes and should not weaken core port functions or divert investment away from passenger and connectivity requirements.

Clause 4: Harbour directions

NITA supports the creation of modern harbour-direction powers covering vessel movement, mooring, equipment and crewing, particularly where these powers improve safety and environmental protection.

The requirement to consult users before a harbour direction is made is important. Where directions could affect ferries, cruise calls, passenger handling or visitor movements, consultation should include the relevant ferry and cruise operators, passenger transport providers, tour and coach operators, destination organisations, local councils and tourism representatives. Directions should be proportionate, clearly publicised and introduced with sufficient operational notice wherever circumstances allow.

Clause 5: Delegation and efficient functioning

NITA supports provisions that enable harbour authorities to delegate functions and pursue objects conducive to the efficient functioning of a harbour. Any delegated arrangement should retain clear lines of responsibility, appropriate service standards and effective oversight, particularly for safety, passenger access and functions that directly affect the visitor experience.

Clause 6: Commencement

NITA supports timely progression and commencement of the legislation. Certainty within the current Assembly mandate would assist ports and their partners in planning future investment.

5. Recommendations for implementation

NITA recommends that:

1. The Bill should progress within the current Assembly mandate.
2. Tourism, passenger access and sea connectivity should be explicitly considered in the subordinate harbour orders, implementation guidance and future strategic plans arising from the Bill.
3. The Department for Infrastructure should work closely with the Department for the Economy, Tourism NI, the Tourism Partnership Board, local government / councils, port authorities and industry when implementing the new framework.
4. Trust Port capital planning should be developed on a multi-year basis and, where relevant, aligned with tourism capital programmes, City and Growth Deals, destination stewardship plans and regional transport priorities.
5. Ports should report against measurable outcomes relevant to the visitor economy, including connectivity and service resilience, passenger and cruise capacity, accessibility, visitor experience, regional economic benefit and sustainability.
6. New commercial freedoms should be balanced by transparent governance and a continuing focus on the statutory and stakeholder purpose of Trust Ports.

6. Conclusion

The Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance is supportive of the Harbours Bill. It offers an important opportunity to provide Northern Ireland's Trust Ports with a modern framework that supports investment, commercial resilience, marine safety and long-term planning.

This is closely aligned with NITA's 2026–2029 Strategy, particularly its strategic priorities to improve sea connectivity, strengthen competitiveness, support regional growth, deliver long-term capital investment and embed sustainability in decision-making.

The legislation will be most effective if port autonomy is matched by accountability and if implementation is coordinated across infrastructure, tourism, economic development and local government. NITA would welcome continued engagement with the Committee for Infrastructure and the Department for Infrastructure as the Bill and the associated harbour orders progress.

Yours sincerely,

Brona Moffett

Interim CEO

Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance