

Regional Balance Bill

[AS INTRODUCED]

LEGISLATIVE COMPETENCE

At Introduction the Member in charge of the Bill, Ms Sinéad McLaughlin, had made the following statement under Standing Order 30:

“In my view the Regional Balance Bill would be within the legislative competence of the Northern Ireland Assembly.”

SECRETARY OF STATE'S CONSENT

The following statement is for the purpose of section 10(3)(b) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998:

The Secretary of State has consented to the Assembly considering this Bill.

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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; 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.

BE IT ENACTED by being passed by the Northern Ireland Assembly and assented to by His Majesty as follows:

PART 1

REGIONAL BALANCE STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

Duty to develop, adopt, maintain and implement a Regional Balance Strategic Framework

- 5 **1.**—(1) The Executive must develop, adopt, maintain and implement a strategic framework to be known as the Regional Balance Strategic Framework.
- (2) The Framework must set out how the Executive proposes to reduce regional disparities in Northern Ireland.
- (3) The Framework must in particular—
- 10 (a) state the outcomes which the Executive intends should be achieved and the period within which it is intended that the outcomes should be achieved;
- (b) identify the roles of Northern Ireland departments in developing, adopting, implementing and revising policies, strategies and plans so as to reduce regional disparities;
- 15 (c) identify mechanisms to reduce regional disparities, including cross-departmental actions and funding plans;

- (d) set out the criteria and methodology for assessing regional disparities;
- (e) include provisions requiring Northern Ireland departments to recognise and consider cross-border economic data in policies, strategies and plans so as to reduce regional disparities; and
- 5 (f) include measurable targets to be achieved by specific dates (and any associated milestones) for reducing regional disparities, including—
- (i) identification of a baseline year against which progress in reducing regional disparities is to be measured; and
- 10 (ii) targets and associated investments that will allow for greater convergence towards the Northern Ireland average.
- (4) Before adopting the Framework, the Executive must consult—
- (a) Northern Ireland departments;
- (b) district councils;
- (c) such bodies as the Executive considers representative of business, workers, the community and voluntary sector; and
- 15 (d) such other persons as the Executive considers appropriate.
- (5) The Executive must lay the Framework, and any revision or replacement of it, before the Assembly and publish it in such manner as the Executive considers appropriate.
- 20 (6) The first Framework made under this section must be laid before the Assembly within 12 months from the day on which this section comes into operation.
- (7) The Executive may revise or replace the Framework, but subsections (2) to (4) apply to a material revision or replacement.

25 **Duty of Northern Ireland departments to have due regard to the Framework**

- 2.—(1) A Northern Ireland department, in developing, adopting, implementing or revising any policy, strategy or plan, must have due regard to the need to reduce regional disparity and to the Framework.
- (2) A Northern Ireland department must, so far as is reasonably practicable, exercise its functions in a manner calculated to contribute to the outcomes and targets set in the Framework.
- 30 (3) This section comes into operation at the end of the period of 12 months after the date this Act receives Royal Assent.

PART 2

35 REPORTING, REVIEW AND SUPPORT FUNCTIONS

Departmental duty to compile and provide information

- 3.—(1) The Northern Ireland departments must—
- (a) compile and retain information on the exercise of the duty in section 2; and

- (b) evaluate progress made in contributing to the criteria set out in the Framework, in so far as they relate to each department's areas of responsibility,

to inform the annual report of the Department under section 4.

5 (2) Each Northern Ireland department must provide the Department with information for the annual report to include, but not be limited to—

- (a) actions taken in accordance with the exercise of the duty to have due regard to reducing regional disparities in the preceding 12 month period;
- 10 (b) an evaluation of the impact of the discharge of the duty on the outcome of policy programmes, to the extent that data is available; and
- (c) such other assistance as the Department requires in the preparation of the annual report.

(3) The Department may issue guidance to Northern Ireland departments about the form, content and timing of information to be provided under this section.

15 **Annual report by the Department**

4.—(1) The Department must, for each reporting year, prepare and publish a report on—

- (a) the implementation of the provisions of this Act,
- (b) the operation of the Framework, and
- 20 (c) progress made by the Executive in reducing regional disparities in accordance with the outcomes and any targets set in the Framework.

(2) The Department must lay a copy of the report before the Assembly as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of the reporting year.

25 (3) The Minister must make a statement to the Assembly as soon as practicable following the laying of the report.

(4) The first report must be published before the end of the period of 18 months beginning with the day on which the Framework is adopted by the Executive in accordance with section 1(1) of this Act.

30 (5) In this section “reporting year” means a period of 12 months ending on a date specified by the Department in the first report.

(6) The Department, following consultation with the Executive, may vary a reporting year.

Review of the operation of the Framework

35 5.—(1) The Executive must review the operation and effectiveness of the Framework within five years of the day on which the Framework is laid before the Assembly in accordance with section 1, and at least once every five years thereafter.

(2) The Department may make recommendations to the Executive about—

- (a) the outcomes and any targets set in the Framework;
- 40 (b) actions to be taken by Northern Ireland departments to reduce regional disparity; and

(c) any revision of the Framework.

(3) The Department must publish any recommendations made under subsection (2) and lay a copy before the Assembly.

Guidance and research

5 **6.**—(1) The Department may—

(a) provide guidance, advice and information about matters connected with addressing regional disparities and the operation of the Framework;

(b) undertake, commission or support (by financial means or otherwise) research into any matter relating to regional disparities; and

10 (c) promote awareness, engagement and best practice among Northern Ireland departments and other public bodies in relation to addressing regional disparities.

(2) The Department may from time to time revise any guidance issued under this section.

15 (3) The Department must publish any guidance issued or revised under this section.

PART 3

FURTHER PROVISIONS

Interpretation

20 **7.** In this Act—

“cross-border economic data” means data concerning economic activity, labour markets, or service provisions that operate across the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland;

25 “the Department” means the Department for the Economy or any successor department;

“the Executive” means the Executive Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly or any successor committee;

“the Framework” means the Regional Balance Strategic Framework developed in accordance with section 1 of this Act;

30 “the Minister” means the minister with responsibility for the Department;

“regional disparities” means disparities in economic performance and living standards between regions and sub-regions within Northern Ireland, having regard (amongst other things) to—

(a) gross domestic product per head of population;

35 (b) average and median disposable household income per head of population;

(c) unemployment rates, employment rates and economic inactivity rates;

(d) productivity, including gross value added per employee;

- (e) health data, including average life expectancy;
- (f) education data, including attainment rates;
- (g) indices of deprivation;
- (h) affordable housing;
- 5 (i) access to airports; and
- (j) the regional distribution of public capital expenditure;

10 “regions” are to be defined 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 specified in the Framework, as well as other relevant data catchments, and other relevant functional areas which may cross administrative or jurisdictional boundaries; and

“sub-regions” means any division of a region.

Commencement and short title

- 15 **8.**—(1) This Act comes into operation on the day after Royal Assent.
(2) This Act may be cited as the Regional Balance Act (Northern Ireland) 2026.

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[AS INTRODUCED]

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; 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.

Introduced by: Ms Sinéad McLaughlin

On: 08 June 2026

Bill Type: Non-Executive Bill

ACCOMPANYING DOCUMENTS

**An Explanatory and Financial Memorandum is printed separately as
NIA Bill 35/22-27 EFM.**



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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