

## **Consultation on the proposed Regional Jobs, Skills and Investment Bill: Summary of Responses**

### **Introduction**

Between November 2024 and February 2025, Sinéad McLaughlin MLA formally consulted on her proposal for a Member's Bill. The aim of the proposed legislation is to strengthen the NI Executive's approach to addressing regional imbalances i.e. the difference in economic performance and living standards between different regions.

Northern Ireland's economy is regionally unequal, with stark differences in economic performance and living standards between different places. For example, the difference between the Local Government Districts with the highest and lowest levels of employment and economic activity is around 10% on each measure. The difference between the Local Government Districts with the highest and lowest proportions of people with no qualifications at all is over 9%<sup>1</sup>. While a range of NI Executive strategies, such as the Programme for Government, the draft Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2050 and the Regional Development Strategy 2035, refer to such regional inequalities, no whole-government, strategic approach exists to reduce such disparities. This legislation intends to ensure that the NI Executive takes a deliberate and strategic approach to level the playing field for people from different places and ensure that where you live is not a barrier to success.

The consultation focused on the Bill's five original policy considerations to:

1. Define regional economic imbalance in Northern Ireland as the difference in economic performance and living standards between different regions.
2. Mandate all Executive departments to have due regard to regional economic balance when developing policies, strategies and plans and designing and delivering public services, and to report to the Department for the Economy on an annual basis on progress made towards addressing regional economic imbalances.
3. Mandate the Department for the Economy to publish a statement at the start of each Assembly mandate outlining the Department's approach for the duration of the Assembly term to improve regional economic balance.
4. Mandate Invest NI to develop and publish sub-regional economic targets on an annual basis and report to the Department on an annual basis on regional economic balance.
5. Mandate the Department for the Economy to report at the end of each Assembly mandate on progress made towards addressing regional economic imbalances and mandate the Minister for the Economy to make a statement to the Assembly on this report.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/labour-force-survey-tables-local-government-districts-2009-2021>

## Process Summary

Legal advice was sought and received on the scope and competence of the Bill's ambitions. The consultation was informed by the provision of four commissioned pieces of research from the Assembly's Research and Information Service on the theory of regional economic imbalance, comparative government approaches to address regional economic balances, a systematic review of existing legislative and policy measures aiming to address regional imbalances and a briefing on comparator regions on the island.

The e-consultation ran online via Google Forms from 25 November 2024 to 16 February 2025 and gathered 115 responses. Data was not collected on the demographic or geographical information of respondents, other than whether they were from organisations and individuals. The e-consultation was widely promoted on social media and direct correspondence inviting responses was issued to stakeholders such as education providers, key lobbying organisations, economic experts and academics.

Views on the proposal were sought from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission did not identify any specific concerns from a human rights perspective. The Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission recommended that the Member considered the Bill's compliance with Windsor Framework Article 2 at this early stage and take full account of the expertise and lived experience of the different equality groups who may be impacted by the legislation. The Chief Commissioner also noted that improving access to and progression within employment is a key driver of economic and social wellbeing as a route out of poverty and to improved social mobility and inclusion.

Feedback was also sought from the Committee for the Economy. While the correspondence was noted by the Committee, no formal response was made by the Committee at this early stage of consultation.

The former Minister for the Economy Conor Murphy MLA was contacted in the pre-consultation phase to ascertain his intentions for legislation. In February, Dr Caoimhe Archibald MLA was appointed as Minister for the Economy and the Member engaged with Dr Archibald to seek her views. A meeting between the Member and the Minister on the Bill's ambition took place following the closure of the consultation. The Minister stated that she is open to the potential of legislation. However, she considers that many reporting requirements already exist and was not convinced that the proposed Bill would ensure a future Minister actually takes the actions needed to promote regional balance, if they are not politically committed to that goal.

The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs also responded to a request to College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise for comment on the Bill. The Minister advised that regional economic statistics are limited, and any reliance will need to take account of the fact that small regions mean statistics are distorted by the fact many people live in one region and work in another, while a business may be based in one region but employ people from throughout NI or further afield.

In addition to the e-consultation and the engagement detailed above, meetings were also held with:

- The Centre for Cross Border Cooperation
- NIC-ICTU
- Derry Chamber of Commerce
- Queens' University Belfast
- Foyle Port

These engagements complement an extensive range of local and national meetings with stakeholders in relation to the Bill since the restoration of the Assembly. Written responses were also received from the NI Tourism Alliance, Queen's University Belfast, the Open University and the Rural Community Network.

### **Support and opposition for the Proposal**

Almost universal support was expressed for certain provisions of the Bill:

- 95.4% of respondents said that they believed that the NI Executive should take greater action to reduce the difference in economic performance and living standards between geographic regions.
- 94.4% of respondents agreed with the definition that regional economic imbalance in Northern Ireland is the difference in economic performance and living standards between geographic regions.

Substantial support was also expressed for other provisions in the Bill:

- 86% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the proposal to mandate all departments to have due regard to regional economic balance when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans and designing and delivering public services.
- 86.9% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the proposal to mandate the Department for the Economy to publish a statement at the start of an Assembly mandate outlining the Department's approach to improve regional economic imbalance.
- 86.2% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the proposal to mandate Invest NI to develop and publish sub-regional economic targets on an annual basis and report to the Department on these targets.

Other findings include:

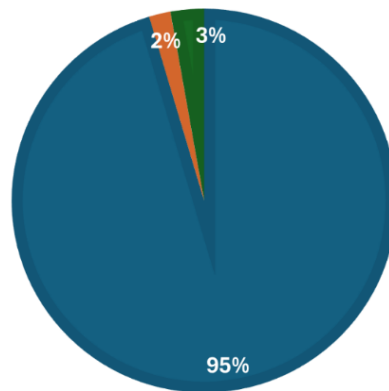
- 50% of respondents found that there would be a manageable financial impact of the Bill's implementation on government departments and 29.3% found that the financial impact on government departments would be minimal. Only 9.3% of respondents said that there would be no financial impact.
- While, 57.8% of respondents did not envisage any unintended consequences of implementing the proposed Bill, 28.4% were unsure and 13.8% did envisage such consequences.

- While 67.9% of respondents did not envisage any equality or human rights implications of the proposed Bill, 21.1% of respondents did envisage some consequences while 11% responded 'maybe'.

The main opposition to the proposal was received from organisations which wished to remain anonymous but raised concerns about the impact on Belfast as an economic driver and the possible neglect of the region's capital city, should government become more focused on 'left-behind' places. This is a point we wish to acknowledge and address in the development of legislation.

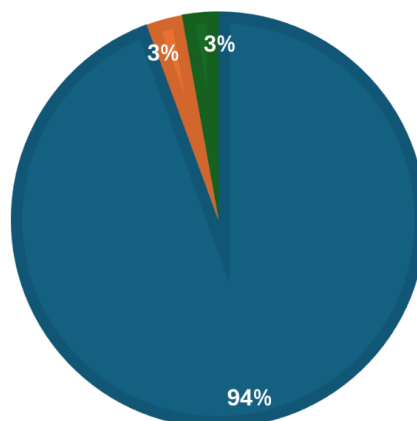
Do you believe that the NI Executive should take greater action to reduce the difference in economic performance and living standards between geographic regions?

■ Yes ■ No ■ Other



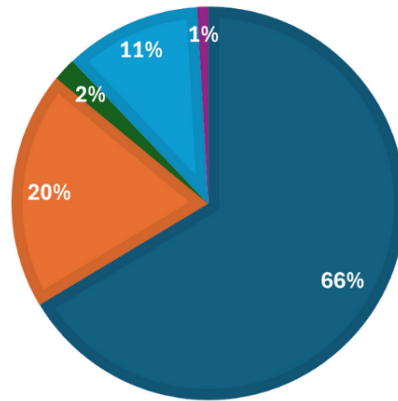
This Bill would seek to define regional economic imbalance in Northern Ireland as the difference in economic performance and living standards between geographic regions. Do you agree with this definition?

■ Yes ■ No ■ Other



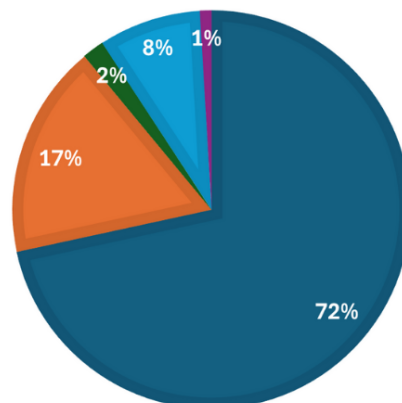
This Bill proposes to mandate all departments to have due regard to regional economic balance when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans and designing and delivering public services. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this proposal?

■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Neutral



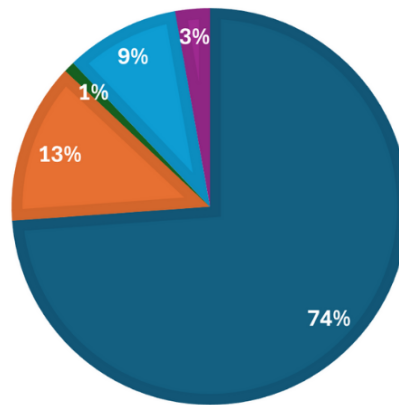
This Bill proposes to mandate all departments to report to the Department for the Economy on an annual basis on progress made towards addressing regional economic balance. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this proposal?

■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Neutral



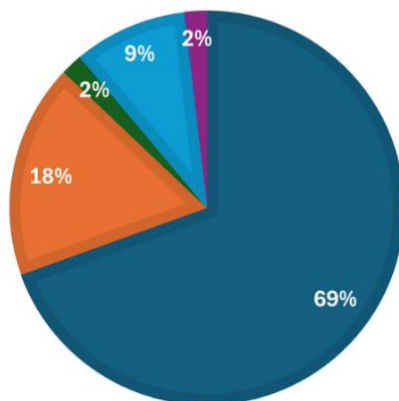
This Bill proposes to mandate the Department for the Economy to publish a statement at the start of an Assembly mandate outlining the Department's approach to improve regional economic imbalance. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this proposal?

■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Neutral



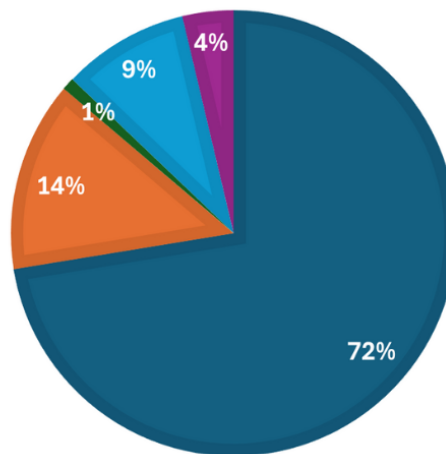
This Bill proposes to mandate the Department for the Economy to report at the end of an Assembly mandate on progress made towards addressing regional economic balance and to compel the Minister for the Economy to make a statement to the Assembly on this report. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this proposal?

■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Neutral



This Bill proposes to mandate Invest NI to develop and publish sub-regional economic targets on an annual basis and report to the Department on an annual basis on regional economic balance. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this proposal?

■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Neutral



### **Suggestions to develop the proposal or for alternatives to legislation**

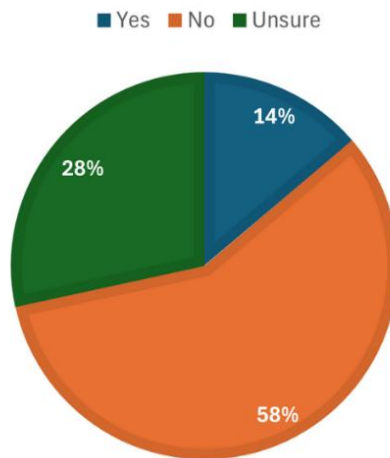
Opponents of the legislation maintain that regional economic imbalances can be alleviated through policy changes / development alone. This could include measures already undertaken by the Department for the Economy (DfE) such as the delivery of the City Deals, the adoption of a Departmental Sub-Regional Economic Action Plan or the expansion of the Magee university campus in the Foyle constituency. While these are appropriate interventions that will assist in addressing regional inequalities, they are limited in scope as they relate only to a limited set of matters under the direct purview of the Department for the Economy. A much wider lens is needed to assess regional imbalances that can encompass health-related inequalities, education and infrastructure, each of which are the responsibility of departments other than DfE.

The Member has carefully considered the comments raised in the consultation, particularly those from the Minister for the Economy. The Member accepts that some reporting requirements already exist, but does not believe any requirement for a strategic approach to the issue exists on government. Further to the Minister's comments, the Member remains of the belief that a statutory responsibility is required on government departments, particularly if, as the Minister suggests, the political commitment of a given Minister impacts the degree to which they take actions needed on this long-term Executive commitment.

### **Weighting of responses**

All responses were weighted equally, even where consultees belonged to lobby groups and umbrella organisations. The significant amount of direct engagement undertaken was intended to provide additional depth to the consultation.

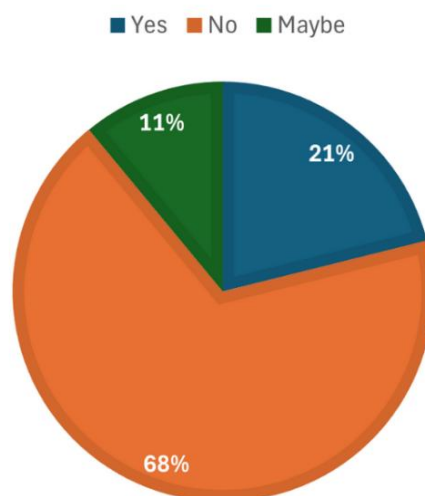
Do you envisage any unintended consequences of implementing the proposed Bill?



### Convention rights and other competence issues

When asked about the relevant human rights implications of the proposed Bill, 67.9% of respondents said that they did not envisage any equality or human rights implications of the proposed Bill, while 11% were unsure and 21.1% stated that they did envisage such implications. Broad support was expressed. Although Convention rights are not directly related to the provisions of the legislation, some consultees expressed an understanding that the legislation may result in some improvements to the rights of those who have been economically neglected.

Do you envisage any equality or human rights implications of the proposed Bill?

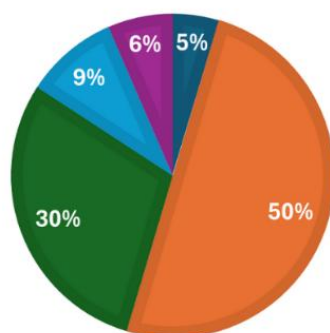




## Financial implications

When asked about the financial impact of the Bill's implementation on Government departments, 50% of respondents indicated that they believed there would be a manageable financial impact, 29.6% of respondents indicated that there would be a minimal financial impact. 9.3% of respondents indicated there would be no financial impact while 4.6% of respondents indicated that it would be prohibitively expensive. In the qualitative responses to this question, some respondents also indicated that they believed the legislation would provide value for money overall, given the costs of continuing regional inequalities. For example, one respondent said, "The cost of investment will be nowhere near as substantial as the impact regional imbalance has had on the economy" while another asserted "Any financial impact of implementing the bill will be outweighed, by far, with the positive economic impacts of delivering regional equality." These are important considerations in determining the financial viability of the proposal.

What do you believe the financial impact of the Bill's implementation will be on Government Departments?



## Identification of respondents

No information has been included in this report that could lead to the identification of respondents, including by jigsaw identification.

### Narrowing of focus: A single policy objective:

We recognise that the Assembly has resolved that a Member's Bill should seek to address one single focused policy objective.

At the start of this period of consultation, it was envisaged that the legislation would extend beyond government, placing duties on Invest NI. In addition, given the salience of Higher

Education for regional inequalities, the Member has previously considered whether a duty would be placed on the Department for the Economy in relation to equitable distribution of higher education places.

Having consulted widely on a range of policy considerations, the common area of interest in feedback was the need for the department to adopt a strategic approach to addressing regional imbalances. With that in mind, the Member is content to exclude these provisions from the remit of her legislation, while maintaining that they should be considered by the Department. The Member has therefore significantly narrowed the scope of her proposal for legislation to one single policy objective: ensuring relevant statutory obligations exist on Executive departments to measure and address regional imbalances.

### **Privacy**

No personal data was submitted as part of this consultation. The SDLP privacy policy was included as part of the online consultation, available online [here](#). The information submitted will be disposed of, following the Introduction of the Bill in accordance with the Information Commissioner Office's guidelines.