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NIAR 143-2026

Regional Balance Bill

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This Paper aims to support Northern Ireland Assembly scrutiny of the Regional Balance Bill, as introduced by a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) on 8 June 2026. It provides context-setting information, before addressing key policy considerations arising from the introduced Bill. Throughout, potential scrutiny points are highlighted for Assembly reference, including that of the Committee for the Economy. The Paper should be read alongside RalSe Briefing Paper [NIAR 137-2026](#) (dated 16 October 2026), wherein the Bill's key potential "public purse" considerations are addressed.

This information is provided to Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in support of their duties, and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as professional legal advice, or as a substitute for it.

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Key Points

- On 8 June 2026, a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) introduced the Regional Balance Bill (the Bill) in the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Bill seeks to establish a statutory framework requiring the Northern Ireland Executive to develop, implement and maintain a Regional Balance Strategic Framework that aims to reduce regional economic disparities and inequalities in living standards across Northern Ireland.
- If enacted and implemented as introduced, the Bill would place new duties on all Northern Ireland Executive departments to give “due regard” to regional balance when developing their policies, strategies and plans, with the ultimate aim of creating a cross-government approach to address regional inequalities.
- The MLA Bill Sponsor’s public consultation regarding her proposals demonstrated strong support for greater action to address regional disparities. However, a concern also was raised that efforts to promote regional balance should not come at the expense of investment in Belfast, given its role within the wider Northern Ireland economy.
- Analysis of relevant existing data for the specified indicators in Clause 7 of the introduced Bill suggests variable economic performance across Northern Ireland. Regional disparities can be observed across measures including economic output, disposable household income, labour market indicators, productivity, health and educational attainment.
- That evidence also demonstrates how different regional economic performance pictures emerge when using different indicators. Areas performing strongly against one metric can perform less favourably against another, highlighting the challenges associated with selecting indicators and measuring progress. For that reason, when seeking to produce reliable and robust evidence and make findings, it is important to be conscious of the fact that the choice of metrics can materially influence the overall assessment.
- When considering the introduced Bill, it also is important to be mindful of a range of existing initiatives intended to promote regional balance in

Northern Ireland, including the Programme for Government, the DfE's Sub-Regional Economic Plan, City and Growth Deals, the North-West Strategic Growth Plan and tourism-related initiatives.

- This Bill Paper identifies a number of key policy considerations arising from the introduced Bill, including those concerning: the interaction between the Bill and existing initiatives; the requirement for Executive-wide agreement; the operation of “due regard” duties; the importance of selecting appropriate benchmarks and indicators, given the specified governance arrangements, and reporting requirements, as well as data limitations; and, the practical delivery of guidance functions.

Introduction

This Bill Paper aims to support Assembly Members' scrutiny of the [Regional Balance Bill](#) (the Bill), which was introduced into the Northern Ireland Assembly (the Assembly) by a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) - the Bill Sponsor - on 8 June 2026. The Bill seeks to place a new statutory duty on the Executive to produce and maintain a new Regional Balance Strategic Framework (the Framework) to address regional imbalances in both economic performance and living standards. It also imposes duties on departments to pay "due regard" to the Framework when developing policies, strategies, and plans, and requires annual reporting to, and therefore scrutiny by, the Assembly.

The Paper relies on sources available to the Public Finance Scrutiny Unit (PFSU) within the Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISe) at the time of writing. Those include: the [introduced Bill](#); its accompanying [Explanatory and Financial Memorandum](#) (EFM); the MLA Bill Sponsor's public consultation on the Bill; and, the Bill's [Second Stage debate](#). Its contents are presented as follows:

1. [Background to the Introduced Bill](#)
2. [Regional Balance: General Theory and Application](#)
3. [Regional Balance in Northern Ireland](#)
4. [Commentary on Bill Clauses](#)
5. [Human Rights and Equality](#)
6. [Key Takeaways](#)

Please note this Paper is not exhaustive; and any discussion about the prevailing law, including existing legislation, is not intended to provide legal advice or opinion. Included throughout are potential scrutiny points in blue boxes, which Members may wish to draw on, including those in the Committee for the Economy.

See RaISe Bill Paper NIAR 137-2026 (dated 16 October 2026) for discussion about key public purse considerations arising from the introduced Bill.

1. Background to the Introduced Bill

The Bill's policy objectives and an overview of its clauses are outlined below, followed by a summary of the MLA Bill Sponsor's consultation on her Bill proposals, which later helped to inform the Bill's contents.

1.1 Policy Objectives

As stated in the Bill's accompanying Explanatory and Financial Memorandum (EFM), the Bill's key policy objective is to:

...improve the Northern Ireland Executive's response to regional imbalances in economic performance and living standards by creating a statutory duty on the Executive to deliver and renew a strategic framework to address these imbalances.¹

The Bill Sponsor explains the need for such legislative change as follows:²

1. Currently, regional balances are addressed only through non-binding Executive/departmental strategies and policy, which have proven an ineffective approach, in the Bill Sponsor's view.
2. Addressing regional balance is the responsibility of the whole of government and requires a long-term approach – not just that undertaken by the Department for the Economy.
3. Existing central government efforts to address such imbalances across the United Kingdom also have proven unsuccessful.
4. Invest Northern Ireland (INI) has failed to equitably target the distribution of jobs and opportunity throughout Northern Ireland.
5. Legislation is needed to adopt a duty-based approach and ensure regional balance is a “golden thread” running through departmental decision-making.

¹ *Regional Balance Bill – Explanatory and Financial Memorandum* (June 2026), available [here](#).

² As above.

A clear theme emerges from the Bill Sponsor’s explanation for the Bill – that is, current efforts to tackle regional imbalances in economic performance and living standards have been insufficient, albeit undertaken by several bodies.

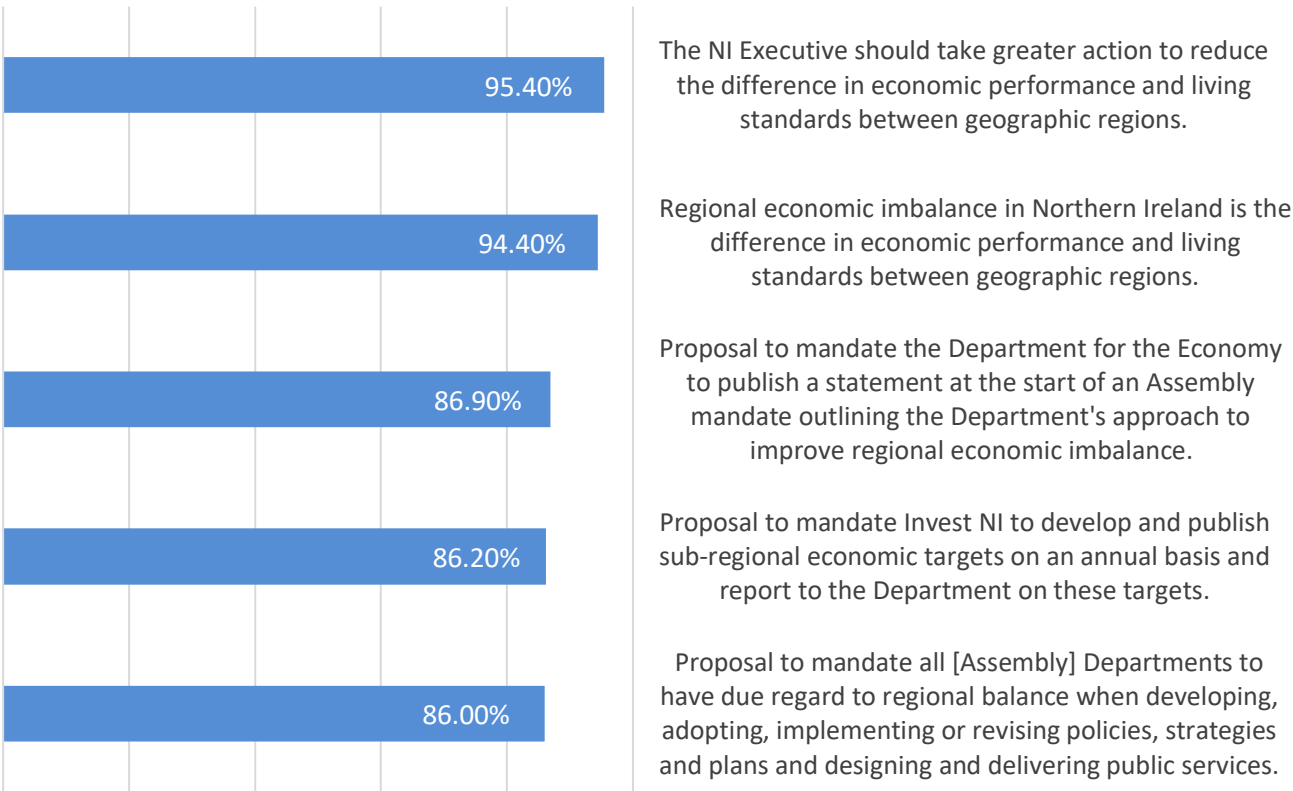
1.2 Consultation Process

Between November 2024 and February 2025, the Bill Sponsor conducted a twelve-week online public consultation on the draft proposals regarding the Bill. A total of 115 responses were received from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), academics, lobby organisations and individuals.

1.2.1 Areas of Support

The Bill’s EFM reports key consultation findings, outlining strong support across a number of provisions within the proposals, as shown in **Figure 1** below.

Figure 1 – Levels of Support Across Selected Statements/Proposals³



³ *Regional Balance Bill – Explanatory and Financial Memorandum* (June 2026), available [here](#).

Those consultation responses collectively demonstrated strong support and recognition to strengthen “tackling regional imbalance” as an Executive and departmental political objective. In fact, there was almost universal agreement that the Executive needed to “take greater action” to reduce differences in economic performance and living standards across Northern Ireland.

1.2.2 Areas of Opposition or Caution

As the Bill’s EFM outlines, the primary area of opposition arising from the public consultation exercise concerned any potential negative impact on Belfast developments if economic focus and duties shifted towards more “left behind” areas, such as those in Derry~Londonderry. Responses also recognised Belfast to be one of the central drivers of the wider Northern Ireland economy, expressing a hesitancy if implementing legislation that could pull investment outside the city. In responding to those concerns within the EFM, the Bill Sponsor explained that the Bill seeks to drive greater regional balance and living standards across all areas in Northern Ireland, affording the Executive appropriate discretion to make policy choices in this area and justify them accordingly. She also highlighted Belfast itself has a share of the so-called “left behind” areas – areas where economic performance and living standards lag the Northern Ireland average – such as North and West Belfast, which contain some of the most economically deprived wards in Northern Ireland.

1.3 Bill Clauses as Introduced

The Regional Balance Bill contains three parts and a total of eight clauses. Below provides an overview of the individual clauses, including commentary about their contents and potential scrutiny points that the Committee for the Economy and other MLAs may wish to consider.

1.3.1 Overview of Clauses

Table 1: Clauses and their Intended Aim if Enacted and Implemented as Introduced⁴

Part	Clause	Intended Aim if Enacted and Implemented as Introduced
1 – Requires the Executive to develop, adopt, maintain and implement a Regional Balance Strategic Framework and imposes a due regard duty on departments, supported by departmental information gathering	1	Places a statutory duty on the Executive to create and maintain a Regional Balance Strategic Framework aimed at reducing regional disparities. It requires measurable targets, funding plans, departmental roles, consultation with stakeholders, and consideration of cross-border economic data. The clause seeks to embed regional balance as a long-term cross-government policy objective.
	2	Requires all Northern Ireland departments to consider regional balance when developing or revising policies, strategies and plans. Departments must, where reasonably practicable, contribute to the Framework's outcomes and targets. The provision mirrors "due regard" duties found elsewhere in legislation and aims to ensure regional balance influences routine government decision-making.
2 – Provides for annual reporting to the Assembly, Departmental review and recommendations, and guidance and research functions	3	Establishes monitoring and accountability arrangements. Departments must gather evidence on how they have applied the regional balance duty and assess their contribution to Framework objectives. Information must be supplied to the Department for the Economy to support annual reporting. This creates an evidence base for measuring progress and departmental performance.
	4	Requires the Department for the Economy to publish annual assessments of the Act's implementation, the operation of the Framework, and progress in reducing regional disparities. Reports must be laid before the Assembly and followed by a ministerial statement. The provision strengthens transparency and enables ongoing Assembly scrutiny of Executive performance.
	5	Provides for periodic strategic review. The Executive must assess the effectiveness of the Framework within five years and at least every five years thereafter. The Department may recommend revisions, new actions, or amended targets. By requiring structured review, the clause allows the Framework to evolve in response to evidence and changing circumstances.
	6	This clause gives the Department for the Economy supporting functions to aid implementation. It may issue guidance, commission research, provide advice, promote best practice, and fund relevant work. The provision recognises that reducing

⁴ [Regional Balance Bill](#); as introduced (29 June 2026)

		regional disparities requires evidence-based policymaking and capacity-building across government and wider public bodies.
3 – Contains ancillary, interpretation, commencement and short title provisions	7	Interpretation - defines key terms used throughout the Bill, including "regional disparities", "cross-border economic data", "regions" and "sub-regions". It identifies the indicators that may be used to assess disparities, ranging from economic performance and income levels to health, education, housing and public expenditure.
	8	Commencement and short title.

1.3.2 Regional Balance Strategic Framework (Part 1, Clauses 1&2)

Clause 1 places a duty on the Executive to develop, adopt, maintain and implement a strategic framework “to be known as the Regional Balance Strategic Framework”.⁵ The Framework must set out how the Executive proposes to reduce regional disparities in Northern Ireland. Clause 1(3) outlines various elements which must be included, namely:⁶

- a) The outcomes which the Executive intends to achieve, and a target period in which to achieve these outcomes.
- b) The roles of departments in developing, adopting, implementing and revising policies, strategies and plans so as to reduce regional disparities.
- c) Mechanisms to reduce regional disparities, including cross-departmental actions and funding plans.
- d) Setting out the criteria and methodology for assessing regional disparities.
- e) Provisions requiring departments to recognise and consider cross-border economic data in policies, strategies and plans so as to reduce regional disparities.
- f) Measurable targets to be achieved by specific dates, including;
 - i. Identification of a baseline year to measure against.

⁵ *Regional Balance Bill 35/22-27 [as introduced]*, NI Assembly, available [here](#).

⁶ [Regional Balance Bill](#); as introduced (29 June 2026)

- ii. Targets and associated investments that will allow for greater convergence towards the Northern Ireland average.

The Framework must be consulted on, laid before the Assembly, and published within 12 months of Clause 1 coming into operation. It also may be revised or replaced using the same process as above. The Bill's EFM outlines that the Department for the Economy (DfE) is the lead department in the compilation of the Framework and its reporting.

Next, Clause 2 requires that departments, when 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. Additionally, departments must exercise their functions in a manner calculated to contribute to the outcomes and targets set in the framework (as much as is reasonably practicable). Those specified departmental duties apply 12 months after the Bill receiving Royal Assent.

1.3.3 Reporting, Review and Support Functions (Part 2, Clauses 3-6)

Clause 3 requires departments to compile, retain and provide information to the DfE to support annual reporting, including actions taken and evaluations of impact, with a power for the DfE to issue guidance on format and timing if it chooses to do so. Each department also is required to evaluate progress made in meeting the criteria set out in the Framework, relative to its areas of responsibility.

Clause 4, following on from the duties assigned in Clause 3(2), requires the DfE to prepare, publish and lay before the Assembly an annual report on the implementation of the Bill's provisions, the operation of the Framework and progress made by the Executive in reducing regional disparities in accordance with targets and measures within the Framework. The Minister for the Economy also must make a statement to the Assembly following the publication of that report. Moreover, the first report must be published within 18 months of the Framework's adoption by the Executive, and the DfE (in consultation with the wider Executive) may vary a reporting year to align with data publication schedules.

Clause 5 outlines that alongside annual reporting, the Executive must review the Framework's operation and effectiveness within five years of it having been laid before the Assembly, and at least once every five years thereafter. This Clause also enables - and in some cases requires - the DfE to make and publish recommendations to the Executive, which must be laid before the Assembly.

Finally, Clause 6 confers a range of ancillary functions on the DfE to provide guidance and information, and to undertake, commission or support research on regional disparities. These powers are not time bound; rather they are exercisable as and when the Department decides. However, the Clause requires publication of any guidance issued or revised pursuant to it.

1.3.4 Further Provisions (Part 3, Clauses 7&8)

Clause 7 of the Bill defines a range of terms used throughout the Bill. Most notably, it defines "regional disparities" as:

...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 (GDP) per head of population;*
- 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 (GVA) per employee;*
- e) Health data, including average life expectancy;*
- f) Education data, including attainment rates;*
- g) Indices of deprivation;*
- h) Affordable housing;*
- i) Access to airports; and*
- j) The regional distribution of public capital expenditure.⁷*

⁷ *Regional Balance Bill – Explanatory and Financial Memorandum* (June 2026), available [here](#).

See [Section 3](#) of this Paper for discussion about the above-specified metrics, which would provide the foundation to examine regional disparities across Northern Ireland if the Bill would be enacted and implemented as introduced.

Within Clause 7, the term “regions” describes geographies within Northern Ireland that have been designated by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), including Local Government Districts (LGDs), and “sub-regions” refer to any division of a region.

Finally, Clause 8 specifies the Bill coming into operation on the day after receiving Royal Assent.

2. Regional Balance: General Theory and Application

To support Assembly scrutiny of this Bill, some additional background may be helpful to understand the economic theory which grounds current academic and governmental thinking around the concept of regional balance. This section provides an overview of that theory, borne out by academic and inter-governmental study in the area – addressing:

- General economic theory of regional economic growth
- Causes of regional inequality
- How best to measure regional divergence in economic performance
- Potential routes to stimulating growth in regional economies.⁸

2.1.1 Economic Theory of Regional Growth

Economic theory on regional growth is an area of research which continues to evolve over time, with several competing theories which attempt to determine how regions grow. Given that there are competing theories, it is worth considering that there is not a ‘one-size-fits-all’ agreed understanding of regional growth. **Table 2** below presents some key theories seeking to explain regional growth and regional economic divergence.

⁸ *Regional Balance: Theory and Application*, NIAR 181-24 (unpublished)

Table 2: Competing theories of regional growth and divergence⁹

Theory	Central Idea	Implications for Regional Policy
Firm Location Theory	Businesses choose locations that minimise costs and maximise advantages such as access to labour, customers, transport and infrastructure.	Policy should make regions more attractive to firms through infrastructure, skills, planning and lower business costs.
Neoclassical Growth Theory	Labour and capital move to where returns are highest. Over time, market forces should help poorer regions catch up with richer ones.	Emphasises removing barriers to labour mobility, investment and trade rather than extensive intervention.
Keynesian Growth Theory	Economic growth is driven by demand. Government spending can stimulate activity through multiplier effects that create jobs and income.	Supports targeted public investment, particularly in lower-performing regions, to stimulate growth and reduce disparities.
Core-Periphery Theory	Economic activity tends to concentrate in a small number of 'core' areas while peripheral regions lag. Without intervention, regional inequalities may persist or widen.	Supports investment in connectivity, infrastructure, skills and services to strengthen peripheral regions.
Endogenous Growth Theory	Growth is driven by internal factors such as human capital, innovation, research and knowledge creation.	Emphasises investment in education, skills, R&D, innovation and institutions to

⁹ As above, Section 1.1 (pages 7-12).

		improve long-term productivity.
New Economic Geography	Firms and workers benefit from clustering together, creating self-reinforcing growth in some places. However, congestion and rising costs can encourage activity to disperse elsewhere.	Policymakers can encourage growth by building regional clusters, improving connectivity and strengthening local assets outside major centres.

2.1.2 Causes of Regional Inequality

Studies by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2023¹⁰), the European Commission (2017¹¹; 2024¹²) and the United Kingdom Government (2022¹³) suggest that the causes of regional economic inequality differ between regions and are often shaped by their specific stage of economic development. These studies commonly adopt typologies that classify regions according to factors such as economic performance, structural characteristics, and development trajectories. They also emphasise that regional disparities are driven by a complex combination of factors and cannot be explained solely through economic indicators. Alongside economic conditions, they identify a range of social, institutional, demographic and human capital factors that can influence regional outcomes, interacting with one another in ways that can reinforce existing inequalities.

2.1.3 How to Measure Regional Disparities

Across the specified OECD, European Commission and previous United Kingdom Government literature, GDP per capita is the principal measure used to assess regional economic divergence. However, all three bodies recognise

¹⁰ *Regional Outlook 2023*, OECD (October 2023), available [here](#).
¹¹ *Lagging Regions Report*, European Commission (2017), available [here](#).
¹² *Ninth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion*, European Commission (2024), available [here](#).
¹³ *Levelling up the United Kingdom – White Paper*, HM Government (2022), available [here](#).

the limitations of relying solely on economic output indicators and increasingly adopt broader frameworks that incorporate labour market performance, education, innovation, income distribution, infrastructure, health, environmental sustainability and wider measures of well-being. The literature therefore suggests that regional balance is a multidimensional concept that cannot be adequately captured through economic output alone, and that a range of complementary indicators is required to understand both the causes and consequences of regional disparities.

2.1.4 Potential Routes to Improving Regional Balance

Common themes across the OECD, European and United Kingdom literature suggest that regional convergence is most effectively supported through a combination of investment in infrastructure, skills, innovation, public services and governance. A common theme is that regional inequalities have different underlying causes in different places, meaning policy responses should be place-based and tailored to local circumstances. Across all three sources, strong institutions, local capacity, effective governance and long-term investment are identified as key requirements for improving regional disparities in economic performance.

3. Regional Balance in Northern Ireland

3.1 Clause 7 Metrics of Regional Balance in Northern Ireland

This sub-section provides a preliminary exploration of the metrics specified at Clause 7 – the regional balance indicators - offering a number of useful insights when scrutinising the introduced Bill. Note: The Bill Sponsor does not consider the specified indicators to be the only credible metrics in this area: she instead offers them as a useful starting point to support the Bill's policy objective.

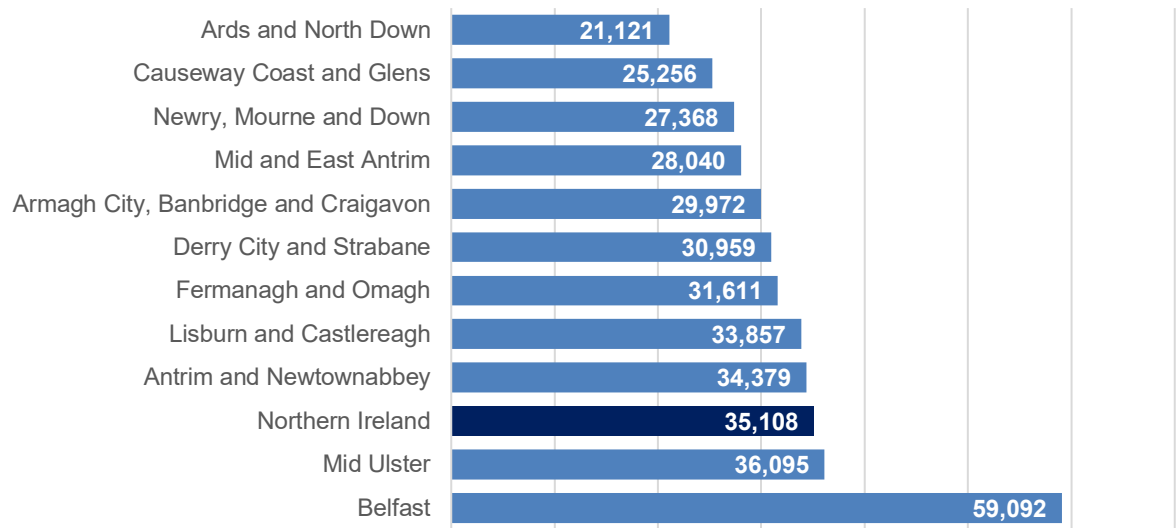
3.1.1 Economic Output

The United Kingdom's Office for National Statistics (ONS) defines Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as "the standard measure of the size and health of a

[region’s] economy”.¹⁴ It encompasses the value, profits and consumption of every item, product or service brought to the market. GDP per capita statistics are available at the Local Government District (LGD) level from the ONS.

Figure 1 below shows regional GDP per capita for Northern Ireland in 2024.

Figure 1 – GDP per capita (£), Northern Ireland, 2024



Source: [ONS](#) (2026)

As the Figure shows, the Northern Ireland average sits at around £35,000. Belfast is the only LGD which sits well above the average, at £59,092, whilst Ards and North Down sits lowest at £21,121. The distribution of LGDs is notable in that only two regions are above the average due to the distortionary effect of Belfast’s high GDP per capita. Overall, there is certainly a regional imbalance in terms of GDP per capita across Northern Ireland. See [sub-section 4.1.5](#) for further discussion of this pattern.

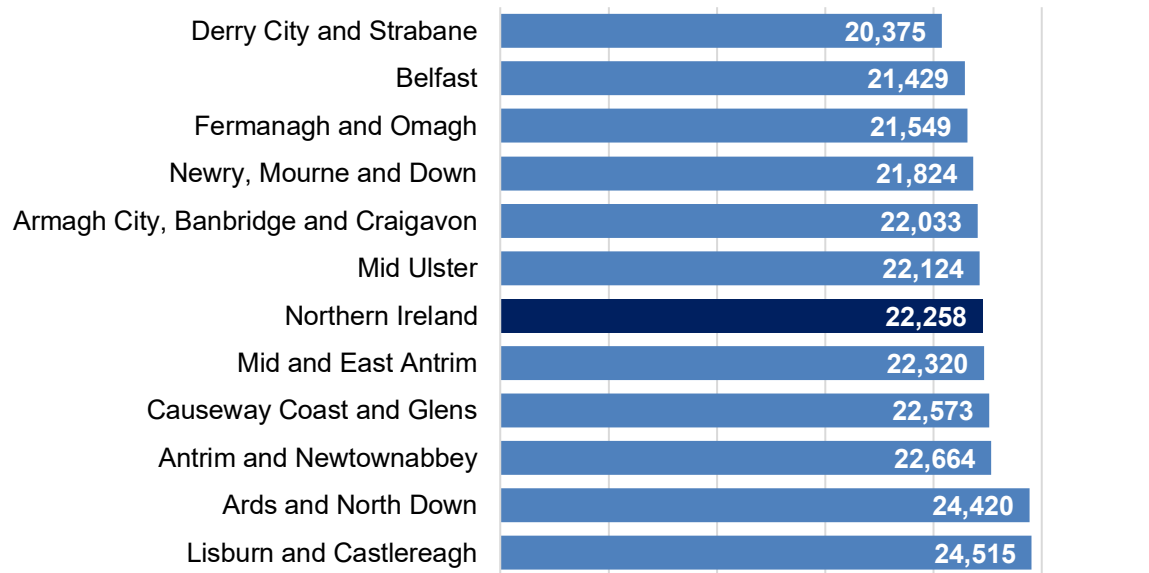
3.1.2 Disposable Household Income

The ONS measure of Disposable Household Income metric is Gross Disposable Household Income (GDHI) per capita, which measures “the amount of money that [households] have available for spending or saving after they

¹⁴ Office for National Statistics, *What is GDP?*, available [here](#).

have paid direct and indirect taxes and received any benefits”.¹⁵ **Figure 2** below shows the distribution of GDHI per head across Northern Ireland LGDs.

Figure 2 – GDHI per head (£), Northern Ireland, 2024



Source: [ONS](#) (2026)

This distribution of LGDs is markedly different from that for GDP per capita. With regard to GDP per capita, Belfast significantly outperformed all other LGDs, however under GDHI per head the area sits second from bottom, with Derry City and Strabane lowest at £20,375. Despite sitting below the average for GDP, Lisburn and Castlereagh has the highest GDHI per head of all LGDs. See [sub-section 4.1.5](#) for further discussion of this pattern.

3.1.3 Labour Market Indicators

The employment rate for official statistics in Northern Ireland is defined as the percentage of all people aged 16 and over who are in employment. Disparities in the employment rate between geographies can indicate a lack of appropriate job opportunities; lower educational attainment; and lower incomes in some areas relative to others. Whilst Clause 7 of the introduced Bill cites the

¹⁵ *Regional gross disposable household income, UK: 1997 to 2024*, Office for National Statistics, available [here](#).

unemployment rate as a relevant metric, analysis in unpublished RaISe Paper NIAR 150-24 (dated August 2024) cautioned that:

*The employment rate is a better indicator of performance than the unemployment rate. An area with a high employment rate relative to others is a good indication of strong labour market and economic performance. However, a low unemployment rate can be harder to draw the same conclusion from, because people leaving the workforce altogether (that is, becoming economically inactive) could cause the unemployment rate to fall. The employment rate cannot be distorted by such factors.*¹⁶

Consideration of that insight is important when trying to draw conclusions from the available regional data. Northern Ireland has a long-term structural issue regarding high rates of economic inactivity, which challenges the utility of the unemployment rate indicator when used in isolation. The economic inactivity rate is defined by NISRA as “people not in employment who have not been seeking work within the last 4 weeks and/or are unable to start work within the next two weeks”.¹⁷ Economic inactivity figures only encompass those aged 16-64.

Potential Scrutiny Point:

1. Based on the possible distorting effect of the unemployment rate indicator, would it be preferable to focus on the employment rate indicator for the purposes of developing a Framework under the Bill, if enacted and implemented as introduced?

¹⁶ Briefing Paper NIAR 150-24: Regional Balance – Comparator areas in the Republic of Ireland, NI Assembly Research and Information Service (August 2024). Not published.

¹⁷ Labour Market Report, NISRA, available [here](#).

Figures 3a - 3c below show these labour market indicators across Northern Ireland LGDs.

Figure 3a – Employment Rate (%), NI LGDs, 2025

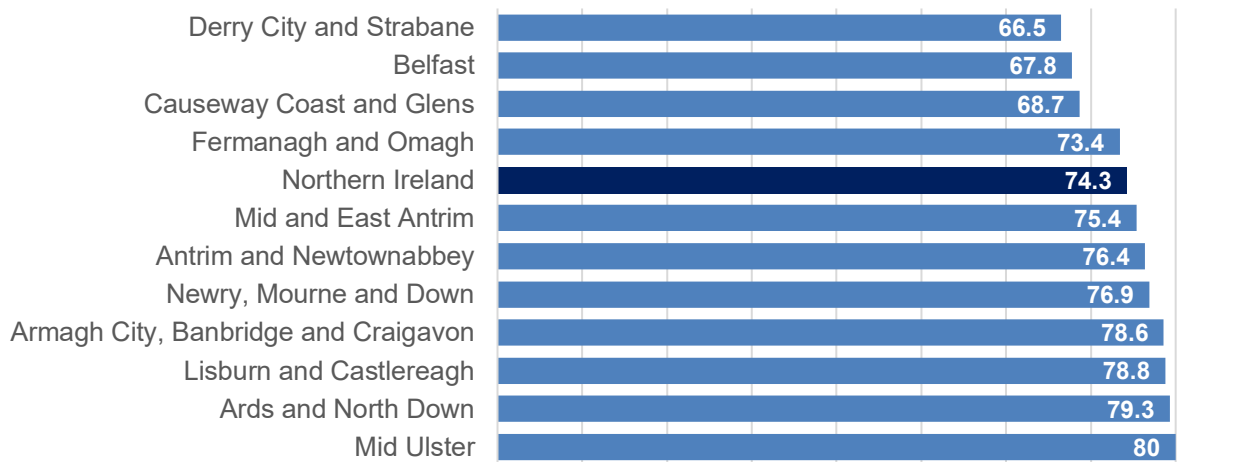


Figure 3b – Unemployment Rate (%), NI LGDs, 2025

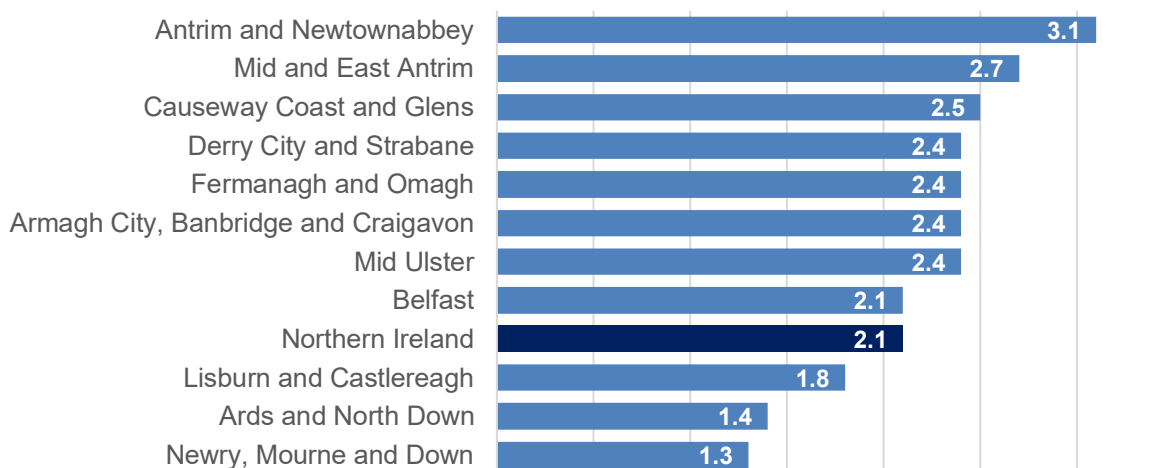
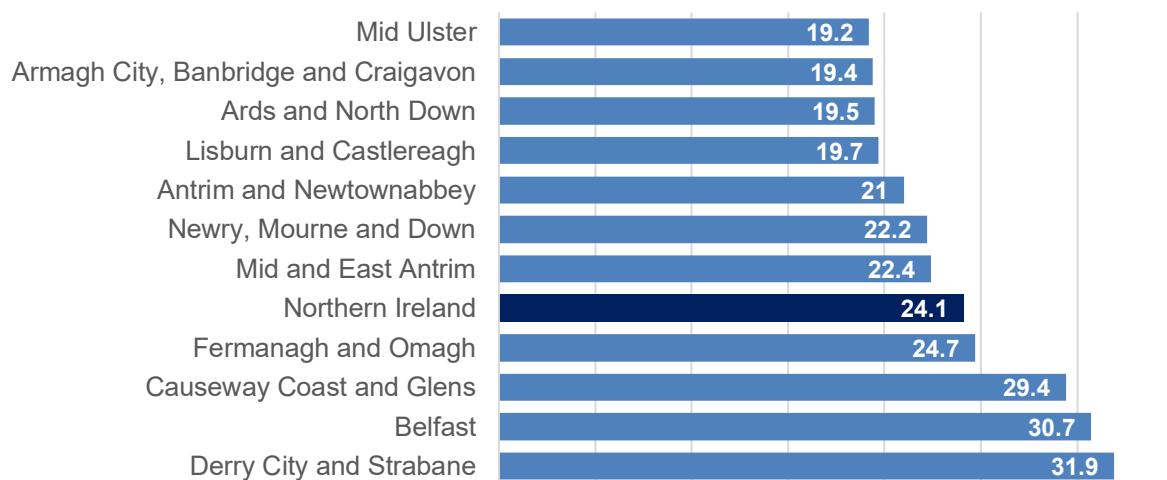


Figure 3c – Economic Inactivity Rate (%), NI LGDs, 2025



Source: [NISRA](#) (2026)

Whilst Belfast and Derry City and Strabane perform poorest of Northern Ireland's LGDs when it comes to the employment rate, they are at or above average in relation to the unemployment rate. That is due to the distorting effect of the two regions' significantly high economic inactivity rate. Consequently, careful consideration of indicators, and how one indicator may affect another, are important considerations when designing a Regional Balance Framework if the Bill would be enacted and implemented as introduced.

3.1.4 Productivity

Productivity refers to how much output can be produced with a given set of inputs. As noted in unpublished RalSe Paper NIAR 150-24¹⁸ (dated August 2024), increasing productivity is generally considered by mainstream economic theory to be the only sustainable way of improving living standards in the long term. According to that viewpoint, with all else equal, higher productivity is commonly associated with higher wages and increased living standards.

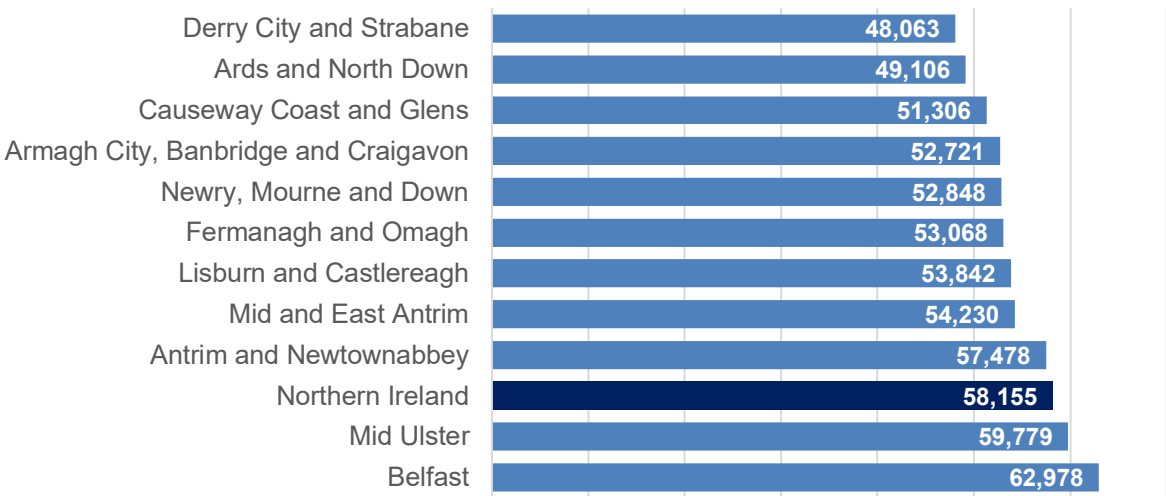
The standard measure of productivity in the United Kingdom is Gross Value Added (GVA) per worker. The ONS defines GVA as “the value generated by any unit (in this case, employees) engaged in the production of goods and services”.¹⁹

Clause 7 of the introduced Bill cites ‘productivity, including GVA per employee’ as a key regional disparity under consideration. **Figure 4** below outlines this indicator across Northern Ireland LGDs. Derry City and Strabane have the lowest productivity in Northern Ireland under this metric, at £48,063 per worker, whilst Belfast is significantly ahead as the highest, at £62,978 per worker. Again, that could create some distortion of the mean average Northern Ireland benchmark.

¹⁸ *Briefing Paper NIAR 150-24: Regional Balance – Comparator areas in the Republic of Ireland*, NI Assembly Research and Information Service (August 2024). Not published.

¹⁹ *Regional economic activity by gross domestic product QMI*, Office for National Statistics (2025). For further detail on how GVA is calculated please see [here](#).

Figure 4 – GVA per filled job (£), NI LGDs, 2022²⁰



Source: [ONS](#) (2026)

3.1.5Health

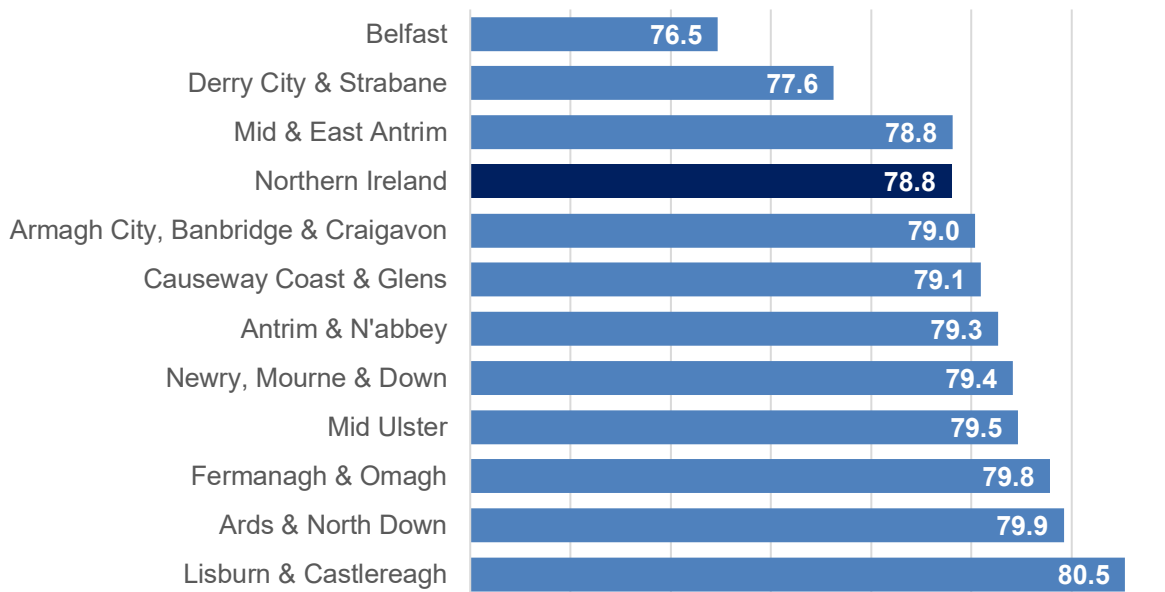
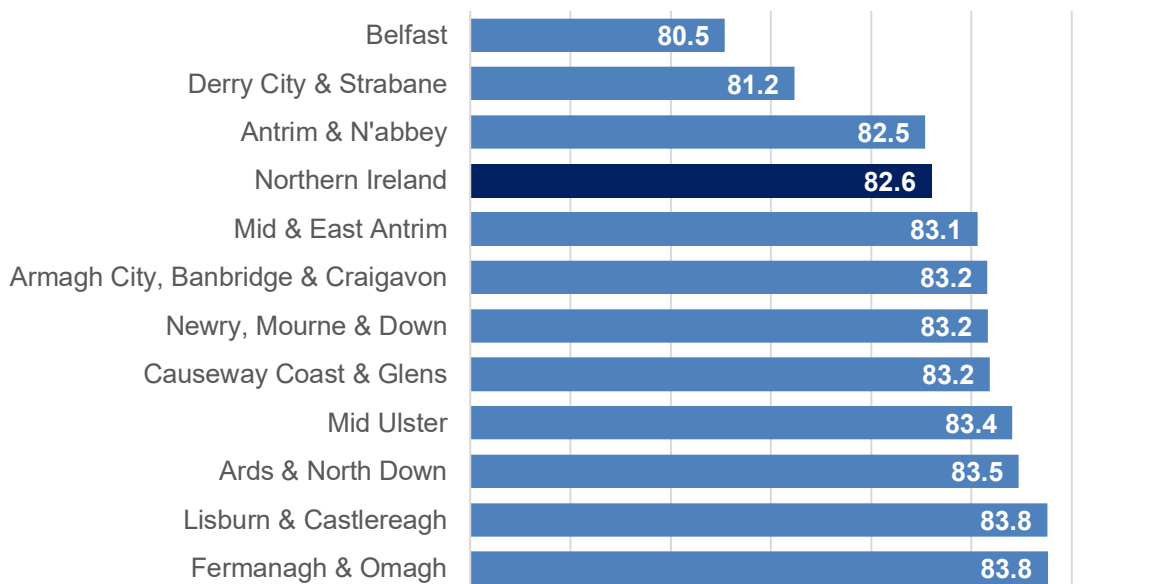
Life expectancy is often the headline indicator used when assessing a region’s health outcomes; though a wide range of indicators could be explored in this context, which goes beyond the scope of this Bill Paper, potentially meriting additional consideration.

Potential Scrutiny Point:

- 2. What other health metrics would be appropriate for inclusion in the Framework required by the Bill, if it would be enacted and implemented as currently introduced?

Figures 5a - 5b below shows a regional breakdown of life expectancy for males and females across LGDs in Northern Ireland. These figures are compiled by the Department of Health.

²⁰ To note, productivity data at this sub-regional level is only available up to 2022, reflecting the fact that regional productivity estimates are derived from annual regional economic output and labour input datasets, which require extensive compilation, balancing and quality assurance before publication.

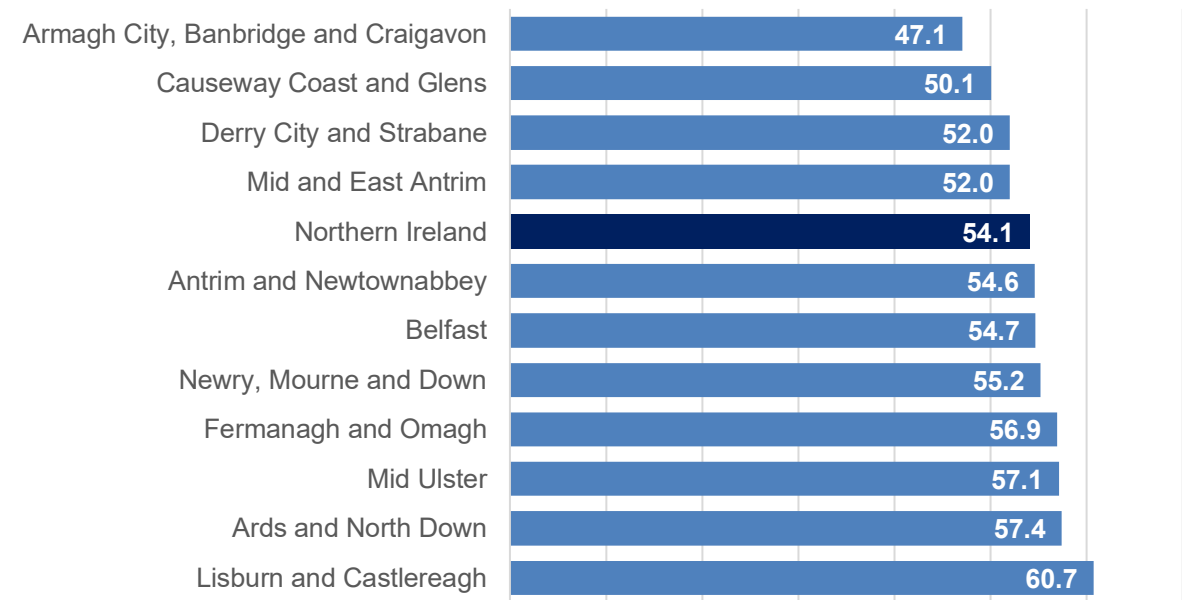
Figure 5a – Life Expectancy, Males, NI LGDs (2024)**Figure 5b – Life Expectancy, Females, NI LGDs (2024)**Source: [NI Department of Health](#) (2025)

The life expectancy figures demonstrate a different distribution of LGDs, whereby Belfast and Derry City & Strabane significantly underperform the Northern Ireland average. That is an inverse distortion²¹ of the mean average, when compared to the earlier GDP per capita figures. Here, the average is pulled down by two outlier areas. Consequently, for eight LGDs in Northern Ireland, with all else equal, convergence towards the average would suggest a reduction in life expectancy. That highlights potential issues that could arise when measuring success through a convergence towards a mean average.

3.1.6 Education

The Department of Education publishes annual statistics on GCSE and A-Level qualifications and destinations of pupils leaving post-primary schools²². Clause 7 of the introduced Bill specifically identifies attainment rates as a key area of consideration for the Framework specified in the Bill. Accordingly, the distribution of attainment rates by LGD in Northern Ireland is outlined below in **Figures 6a - 6b**.

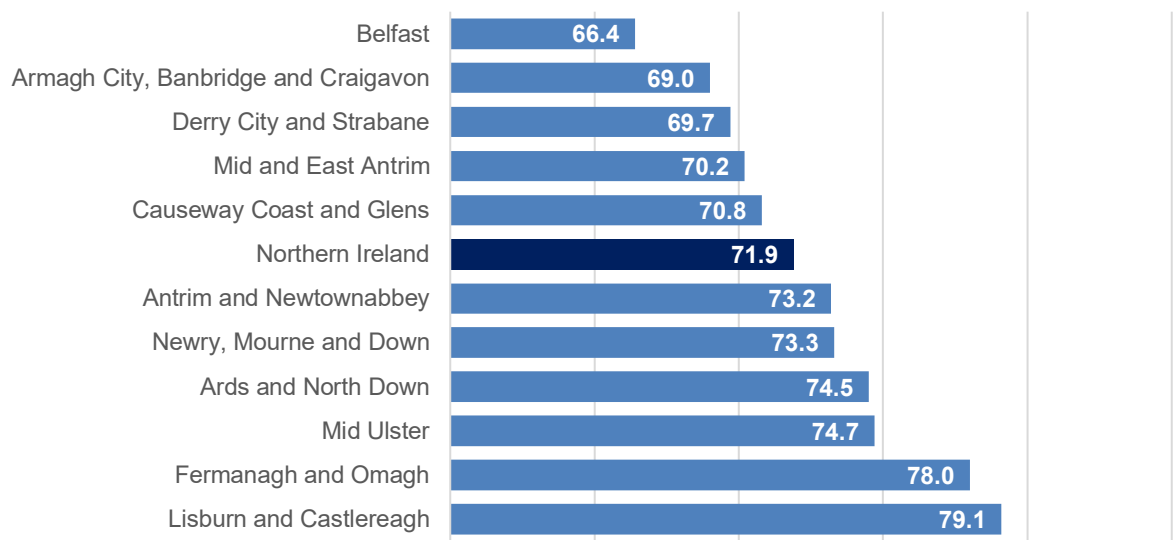
Figure 6a - % of School Leavers with 2+ A-Levels A*-E, NI LGDs (2024/25)



²¹ A statistical distortion of the mean average occurs when a small number of unusually high or low values disproportionately influence the average, making it less representative of the typical observation.

²² *School Leavers 2024/25*, Department of Education, available [here](#).

Figure 6b - % of School Leavers with 5+ GCSEs A*-C incl. GCSE English and Maths, NI LGDs (2024/25)



Source: [Department of Education](#) (2026)

Examining only the headline figures for GCSEs and A-Levels for the specified period demonstrates variation between metrics. For example, whilst Belfast places near the Northern Ireland average for A-Levels, it ranks lowest by a tangible margin when looking at GCSE attainment. As another example, Derry City and Strabane ranks third from last across both metrics. It should be noted that there are many more metrics related to educational performance which could be selected and considered for the Framework, as the MLA Bill Sponsor recognised. Consequently, it is reasonably foreseeable that the choice and balance of metrics in this area could present challenges when seeking to assess objectively.

3. What approach would be envisaged to ensure an objective selection of metrics to be monitored under the Framework, if the Bill would be enacted and implemented as introduced?

3.1.7 Deprivation

Deprivation is another area which can be represented by a range of metrics when comparing regions. The Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (NIMDM) 2017²³ attempts to combine many different indicators relating to deprivation, such as income, employment, health, education, etc. to rank small geographic areas known as Super Output Areas (SOAs).

Importantly, this package of data is now significantly out of date to the current context. Currently on their website, NISRA state the following about its more current work on deprivation indices:

*NISRA personnel are currently seeking to resource exploratory work on how and when to update the NIMDM to account for new data including the 2021 Census, new statistical geographies and potential methodological changes.*²⁴

In the current context, the evidence suggests a contemporary, regularly updated and comparable index of wider deprivation across multiple indicators is not going to be available in the short-term for inclusion within the Framework if the Bill would be enacted and implemented as introduced.

Nonetheless, the NIMDM already includes some of the indicators specified at Clause 7, such as those relating to income, employment, health and education. Consequently, if the Bill would be enacted and implemented as introduced, and in the absence of a composite up-to-date measure, a key decision would arise about the balance of relevant indicators.

4. Given that NISRA do not currently produce an ongoing index of deprivation, what approach is envisaged to account for this metric under the Framework, if the Bill would be enacted and implemented as currently introduced?

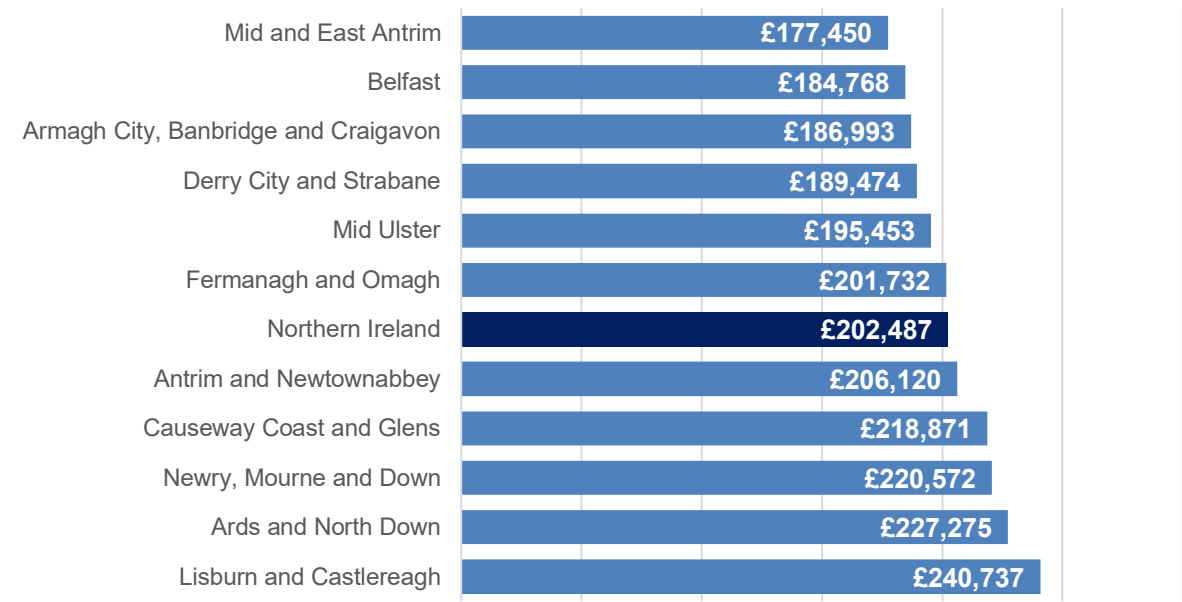
²³ Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2017, NISRA, available [here](#).

²⁴ Deprivation and poverty statistics, NISRA, available [here](#).

3.1.8 Affordable Housing

Housing is another broad area which could be accounted for within the Framework, in a range of ways. The distribution of headline average house prices is relatively balanced, with the Northern Ireland average falling roughly in the centre of all LGDs. **Figure 7** below shows the median house sale prices for Northern Ireland LGDs in Q2 2026.

Figure 7 – Average Dwelling Sale Price, NI LGDs (Q2 2026)

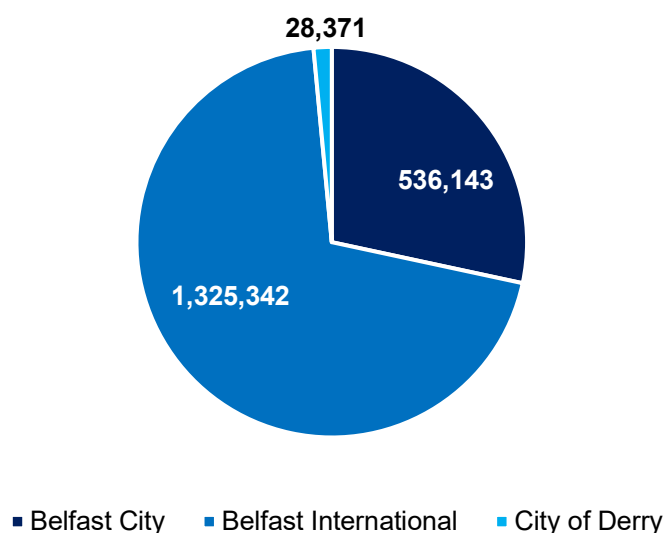


Source: [NI House Price Index](#) (Q2 2026)

Regional house price data are regularly updated (quarterly), offering sufficient opportunity to monitor annually. However, further metrics beyond headline house prices, to look at trends in social housing, rent prices and homelessness also could be valuable, offering a more holistic view of strengths and challenges in housing across LGDs. Consequently, the Framework could do that, with relevant input of the Department for Communities.

3.1.9 Access to Airports

Northern Ireland has three airports, with two located in the wider Belfast area, and one in Derry~Londonderry. Air passenger flow statistics from NISRA/Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) evidence passenger flows to be largest in Belfast International Airport, followed by Belfast City Airport, with the City of Derry Airport significantly behind, as **Figure 8** below shows.

Figure 8 – Quarterly Passenger Flow, NI Airports (Q2 2024)Source: [NISRA](#) (Q2 2024)

The DfE assumed responsibility for providing annual operating funding of up to £3 million for the City of Derry Airport from 1 April 2025.²⁵ Further consideration of how that metric could be evaluated in the Framework would be required. Wider infrastructure, particularly relating to transport, also would be important for regional development. However, how airport access in particular could be monitored is a current unknown.

5. What approach does the Bill envisage for accounting for ‘access to airports’ as a measurable metric under the Framework, if it were enacted and implemented as introduced?

3.1.10 Public Capital Expenditure

The regional distribution of public capital expenditure is likely to be a complex area for ongoing monitoring and assessment. NISRA currently maintains an

²⁵ Archibald – CoDA a vital part of economic development in the North-West, Department for the Economy, available [here](#).

online dashboard,²⁶ providing some details on the Executive's capital spending trends.

This is an area which could be suited to bespoke departmental reporting for the Framework.

6. As part of the Executive's ongoing work to implement political agreements related to [Transformation](#), as well as Budget [Sustainability](#) and [Improvement](#), has any Executive assessment been undertaken to assess the regional impact of capital spending across all departments?

3.2 Commentary on Indicators

The analysis above demonstrates regional balance is a multidimensional concept, and different regional economic performance pictures emerge when using different indicators. For example, Belfast performs strongly on measures such as GDP per capita and productivity, but less favourably on indicators including disposable household income and life expectancy. That suggests no single metric is likely to provide a comprehensive assessment of regional balance.

The evidence also highlights the importance of considering how indicators interact with one another. Labour market statistics illustrate this clearly, as relatively low unemployment rates in some areas may coincide with high levels of economic inactivity. Similarly, convergence towards a Northern Ireland average may not always indicate improved outcomes, as averages can be influenced by outlier regions. The choice of indicators, the balance between them and the availability of up-to-date data therefore are important considerations in the development of the Regional Balance Framework specified in this Bill.

²⁶ *Northern Ireland Executive Capital Spending*, NISRA (2026), available [here](#).

3.3 Existing Measures to Promote Regional Balance in Northern Ireland

As the sub-section immediately above outlines, regional imbalances across Northern Ireland on a range of indicators are clear within the available data. Regional imbalances of this kind are already a well-recognised and supported priority of public bodies at the national, regional and local levels. It is important to now outline these in detail to offer an assessment of effort and investment already undertaken, to compare with the likely outworkings of the Regional Balance Bill's provisions, if enacted and implemented as introduced; and given the Bill Sponsor's stated view that existing efforts have fallen short of delivering the scale of change which the Bill seeks to deliver. Particular focus is paid in this Paper to whether the Bill's provisions are likely to create a different pattern of activity than that which already exists. In other words, how the Bill could change patterns of policy and investment decisions versus what is currently taking place, if enacted and implemented as introduced. The below sub-sections are not intended to be exhaustive, as regional balance is cross-cutting across myriad policy interventions.

3.3.1 Programme for Government 2024-27

The Executive's Programme for Government (PfG) 2024-27²⁷ - entitled "Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most" - was agreed on 27 February 2025 and subsequently approved by the Assembly on 3 March 2025. The PfG set out four key priorities, one of which related to regional balance. The PfG stated:

*...We want to build an economy where everyone has a fair chance...and has the best possible opportunity to succeed...to do this we need to invest in our economic infrastructure working more closely and importantly more constructively with local stakeholders...these changes will mean everyone feels the benefit of our growing economy, regardless of where they live.*²⁸

²⁷ *Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most, Programme for Government 2024-27*, Northern Ireland Executive (2025), available [here](#).

²⁸ As above, page 22.

In terms of specifics, the PfG cites some of the key measures aimed at tackling regional economic imbalances – namely higher and further education investment; Ulster University Magee campus expansion; a new Tourism Strategic Action Plan; a Sub-Regional Economic Action Plan; and regional R&D Strategy development.

3.3.2 Levelling Up/Pride in Place Funding

“Levelling Up” was a programme of initiatives first outlined²⁹ by the 2019 United Kingdom Government. A stated aim of Levelling Up was to “...end the geographical inequality which is such a striking feature of the UK...”³⁰, with the United Kingdom Government further stating “...economic growth and ...the higher productivity which drives [economic growth] has been over-concentrated in specific areas”.³¹

Levelling Up delivered different funding packages across the United Kingdom. As of 2023, around £342 million in funding had been provided to projects in Northern Ireland specifically. Those projects varied widely, including things like £8 million for a new leisure centre in Causeway Coast and Glens,³² £5.8 million investment in Castlederg,³³ and £4.1 million to upgrade Daisyfield Community Sports Hub (in Derry City and Strabane Council).³⁴

In the 2025 Spending Review (SR),³⁵ the United Kingdom Government announced the Pride in Place Impact Fund, which had the aim of “building strong, resilient, prosperous and inclusive communities”. This fund effectively replaced the existing framework of Levelling Up, which is no longer used by the United Kingdom Government. Pride in Place will not be directly delivered in Northern Ireland, with corresponding funding being made available through the

²⁹ *Conservative Party Manifesto 2019*, available [here](#).

³⁰ *Levelling Up the United Kingdom: Executive Summary*,

³¹ As above.

³² *Northern Ireland: Levelling up case studies*, UK Government (2023), available [here](#).

³³ As above.

³⁴ As above.

³⁵ *Spending Review 2025*, UK Government, available [here](#).

Local Growth Fund, with a total United Kingdom Government investment of £45.5 million per annum over the SR period³⁶.

3.3.3 Department for the Economy Funding and Initiatives

Tackling regional disparities currently forms a strong section of the DfE's ongoing work. Speaking on the publication of the DfE's Sub-Regional Economic Plan in October 2024, the then Economy Minister stated:

*In working together like this, in the spirit of true co-design and collaboration, we can start to reverse historical imbalances and deliver prosperity throughout the region.*³⁷

The Sub-Regional Economic Plan further stated:

*Disparities across the region in economic performance have been getting worse; it's time to reverse this.*³⁸

The Plan identified several areas of priority for tackling regional disparities, such as Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs), an enhanced role at the sub-regional level for InvestNI and a realignment of departmental policies and programmes to drive local growth. Alongside this, the Plan committed the DfE to establishing a new Regional Balance Unit (RBU), which is now fully operational, with approximately 10 full-time staff.

The Sub-Regional Economic Plan sits alongside the DfE's Business Plan 2025-26³⁹, which also cites driving greater regional balance as one of four key departmental priorities. The DfE note in the Business Plan that the key regional metrics they are monitoring to assess progress are median earnings, the employment rate, qualification levels, economic inactivity rates and household

³⁶ *Pride in Place Programme: Northern Ireland, Question for the Northern Ireland Office* (UIN 97328), available [here](#).

³⁷ *Sub-Regional Economic Plan*, Department for the Economy (2024), available [here](#).

³⁸ As above.

³⁹ *DfE Business Plan 2025-26*, Department for the Economy, available [here](#). At the time of writing, it appears that a 2026-27 Business Plan has yet to be published.

disposable income. Their End of Year Progress Report 2025-26⁴⁰ notes several areas of progress towards driving increased regional balance, including:

- i. A 22% increase in student enrolments at Magee between 2024-26.
- ii. Construction commenced on two major capital projects in Belfast and Derry~Londonderry.
- iii. Completion of a new £51m Northern Regional Campus in Ballymena.
- iv. 59% of Invest NI's investments were made to businesses outside the Belfast Metropolitan Area (or offered NI-wide opportunities).

3.3.4 North-West Strategic Growth Plan

The revised North-West Strategic Growth Plan was published in June 2026. It is a cross-border collaborative plan setting out a commitment between government, local government, and partners in health, tertiary education and industry to drive economic development in the North-West City Region (encompassing Derry~Londonderry and much of Donegal).

The Plan argues that the region continues to suffer from longstanding disadvantages linked to peripherality, underinvestment, infrastructure deficits and regional inequality. It identifies three priority areas for action: infrastructure, skills, and health. The Plan's overarching aim is to improve regional balance, increase productivity and competitiveness, and reduce deprivation and health inequalities.

3.3.5 Northern Ireland City and Growth Deals

Northern Ireland's City and Growth Deals Programme is one of the most significant place-based economic interventions undertaken in recent decades. Across four deals, covering Belfast Region, Derry and Strabane, Causeway Coast and Glens, and Mid South West, the United Kingdom Government and Northern Ireland Executive have committed around £1.3 billion of capital funding, with local councils and partners contributing a further £300 million. The Programme was explicitly designed to support inclusive growth and regional

⁴⁰ *DfE Business Plan 2025-26: End of Year Progress Report*, Department for the Economy (2026), available [here](#).

balance by directing investment to all council areas, rather than concentrating economic activity in Belfast.

However, progress so far in this area has been mixed. A recent report from the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO)⁴¹ found that as of March 2026, £1.2 billion (of £1.3 billion central government funding) remained unspent, with only a small number of projects operational. The report estimates that the real terms value of funding is being reduced by around £37 million for each year of delay. Further, benchmarking against other United Kingdom regions suggests that Northern Ireland has progressed more slowly than in other jurisdictions.

3.3.6 Tourism Strategic Action Plan

The then-Minister for the Economy published the “Tourism Vision and Action Plan: 10 Year Plan”⁴² on 15th January 2025, which sets out the DfE’s ambition for growth in the local tourism sector over the next decade. Alongside the Plan’s various other provisions, regional balance is held as a key overarching priority. The Plan outlines the connection between high-quality transport links and the performance of regional economies⁴³. Alongside transport, investment in tourism infrastructure (including accommodation) is cited as an area of focus which could stimulate greater regional balance.

To ensure tourism delivers economic and social benefits across all regions of Northern Ireland, Tourism NI is to:

*...apply a destination-led approach to sub-regional development by identifying visitor-centric destinations; developing local action plans...and will pilot a Stewardship Plan for one of these destinations in 2025.*⁴⁴

⁴¹ NI Audit Office Report – NI City and Growth Deals (2026), available [here](#).

⁴² Tourism Vision & Action Plan: 10 Year Plan, Department for the Economy (2025), available [here](#).

⁴³ As above, page 12.

⁴⁴ As above, page 13.

3.3.7 North-West Regional Development Fund

The North-West Regional Development Fund (NWRDF) was committed to by both the Irish Government and the Executive under the Fresh Start Agreement⁴⁵ of 2015 and established in 2016. It is a relatively small enabling fund designed to stimulate collaboration between local Councils and other stakeholders both sides of the border on regional development needs. Since its establishment, the NWRDF has enabled the delivery of various specific initiatives, including regional spatial planning, export support programmes for SMEs, and co-design and implementation of joint tourism events and initiatives.⁴⁶ Alongside funding, the NWRDF has also provided additional structure and governance to give initiatives a better chance of delivery.⁴⁷

More recently, it was reported in the local media in March 2025 that the Executive had failed to match around £1.5m in funding provided by the Irish Government to the NWRDF. Reacting to this, the Bill Sponsor said at the time:

*We have repeatedly heard commitments from the Executive to promote regional balance and invest in areas that have long suffered from underdevelopment...this is about fairness and ensuring that the North-West gets the investment it needs and deserves.*⁴⁸

3.4 Commentary on Existing Initiatives

As stated at the start of this section, a vast number of policies, strategies, and funding activities already are in place within Northern Ireland to wholly or partly tackle regional disparities. Consequently, the primary question when considering the introduced Bill is not whether this type of work is ongoing;

⁴⁵ *A Fresh Start: The Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan*, UK and Irish Governments (2015), available [here](#).

⁴⁶ *North-West City Regional Ireland/Northern Ireland Statement of Regional Priorities*, North South Ministerial Council (2021), available [here](#).

⁴⁷ *Exploring Shared Opportunities in the North-West: Findings from Focus Groups*, National Economic & Social Council (2022), available [here](#).

⁴⁸ *The Executive Office accused of reneging on North-West fund as Irish Government honours commitment*, The Belfast Telegraph (March 2025), available [here](#).

rather, it is how would this Bill, if enacted and implemented as introduced, interact with the wide range of initiatives already in place?

The evidence examined in this section demonstrates that regional disparities continue to be apparent across a range of economic and social indicators. It therefore could be argued that existing arrangements have thus far not delivered the degree of regional convergence sought by the Bill Sponsor. Equally, a key consideration for Members may be whether the Bill's proposed duties and responsibilities would result in materially different outcomes from those already being pursued through existing strategies, plans, and investment programmes.

4. Commentary on Bill Clauses

This section identifies areas of policy consideration which could warrant further exploration and scrutiny from the Committee for the Economy and the wider Assembly.

4.1 Part 1 – Regional Balance Strategic Framework

Part 1 of the introduced Bill requires the Executive to develop, adopt, maintain and implement a Regional Balance Strategic Framework and imposes a “due regard” duty on departments, supported by departmental information gathering, reporting and evaluation.

4.1.1 Potential Duplication and Interaction with Existing Initiatives

As outlined in [sub-section 3.3](#) of this Paper, a wide range of existing policies, strategies and other initiatives already in place, which have a sole or partial objective of addressing regional imbalances in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the Bill's EFM acknowledges this, stating:

The Department for the Economy already undertakes substantial activity related to regional balance, including a dedicated Regional Balance Unit

*and significant programme expenditure through initiatives such as the Regional Balance Fund and Invest NI regional programmes.*⁴⁹

A key potential policy consideration related to the Bill's central provision - a new Regional Balance Strategic Framework - is to what extent that Framework would duplicate work that is already taking place, potentially limiting value for money. Further, if the Framework would create entirely new initiatives, another consideration is how that would interact with existing initiatives.

The Sub-Regional Economic Plan, published by the DfE in October 2024, committed the Department to establishing a new Regional Balance Unit (RBU) which is now fully operational. In previous correspondence with the DfE in March 2026, RalSe-PFSU obtained data relating to staffing within the RBU. In March 2026, there were 10.71 FTE staff working within the unit, with the DfE informing RalSe:

*There are two teams, headed by two G7s. Their responsibilities include local economic partnerships, regional balance fund including finance and governance, entrepreneurship and collaboration with other departments on rural development, and anti-poverty strategies/policies.*⁵⁰

Clause 1(2) of the introduced Bill states that the Framework must set out how the Executive proposed to reduce regional disparities in Northern Ireland. It is currently not fully understood how this Framework would integrate the wide range of existing regional balance initiatives, whilst remaining a distinct output. To assess this further, RalSe-PFSU further engaged with the DfE, and received an email dated 5 October 2026. The Department explained any assessment it had made thus far on how the Bill's provisions would integrate with existing policy initiatives on regional balance, if enacted and implemented as introduced, stating:

⁴⁹ *Regional Balance Bill – Explanatory and Financial Memorandum* (June 2026), available [here](#).

⁵⁰ RalSe correspondence with DfE – received 3 March 2026.

Analysis [of the Bill] is ongoing...our initial assessment is that, given the breadth of the proposed duties, the Bill could potentially interact with the full range of Departmental functions and existing policy frameworks.⁵¹

Further, the Department provided its view on the possible extent of any duplication of work, if the Bill would be enacted and implemented as introduced, stating:

Our initial assessment is that...there is potential for interaction with existing policy...this could involve extensive administrative work and duplication. As part of its analysis [of the Bill], the department is considering the extent to which any new duties may overlap or interact with existing statutory obligations and frameworks...⁵²

The DfE noted in its responses that its analysis of the introduced Bill is still developing. Accordingly, the following potential scrutiny points arise for the DfE in this area.

Potential Scrutiny Points:

7. Has any assessment been undertaken within the Executive (by DfE or otherwise) to ascertain how the Bill would interact with existing initiatives tackling regional disparities in Northern Ireland, if the Bill would be enacted and implemented as introduced?
8. What measures or approach would the DfE, and other departments take to meet the Bill's specified requirements in a manner that represents value for money and does not result in extensive duplication of ongoing work?

⁵¹ RalSe correspondence with DfE – received 5 October 2026.

⁵² As above.

4.1.2 Requirement for Executive and Cross-Departmental Agreement

Clause 1(3a) requires the Framework to state the outcomes which the Executive intends to be achieved, and the period within which it is intended those are to be achieved. Further, Clause 1(3c) references “...cross-departmental actions and funding plans”, which also should be included in the specified Framework.

Implementing this Clause could present challenges arising from the need to secure Executive-wide agreement on the Framework. As responsibility for relevant policy areas rests across multiple departments, each with its own (often competing) priorities and ministerial leadership, reaching agreement on outcomes, targets, funding commitments and delivery mechanisms could prove difficult. For example, at the time of writing, the Executive has not agreed the draft Multi-Year Budget 2026-29/30,⁵³ which had been published by the Minister of Finance in January 2026. The current PfG took just over a year to be published. Going forward, similar delays for a future PfG could arise following the upcoming May 2027 Assembly elections, thereby impacting any Framework that would be implemented if the Bill would be enacted as introduced.

Clause 1(6) states the first Framework - statutorily required - is to be laid before the Assembly within 12 months of the Act coming into operation (that is, the day following the Bill receiving Royal Assent). It should be further noted that that 12-month period also would encompass the time during which the Executive would be required to consult departments, district councils and other relevant stakeholders on the development of the Framework, pursuant to Clause 1(4a-c).

As framed, it seems each department would approach the development of a Regional Balance Framework under the Bill with its own preferred priorities and targets. Clause 1(3) outlines a range of elements which must be included in the Framework, including: intended outcomes/ targets with target dates; a statement of departmental roles; identification of mechanisms to drive regional balance; the criteria for assessing their impact; consideration of cross-border

⁵³ *Draft Budget Document 2026-29/30*, DoF (January 2026), available [here](#).

economic data; identification of a baseline year; and, investment decisions allowing for greater convergence towards the Northern Ireland average. That represents a significant breadth of specific details, which would need to be agreed by all Executive departments in advance of laying the Framework before the Assembly. The Committee for the Economy may wish to consider whether 12 months represents an appropriate and sufficient period of time for agreement to be reached on all of these specific elements.

It is not stated within the Bill's text or accompanying EFM as to what the direct consequences would be under the Bill if enacted and implemented as introduced, if a Framework could not be agreed upon by the Executive during the statutory 12-month period following the Bill receiving Royal Assent. If Executive discussions regarding Framework adoption ended in stalemate, where targets or priorities could not be agreed, another key question worth exploring is whether that impasse, in practice, would limit the ongoing work of the DfE and others on regional balance.

Potential Scrutiny Points:

9. Is the specified statutory period of twelve months a reasonable amount of time for the Executive and departments to agree on all elements to be contained within the Regional Balance Framework, as outlined in Clause 1(3)?
10. What reasonably foreseeable consequences could arise if the Executive failed to publish an agreed Regional Balance Framework within the specified statutory 12-month period?
11. If agreement on elements of the Framework could not be reached, what mechanism would be available to resolve any disagreements between departments and enable the Framework to be finalised? Could those be specified in the Bill?

4.1.3 Lead Role of Department for the Economy

The Bill's EFM states that the DfE is designated as the lead department in compiling the specified Framework and its subsequent reporting. In correspondence with RalSe-PFSU, the DfE stated:

*The duty to develop the Strategic Framework is on the Executive and it is unclear how this would work in practice as the Executive is not a corporate body.*⁵⁴

There appears therefore to be a difference in interpretation between the Bill's EFM and the DfE about this aspect of the Bill. The DfE's argument that the Executive is not a corporate body may have implications for the duties which the Bill would impose to produce the specified Framework. The Bill seems to place the duty to produce the Framework (as explained in its EFM) primarily on the DfE. However, agreement would be required from all departments for the Framework to progress. One interpretation therefore is the Bill imposes a duty on the DfE to ensure the Executive produces an output (the Framework), where it would have limited ability to enforce this provision. That is a technical area which would warrant further investigation during the Bill's scrutiny process.

Potential Scrutiny Points:

12. Given that the introduced Bill designates the DfE as the lead department in compiling the Framework, how would that operate in practice if the Bill would be enacted and implemented as introduced, given the legal status of the Executive?
13. Would the DfE have any mechanisms available to it to compel departmental agreement on the Framework, if the Bill would be enacted and implemented as introduced?

⁵⁴ RalSe correspondence with Department for the Economy, received 5 October 2026.

14. Would the absence of Executive agreement prevent the discharge of the statutory duty to create the Framework, if the Bill would be enacted and implemented as introduced?

4.1.4 Cross-Border Considerations

Clause 1(3e) stipulates the Framework is to include provisions requiring departments to “recognise and consider cross-border economic data in policies, strategies and plans so as to reduce regional disparities”.⁵⁵ For clarity, Clause 7 later defines “cross-border economic data” as ‘data concerning economic activity, labour markets, or service provisions that operate across the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland’.

Relying on previous OECD research, the Bill’s EFM further explains that:

It is expected that the Framework should include provisions to utilise the economic potential of cross-border agglomeration economies and cross-border cooperation...⁵⁶

There is a documented history of cross-border cooperation between the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government in developing regional economies. Major projects have tended to focus on the area of cross-border infrastructure to support regional development. Perhaps the clearest recent example is the A5 Western Transport Corridor,⁵⁷ to which the Irish Government committed €600 million of funding in February 2024.⁵⁸ The wider potential for agglomeration effects and regional clustering is also well understood but is beyond the scope of this Paper.

A central question regarding this provision is the specific meaning of “recognise and consider” when dealing with cross-border economic data. Whilst the clause

⁵⁵ *Regional Balance Bill 35/22-27 [as introduced]*, NI Assembly, available [here](#).

⁵⁶ *Regional Balance Bill – Explanatory and Financial Memorandum* (June 2026), available [here](#).

⁵⁷ *A5 Western Transport Corridor – overview*, Department for Infrastructure, available [here](#).

⁵⁸ *Unprecedented funding of over €800 million for Shared Island investment priorities including A5 road*, Department of the Taoiseach (February 2024), available [here](#).

appears procedurally clear in intent, its practical operation may require further exploration.

Determining what constitutes relevant cross-border economic data is also likely to present areas of disagreement between departments. The Department of Health, for example, may engage with cross-border service provision markedly differently to the Department for Infrastructure. Specific indicators for cross-border data are not identified in the Bill itself.

Cross-border considerations are typically more relevant in areas of Northern Ireland which share a border with the Republic of Ireland. Consideration therefore may need to be given to how cross-border considerations are to be accounted for when considering the needs of areas that do not sit along the border, but which underperform the Northern Ireland average on the metrics identified. The Committee for the Economy may wish to consider whether the focus on cross-border considerations provides a fully balanced foundation through which to measure success.

While there is a history of cross-border cooperation in support of regional development and infrastructure, the introduced Bill does not specify how departments should weigh cross-border economic data against other forms of evidence. The following scrutiny points are suggested about cross-border considerations.

Potential Scrutiny Points:

15. How would departments be required to demonstrate that they would have sufficiently recognised and considered cross-border economic data in their policies, strategies and plans? For example, what form of outputs would be expected? How would compliance with this provision be assessed?
16. Could a departmental policy or investment decision be legally challenged due to insufficient consideration being given to cross-border evidence under the Framework?

4.1.5 Selection of “Average” Measure

Clause 1(3f) references targets and investments within the Framework which would allow for greater convergence towards the Northern Ireland average. However, as [Section 3.1](#) of this Paper demonstrates, the “average” for many indicators can be skewed by outliers, particularly Belfast under some criteria. In those cases, a significant majority of LGDs sit below the Northern Ireland average. It may be worth considering whether convergence towards an average would be the most effective scale to measure improvements in regional balance, given the distortionary effect of outliers.

Another potential approach could be using the median average as opposed to the mean average. A standard definition of these two measures is outlined below for clarity:

- Mean is the arithmetic average (adding all values together and dividing by the count).
- Median is the middle value when all values are ordered from smallest to largest.⁵⁹

Calculating either of these from the sub-regional figures gives a different number from the published official average because it ignores differences in population sizes. Using the sub-regional figures for GDP per capita for example, there are three possible “averages”, which could be used:

1. The official (ONS) Northern Ireland average (population-weighted): £35,108.
2. The mean of the sub-regional data (unweighted): £32,523.
3. The median of the sub-regional data: £30,959.

Each approach has advantages and disadvantages. However, the substantial variation between these figures illustrates how the choice of benchmark may influence assessments of regional convergence.

⁵⁹ Definitions taken from previous NISRA labour market data.

Potential Scrutiny Point:

17. What is the most appropriate measure of the Northern Ireland average to use for metrics and targeting in the Regional Balance Framework, as stipulated by Clause 1(3f) of the introduced Bill?
18. Should a Regional Balance Framework take account of the potential distortionary effect of outliers within a mean average figure, as opposed to a median average?

The salient point here: if a Regional Balance Framework measures success against convergence towards a mean average, it is possible that most areas could see improvements in things like economic output, wages, or productivity, whilst still ultimately remaining below “average”, due to the distortionary effect of outliers like Belfast. The Framework therefore could be viewed as failing to meet its own targets, even with widespread improvements in regional areas. This is a technical issue potentially warranting further consideration.

4.1.6 “Due Regard” and Legal Challenges

Clause 2 of the introduced Bill states that departments would be required to have “due regard” to the Framework and the need to reduce regional disparity when they undertake any policy, strategy or plan. Further, Clause 2(2) states that departments would further be required to, as far as reasonably practicable, exercise their functions in a way which contributes to achieving the targets and outcomes within the Framework.

The Bill’s EFM describes the Clause 2 duty as “justiciable, yet proportionate”, avoiding hard-edged obligations which are “overly prescriptive and too unwieldy”.⁶⁰ It is important to note that this Clause may introduce the possibility of legal challenges to departmental policy and investment decisions.

⁶⁰ *Regional Balance Bill – Explanatory and Financial Memorandum* (June 2026), available [here](#).

The phrase “due regard” is common parlance in United Kingdom legislation, used for example in the Equality Act 2010, wherein Section 149 states that a public authority must have “due regard” to the need to eliminate discrimination and promote equality of opportunity during the course of exercising its functions. Duties such as this one which require public authorities to have due regard to a particular area have been the subject of numerous judicial review challenges where claimants alleged that relevant factors were not properly considered during the decision-making process. Such duties generally require public authorities to demonstrate genuine consideration of the relevant factors, rather than to reach any particular outcome.

Potential Scrutiny Points:

19. Given the established body of case law concerning “due regard” duties, what evidence or documentation would departments be expected to retain in order to demonstrate compliance with Clause 2 of the introduced Bill?
20. Is there a need for a formalised impact assessment process to assist departments in demonstrating that they have given “due regard” to the need to tackle regional disparities, to ensure compliance? If so, should such a process be analogous to existing assessment frameworks, such as Equality Impact Assessments or Rural Needs Impact Assessments?

4.2 Part 2 – Reporting, Review and Support Functions

4.2.1 Information Retention and Issuing of Guidance

Clause 3(1a) of the introduced Bill states that departments must compile and retain information showing they have exercised due regard to the Framework when developing, adopting, implementing or revising any policy, strategy or plan.

This does appear to cover a significant portion of departmental activities. Clause 3(2) states that all departments must provide information for an annual report on the implementation and operation of the framework, with actions taken to reduce regional balance as well as an evaluation of their impact. The Bill therefore creates additional administrative work, both by departments in assessing any policy decisions against the objective of driving regional balance, and particularly for the DfE in compiling this information to exercise its reporting and monitoring functions across all departments.

RaISe-PFSU have been advised by the DfE that:

*Initial consideration has identified a wide range of information requirements, monitoring arrangements and reporting obligations.*⁶¹

Further, Clause 3(3) empowers the DfE to issue guidance on the form, content and timing of information under this section

Potential Scrutiny Points

21. Do departments have sufficient internal capacity to manage an ongoing additional administrative process under the Bill if enacted and implemented as introduced, whereby they must be able to demonstrate adherence to the Regional Balance Framework when developing, adopting, implementing or revising any policy, strategy or plan?
22. Which body ultimately would decide whether a department had demonstrated ongoing due regard to regional balance in the exercise of its operations under the Bill if enacted and implemented as introduced?
23. How would departments assess and demonstrate the impact of individual policies, strategies or plans on regional balance if the Bill would be enacted and implemented as introduced,

⁶¹ RaISe correspondence with Department for the Economy, received 5 October 2026.

particularly where outcomes may take a number of years to materialise?

24. Is the DfE best placed to issue guidance on the form, content and timing of information to be provided by all departments under Clause 3, if the Bill would be enacted and implemented as introduced?

4.2.2 Expansion of Existing Reporting?

The DfE currently publishes documentation on its progress to tackling regional disparities. For example, their end year progress report⁶² on their 2025-26 Business Plan⁶³ on 5 June 2026. Regional balance was one of the four key priorities within the business plan, and the DfE laid out ten key commitments relating to improving regional economic balance. Within the end year progress report, the DfE subsequently produced a table outlining the specific progress made against each commitment in the preceding year, graded by a “traffic light” progress scale.

Clause 4 of the introduced Bill places a duty on the DfE to prepare and publish a report on:

- The implementation of the provisions in the Bill.
- The operation of the Framework; and
- Progress made by the Executive in reducing regional disparities in accordance with the outcomes and targets set in the Framework.

A consideration arising from this Clause is whether this annual report is envisaged to be an expansion of the existing reporting from the DfE on departmental efforts to address regional disparities, or would it be a further distinct output existing alongside documents such as annual reporting on the DfE’s Business Plan. It is clear that the annual report in Clause 4 would be more wide-ranging than the DfE’s existing reporting because it would collate the

⁶² *Business Plan 2025-26: End Year Progress Report*, DfE (June 2026), available [here](#).

⁶³ *Business Plan 2025-26*, DfE (June 2025), available [here](#).

work of all departments. However, it is unclear whether the proposed report is intended to be complementary to existing reporting arrangements or substitutive of them.

Potential Scrutiny Point:

25. How would the annual report outlined in Clause 4 of the introduced Bill interact with the DfE's existing annual reporting on tackling regional imbalance? Would it be intended to be complementary or substitutive?

4.2.3 Consequences of Targets Missed

Another consideration relates to the provisions of Clause 4 and the annual report. Clause 4(2-3) of the introduced Bill states the DfE must lay this report before the Assembly, as well as the Minister for the Economy being required to make a statement to the Assembly following its publication.

The Bill does not appear to provide for any specific remedial action where targets or outcomes contained within the Framework would not be achieved, as would be set out in the annual report. It seems reasonable to expect scrutiny would occur through existing Assembly and Committee mechanisms. However, MLAs may wish to consider whether the introduced Bill should provide greater clarity about what happens if departmental underperformance against the Framework would occur and an annual report uncovers such failings.

Potential Scrutiny Point:

26. What actions would be expected under the introduced Bill where an annual report would demonstrate departmental outcomes had fallen short of the targets specified in the Regional Balance Framework?

4.2.4 Data Limitations

Several aspects of the introduced Bill rely on a selection of data related to regional disparities. Clause 7 specifies a non-exhaustive list of relevant metrics, as explained earlier in [sub-section 3.1](#) of this Paper. Once a selection of relevant metrics would be agreed upon, it is likely that the annual reporting and monitoring processes outlined in Part 2 of the Bill rely on ongoing updates to the data underlying the Framework's targets to evaluate progress.

The Bill Sponsor recognised potential issues relating to data availability. Within the Bill's EFM, it explains that:

A flexible definition of 'reporting year' enables alignment of the publication [of the annual report] with data cycles and creates conditions for stronger scrutiny of performance under the Framework.

Clause 4(5) therefore recognises that data for different metrics is published at various intervals throughout the year. However, a number of potential issues may still warrant further consideration. First, if data for different metrics typically are published at different stages of the year, there could be challenges in agreeing a consistent "reporting year" on which to base the specified annual report. If a reporting year beginning in April, for example, was chosen, data could be published in June of that same year, which would be somewhat out of date by the time it came to publish an annual report in the following April.

A further potential data issue is the widespread practice of data lags, particularly for sub-regional data. At the time of writing, GDP per capita and GDHI per capita are available only up to 2024. Productivity figures like GVA per employee are especially lagged, at the time of writing only available up to 2022, due to the complexity of compiling data over smaller geographic areas. MLAs therefore may wish to explore how the introduced Bill would be intended to navigate the data issues which could present themselves during the operation of the specified Framework.

Potential Scrutiny Points:

27. How would differences in the publication schedule of relevant datasets affect the timing and content of annual reporting under the Framework, if the Bill would be enacted and implemented as introduced?

28. How would the Bill accommodate indicators that are subject to substantial publication lags, particularly where data would not be available for one or more years following the reporting period?

4.2.5 Guidance and Research

Clause 6 of the introduced Bill would provide the DfE with further discretionary powers to provide guidance to other departments about matters connected with addressing regional disparities. The DfE also may undertake or commission research into any matter relating to regional disparities.

Potentially relevant here is the appropriateness of the DfE advising other departments on tackling regional disparities, where it may not have the expertise on the policy remits of other departments. In that regard, the DfE advised RalSe-PFSU that:

...the duties on [the Department] to provide guidance are problematic in practice. The Department does not have the knowledge or expertise to comment upon policy areas that are within the remit of other Departments...For example, at this stage it is difficult to see how the Department for the Economy could issue appropriate guidance to the Department of Health, on how it should define and tackle regional health imbalances.⁶⁴

It is clear from the DfE's response that its initial consideration stage of the Bill included reservations regarding the practical operation of the Department's

⁶⁴ RalSe correspondence with Department for the Economy, received 5 October 2026.

proposed guidance-issuing powers. In particular, the DfE noted that it may not possess subject-specific expertise across the full range of policy areas covered by other departments. MLAs therefore may wish to explore the appropriateness of the proposed guidance function and how it would operate in practice.

Potential Scrutiny Point:

29. Is the DfE the most appropriate body to exercise the guidance-issuing function under Clause 6, given the breadth of policy areas that would be included within the scope of the Bill if enacted and implemented as introduced?

5. Human Rights and Equality

The Bill's EFM states the Bill imposes duties on public authorities and does not interfere with rights under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Further, it states the Bill is compatible with Article 2(1) of the Windsor Framework.

On equality considerations, as outlined in the Bill's EFM, initial engagement between the Bill Sponsor and the Equality Commission Northern Ireland did not raise any potential adverse effects arising from the Bill.

The Bill's EFM states the Bill may positively affect some groups subject to disadvantage. RalSe internally⁶⁵ has identified several such groups of individuals which may be of relevance in this area when considering the Bill. For example, it has been suggested that greater regional opportunities for employment would have particularly positive impacts for certain groups, including women with dependants and younger people. Disability also may be a relevant consideration. Northern Ireland's disability employment gap is well documented, and improvements in that area could benefit those with a disability.

⁶⁵ Based on engagement with another researcher within RalSe.

6. Key Takeaways

- The introduced Bill proposes a new statutory framework for addressing regional disparities across Northern Ireland and places new duties on both the Executive and individual departments.
- Regional disparities are evident across a range of economic and social indicators. However, the evidence examined in this Paper indicates that regional balance is a complex and multifaceted concept, which apparently cannot be fully captured through any single measure.
- Regional balance is already a stated objective of several existing strategies, plans and investment programmes. A key issue for consideration is therefore how any new statutory framework would interact with these existing arrangements.
- The practical operation of the Bill, if enacted and introduced as introduced, would raise a number of implementation questions, including how a Framework would be agreed across departments, how compliance with “due regard” duties would be demonstrated, how progress would be measured, and how data limitations could be managed.
- The Committee for the Economy and the wider Assembly may wish to explore whether the Bill’s proposed governance, reporting and accountability arrangements are proportionate, deliverable and sufficiently distinct from existing activity aimed at reducing regional disparities.