



Subject:	Regional Balance Bill – Call for Evidence Response
Date:	18 September 2026
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Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes ☐ No ☒
Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.	
Insert number	
1. Information relating to any individual 2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual 3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information) 4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter 5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained 6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction 7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime	
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	☐
After Council Decision	☐
Sometime in the future	☐
Never	☐

Call-in	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes ☒ No ☐

1.0	Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues
1.1	The purpose of this report is to seek approval from Members for the attached response to the Economy Committee's Call for Evidence in relation the Regional Balance Bill.
2.0	Recommendation
2.1	The Committee is asked to: Consider and approve the submission attached at Appendix 1, as the Council's response to the NI Assembly's Committee for the Economy.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	The Regional Balance Bill is a Private Member's Bill introduced by Foyle MLA Sinéad McLaughlin to the Northern Ireland Assembly on Monday 8 June 2026. The Bill seeks to improve regional economic balance across Northern Ireland. It seeks to do so by imposing a duty on the NI Executive to develop and implement a framework setting out how disparities in regional economic performance and living standards are to be addressed and to review the effectiveness of the framework. The Northern Ireland Assembly's Committee for the Economy launched a call for evidence and is inviting individuals and organisations to share their views on the Regional Balance Bill. The evidence received will play a role in informing the Committee's scrutiny work, which will include evidence sessions with stakeholders; clause-by-clause consideration of the Bill, and recommendations to the sponsor of the Bill and the Department for the Economy.
3.2	The Bill gives statutory recognition to regional balance (i.e. the difference in economic performance and living standards between geographic regions) as an Executive-wide priority, requires the Executive to adopt and maintain a Regional Balance Strategic Framework, imposes a duty on departments to pay due regard to the Framework when developing policies, strategies and plans, and requires annual reporting to, and scrutiny by, the Assembly. The Department for the Economy (DfE) is given a lead role in monitoring, reporting, issuing guidance and conducting research to support delivery. This latter point is important, as the Bill is seeking to balance recognition that departments need to work together in the context of an overall, strategic framework with the expertise and lead responsibility resting with the DfE. This means that the Framework will have a clear owner in terms of reporting and recommending improvements, whilst ensuring the Executive drives it across the board.
3.3	During the initial 12-week online public consultation conducted between November 2024 and February 2025 (which received 115 responses) there was strong support for many of the provisions in the Bill. However, concerns were raised about the potential 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 the Bill Sponsor is alive to, but notes that the legislation is seeking to drive greater regional balance and lift opportunity and standards of living overall, giving the Executive appropriate discretion to make policy choices on that and justify them accordingly. It is the Bill Sponsor's firm belief that regional balance will result in an improved settlement for left-behind areas, whether within the capital city which contains an extensive share of more deprived wards, especially in North and West Belfast, or more peripheral areas such as the North-West.

	It was highlighted 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. The Bill Sponsor considers that these are important contributions which should be addressed by the Department through more effective data collation and improved monitoring. In fulfilling their responsibilities under the Bill, Departments can set out their operating assumptions and approach to any targets they have been assigned.
3.4	The proposed response (attached at Appendix 1) supports the principle of addressing regional disparities but raises concerns that the Regional Balance Bill, as currently framed, could unintentionally negatively impact Belfast's role as Northern Ireland's primary economic driver as set out in the Regional Development Strategy. We set out five key points for the Committee's consideration: 1. The Belfast economy has performed well over recent years; 2. The city's strong economic performance drives growth across the whole region; 3. The city's economic performance does not automatically translate into improved living standards or economic benefit for all its residents; 4. Research consistently shows that cities drive productivity; and 5. Belfast has spent years playing catch-up – we must maintain that focus rather than take our eye off the ball. The Council argues that Belfast's economic competitors are comparable UK, Irish and European cities rather than other parts of Northern Ireland and warns that diverting policy attention or investment away from the city could weaken overall regional prosperity. It highlights Belfast's significant contribution to the economy, accounting for around one-third of Northern Ireland's GVA, 30% of all jobs and more than a quarter of net job growth since 2013, while also serving as the region's main hub for inward investment, innovation and high-value sectors. The draft response emphasises that strong economic performance does not automatically translate into improved outcomes for all residents. Despite economic growth, Belfast contains some of Northern Ireland's most deprived communities, with six of the ten most deprived wards located in the city, significant skills deficits, high levels of economic inactivity and marked inequalities in employment, educational attainment and life expectancy. It therefore contends that any regional balance framework should consider both intra-city deprivation and objective need, alongside disparities between geographic regions. Drawing on national and international evidence, the Council argues that cities are key drivers of productivity, investment and economic growth, and that policies should focus on enabling places to realise their own economic potential as well as redistributing growth. The Council advocates an inclusive approach that strengthens Belfast's competitiveness while ensuring that economic benefits are more widely shared. The draft responses recommends that the Bill recognises Belfast's strategic economic role, avoid creating barriers to investment and infrastructure delivery, and ensure that efforts to reduce regional disparities are balanced with measures to raise overall economic performance and living standards across Northern Ireland.

3.5	<u>Financial and Resource Implications</u> There are no direct financial implications as a result of this report.
3.6	<u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u> The Bill's Explanatory and Financial Memorandum states: "An Equality Impact Assessment has not been undertaken. Engagement between the Bill Sponsor and the Equality Commission on the outline proposal did not raise any potential adverse effects on initial reading and the Bill Sponsor is happy to engage on this further. Indeed, if the Bill contributes to achieving its policy objectives it may positively affect some groups subject to disadvantage. By promoting action to reduce geographic disparities, the Bill is expected to have positive equality impacts. Transparent reporting and a duty to pay due regard to the Framework support compliance with existing equality obligations. The Bill Sponsor is therefore satisfied that the Bill will not have an adverse effect on any of the groups identified in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The duties imposed by the Bill will be subject to obligations under Section 75."
4.0	Appendices - Documents Attached
	Appendix 1 – Belfast City Council's draft response to the Economy Committee's Call for Evidence in relation to the Regional Balance Bill.