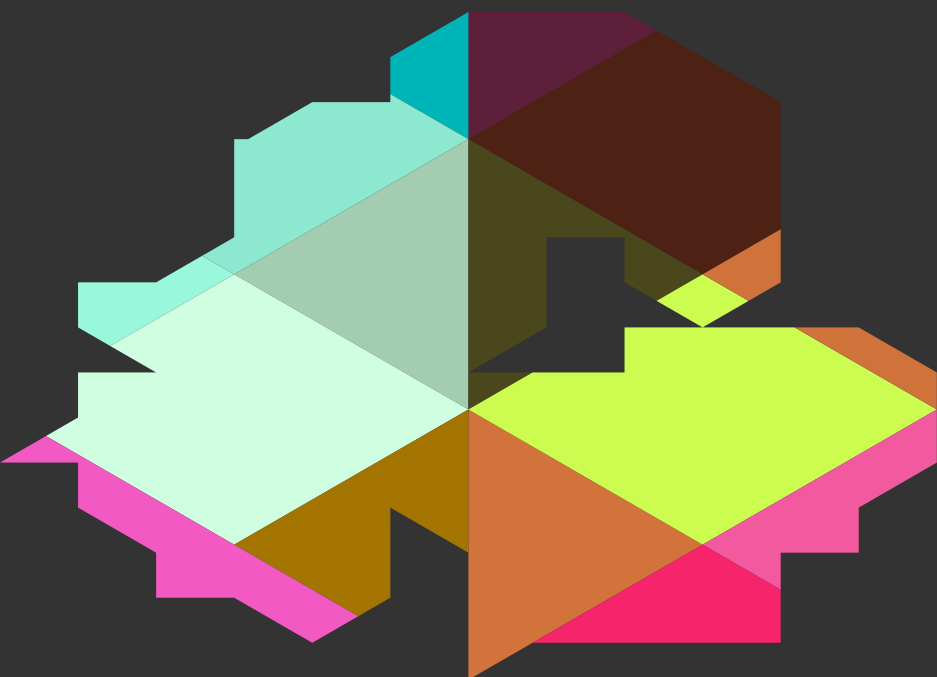


The Chamber of
Commerce Network in
Northern Ireland

*“Let’s do
business”*



Joint Policy Statement

JUNE 2015

Introduction

A chamber of commerce is a form of business network whose goal is to further the interests of business. With chambers in virtually every major town and city in Northern Ireland, we are uniquely positioned to understand the needs of the business community.

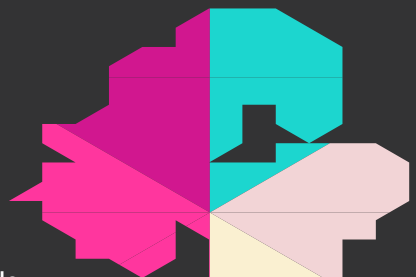
Chambers of commerce are recognised for helping businesses grow by providing networking opportunities; access to key government officials and key decision makers; a range of support initiatives and contributing to local economic and community development.

For the first time, chambers of commerce from across Northern Ireland have joined together to urge local councils to commit to backing policies that support business growth. In this way they will be supporting local communities, local people and local employers.

Chambers of commerce have always recognised the importance of Local Government and valued the work of Councillors throughout the region. We call on all councils to support the priorities put forward by the local chamber in their area. Building upon the excellent relationships between local chambers and Local Government, we believe the suggestions put forward in this document can support business and facilitate job creation. In turn, councils should promote these priorities to the Northern Ireland Executive. This will make every part of Northern Ireland a better place to live and work.

The following chambers have contributed to the development of this document:

Armagh Chamber of Commerce
Ballycastle Chamber of Commerce
Ballymena Chamber of Commerce
Ballymoney Chamber of Commerce
Bangor Chamber of Commerce
Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce
Causeway Chamber of Commerce
Holywood Chamber of Commerce
Lisburn Chamber of Commerce
Londonderry Chamber of Commerce
Magherafelt Chamber of Commerce
Newtownards Chamber of Commerce & Trade
Newry Chamber of Commerce and Trade
Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry
Omagh Chamber of Commerce and Industry
Portadown Chamber of Commerce
Roe Valley Chamber of Trade & Commerce
Strabane Chamber of Commerce



* This document represents common issues across the chamber of commerce network in Northern Ireland and may also be supplemented by an area specific manifesto from individual chambers.

Background

There are clear signs of recovery in the local economy, albeit uneven, with growth of over two percent expected in 2015. Invest NI has delivered a record year of job promotions; expenditure on Research and Development is up, the improving economy in Ireland is having a positive impact on Northern Ireland, and the number of people in employment is growing at close to the record levels experienced in the decade to 2008. And whilst that employment growth has not yet been accompanied by parallel improvements in productivity, wages and living standards, we do have recovery. This is the first crucial step on a much more positive road.

However, there is more to do to ensure that we have a Northern Ireland built for growth where business policies are fit for the long term and local business communities are empowered. The chamber of commerce network in Northern Ireland actively supported Local Government reform, having called for a rationalised and streamlined system to achieve a more effective and efficient model. We welcome the new powers and responsibilities given to Local Government and Councillors and see these new structures and powers as an opportunity to ensure Local Government works with and works for the local business community to create employment and benefit all citizens.

As business, through commercial rates, provide the single greatest source of funding to Local Government, the business community must be a key contributor to policy. This will ensure that every area can contribute to and benefit from Northern Ireland's economic recovery.

Chambers of commerce throughout Northern Ireland are committed to protecting the vitality and viability of their towns and city centres through sustainable development and effective regeneration. Chambers of commerce have been, and continue to be at the forefront of protecting, supporting, promoting the development of town and city centres as commercial hubs; this of course is entirely consistent with the prevailing draft PPS5 and adopted regional retail planning policies as well as retail policies set out in the Local Area Plans.

Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry, with its focus on trade and export development, supports businesses across the region to increase their capacity to sell into new markets. Growing exports is a key Programme for Government target.

All of the recommendations in this joint policy statement are designed to support business growth by:

- 1. Reducing the cost of doing business**
- 2. Creating new jobs**

The swift and full implementation of the measures contained in this manifesto could lead to the creation of thousands of Northern Ireland wide jobs in the construction, retail, tourism, manufacturing and service sectors.

Recommendations

Town centre vacancy rates in Northern Ireland are significantly higher than the UK average. The chambers of commerce network in Northern Ireland seeks a firm commitment to a Town Centre First planning policy being replicated in the opening statements of the Local Development Plans to be produced for each of the new district council areas. We believe that it is the chamber of commerce network that is best placed to work with Local Government on community plans.

The chamber of commerce network in Northern Ireland therefore calls on Local Government to:

1. Support Local Economies

Town centres

- Work with chambers of commerce and businesses to develop plans that make local towns attractive places in which to live, work and socialise.
- Support retailers and other businesses in town centres, giving them the opportunity to remain competitive with companies located 'out of town'.
- Ensure that a local car parking strategy is implemented, and that it does not act as a disincentive for people to shop and socialise in town centres.
- Commit to the implementation of an effective marketing strategy for each region, marketing towns/cities as places to live and work.

Rates

- In areas with higher rates, the impact could be the difference between businesses in these areas remaining viable and having to close. If an increase in rates is unavoidable, Councillors must chose the maximum period of adjustment allowed to ensure the viability of those businesses and protect local jobs.
- Target and encourage new businesses with rates incentives and an imaginative rates strategy that learns from best practise from other countries.
- Expand the Small Business Rates Relief Scheme from its current £15kNAV within the next two years.

Tourism

- Work with Chambers to deliver and support initiatives that attract tourists and tourism spend to their local areas.
- Work to enhance amenities that will attract tourists and improve the quality of life in their respective areas.

2. Make Infrastructure & Planning Contribute to Growth

- Ensure that there is a high quality road and rail infrastructure that connects key towns and cities.
- Cost effectively deliver the infrastructure that business needs to support jobs. Planning decisions must support business development and remove barriers.
- Ensure that delays in planning applications can no longer hamper Northern Ireland's competitiveness.
- Support further roll out broadband connectivity across Northern Ireland to increase e-business activity and improve access to high-speed broadband in rural areas.
- Explore actions which reduce electricity prices for large users and to target alignment with the EU average.

3. Support Indigenous Business Growth

- Ensure that investment in skills is prioritised and that there is sufficient budget allocated to support the development of narrow STEM programmes, international business expertise and the expansion of the Assured Skills programme. There are job vacancies across our towns and cities, but employers cannot fill these because of the shortage of the appropriate skills in the local economy. Such skill shortages will significantly hamper NI's tax and talent strategy should corporation tax be lowered.
- Work with businesses to ensure that the Northern Ireland Apprenticeship Strategy is implemented - designed to remove barriers to businesses, particularly SMEs, taking on apprentices and ensure seamless progress for apprentices.
- Promote enterprise modules for schools and colleges so that they have the opportunity to build up their knowledge of business, better preparing them for work or to set up their own firms.
- Provide additional financial incentives, such as tax credits for small and medium-sized businesses that make a significant investment in training. In turn this will contribute to business growth and exporting.

4. Support Business Growth

- Ensure a positive business environment that will attract FDI, promoting Northern Ireland as a stable and secure environment to locate.
- Ensure that a high quality start up programme is available across Northern Ireland that is consistent in delivery across all of Northern Ireland.
- Provide an easy to navigate and highly visible continuum of support for the business start, growth and export life cycle, particularly for potential/new exporters to include export finance.
- Increase SME participation in procurement, making it easier for consortia to compete for large public sector contracts by removing the substantial hurdles small businesses face when coming together to compete with larger providers.
- Consider the implementation of further enterprise zones across the region that comprise a fast track planning process and 100% relief on regional and domestic rates for the first five years of any new-start-up business, and for a three-year period for companies with expansion plans.
- Work with business in order to ensure a 'date and a rate' for the reduction of corporation tax is set as soon as possible.

*We look forward to working with
Local Government along the way*

Contact

chambersnetworkni.com