



RetailNI

Standing up for
Independent Retailers

NEW AMBITION

Retail NI Policy Priorities for the
NI Assembly 2022-2027



 @retail_ni

 @RetailNI

 @RetailNI

 @RetailNI

NEW AMBITION

Retail Policy Priorities for the NI Assembly 2022-2027

There is no doubt that Northern Ireland is not short of strategy and policy when it comes to the future of our high streets. The Executive's Investment Strategy (Infrastructure 2050), UK Government's Levelling Up White Paper and the Northern Ireland High Street Taskforce report all set out ambitious plans for our town centres.

Retail NI played a key role in establishing the Northern Ireland High Street Taskforce and the drafting of its final report. Full implementation of the 14 recommendations must be a top priority for the Executive.

The question that Retail NI members ask is how we can get local, regional and national governments all pushing in the one direction and, more importantly, how all these policy priorities can be delivered so we can create 21st century high streets. Alongside a dynamic retail and hospitality offering we also need to ensure they become multi-functional hubs with libraries, community services, police stations, healthcare, leisure, education, open spaces, housing and sports facilities.

We now have an opportunity for a co-designed solution-based approach to the challenges facing our local high streets. Retail NI wants to see the implementation of a five-year High-Street Reconstruction plan (as outlined in the High Street Taskforce) so that the Executive and Assembly can deliver real change. This would include significant changes on planning, business rates, regeneration and infrastructure investment. Clean, green, fun family-friendly destinations which are eco-systems for lots of different types of business is the promised land for our high streets and it is the job of us all to define, in policy terms, how we get there.

The Infrastructure 2050 report sums up what needs to be done to create 'opportunities to focus on the reuse, repurposing and refurbishment of existing urban buildings instead of new developments'. It also cites the importance of a strong town centre first approach which places 'town centre health at the heart of decision-making processes, driving public sector investment decisions, aligning policies and targeting resources to prioritise the regeneration of town centre sites.'

However, in the short term, our members are facing a perfect storm of challenges from energy hikes, labour shortages, National Insurance increases and Covid-19 recovery. We are not just dealing with a cost-of-living crisis, we are also facing a cost of business crisis too.

We look forward to your feedback on our proposals.

Glyn Roberts

Retail NI Chief Executive
glyn@retailni.com



IMPROVING GOVERNMENT IN NORTHERN IRELAND



We believe the needs of micro-and-small businesses should be at the forefront of government policy.

Retail NI will support:

- The creation of a new Small Business Champion based within the Department for the Economy.
- A new government agency, wholly focused on micro and small business development and promotion.
- A new independent advisory board, chaired by the Small Business Champion, with a membership of micro-and-small business owners.
- A dedicated Retail Champion appointed within each Council area, reporting directly to the Chief Executive and Director of Economic Development.
- Devolution of regeneration powers, local roads responsibility and on-street car parking to local government.
- The creation of a Minister for Wellbeing in the Executive Office. Given that Wellbeing is a cross-departmental responsibility, a co-ordinated plan must be delivered as part of the 2022 Programme for Government.

TACKLING THE COST OF BUSINESS CRISIS AND GROWING NORTHERN IRELAND PLC.

Independent retailers are facing a cost of doing business crisis, with sky high business rates, energy costs and other general taxation which is restricting growth and post-pandemic recovery.



Retail NI will support:

- The current business rates holiday extended until January 2023.
- A fundamental redesign of the business rates system, based on fairness and affordability.
- A reformed Small Business Rate Relief Scheme which would directly provide independent retailers and hospitality with further discounts on their bill.
- Reform of the Rates Hardship Fund. This is decades out of date and needs urgent reform. It should include a much more flexible approach and include businesses that can demonstrate serious loss of revenue due to public realm, utility upgrades or other major disruption.
- The Department of Finance examining ways to introduce an additional rate levy for large out-of-town retail premises. The proceeds would be ring-fenced to support ratepayers in town centres (streetscape improvements, promotions, additional security measures etc.).
- The Northern Ireland Executive establishing a Rural Town and Village Infrastructure Investment Fund to ensure our small and mid-sized towns and villages are not left behind.
- The establishment of a Cost of Doing Business Taskforce to ensure a comprehensive package of measures is produced to support business. The Economy Minister should take responsibility for and chair the group.
- The introduction of energy costs assistance for small businesses by the UK Government. It should be part-funded by a windfall tax on large energy companies.
- The cancellation of plans to remove the 'Red Diesel' exemption.
- The serious consideration of the current economic difficulties facing the High Street. The Executive should consider rerunning the Spend Local scheme on a much more targeted basis in 2023 or 2024 to provide a further fiscal stimulus to the economy.

A MODERN INFRASTRUCTURE AND BETTER PLANNING



Good infrastructure will be the key to giving our town and city centres a viable future. This is underpinned by a focus on sustainability and strong environmental policies.

Retail NI will support:

- Significant investment in our public transport network, making it more accessible and cost-effective for users, particularly in rural areas.
- A review of the proposed Glider Route Extension. Retail NI has produced a report highlighting concerns of traders regarding deliveries, potential loss of trade and car parking with the extension of the Glider routes in North and South Belfast. These issues must be addressed immediately, and Retail NI is very clear that no small business should in any way be disadvantaged by the proposed Glider routes.
- The extension of the Belfast Bikes model across Northern Ireland.
- The installation of ultra-fast Wi-Fi in every village, town and city.
- A strengthening of the 'Town Centre 1st' principle, underpinned by an immediate five-year moratorium on major out-of-town retail and mixed-use development.
- Government at all levels across Northern Ireland to accelerate the relocating of their administrative office space to town and city centres.
- The prioritising of social purpose in our high streets and the development of the 'kindness economy'. The Executive and Local Councils need to support the next generation of passionate independent retailers who will prioritise people and planet and breathe new life into our empty spaces and derelict buildings.
- The fast-tracking and provision of rates exemptions for more town and city centre based residential schemes, to breathe new life into our high streets.

ADDRESSING THE CLIMATE CRISIS

The environment is a critical and we all have a part to play, and independent retailers have been to the forefront of the sustainability agenda.



Retail NI will support:

- Local consultation on the Carrier Bag Levy Scheme. Retail NI members have administered the Carrier Bag levy since its inception in Northern Ireland and have played a central role in its success. As is the case in Wales, we would now like to see our members decide on what local environmental projects the proceeds of the levy that they administer, is spent on.
- A Green Rates Rebate Scheme to incentivise retailers who invest in energy efficiency and carbon neutral technology.
- A new enterprise strategy focused on transport and business opportunities along our waterways in our towns and cities
- Connecting our neighbourhoods, towns and cities with dedicated active travel routes.
- Development of "Green Quarters" in Belfast and in our major cities and towns. Athens and Seattle are good examples of successful projects of 'greening' high streets. The Executive and Councils need a "Green High Street" strategy which will include providing more tree-lined streets, living walls, urban gardens, walking and cycling options.