

# THE BUSINESS OF GOVERNMENT

INSIGHTS FROM LOCAL BUSINESS LEADERS ON  
NORTHERN IRELAND'S ECONOMIC AND POLICY LANDSCAPE

CONFLUENCE  
CONSULTING



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# FOREWORD

FROM  
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At Confluence, we have always believed that because business operates in a system shaped by policy and politics, understanding how government decisions are made, how they are experienced and how they translate into real-world outcomes is critical for any business seeking to operate, invest and grow in Northern Ireland.

This report – **The Business of Government** – is our contribution to that understanding.

It is grounded not in theory, but in the lived experience of industry. It captures how more than 100 business leaders are navigating a system shaped by political complexity, structural constraints and increasing global uncertainty. What emerges is not a single issue, but a pattern. A set of consistent signals that, taken together, tell a clear and challenging story about the relationship between government and growth.

Investment is being delayed. Confidence in delivery is low. Stability is valued above ambition. And, perhaps most tellingly, there is a widening gap between how policy is designed and how it is experienced by those it is intended to support. Yet they also

point to a business community that remains resilient, engaged and ready to grow under the right conditions.

This survey is not simply a critique. It is a diagnosis intended to inform better decisions. It reflects a belief at the core of Confluence that better outcomes come not from standing outside the system, but from understanding it, engaging with it early and shaping it constructively.

For policymakers and political leaders, this report offers something both simple and challenging. It is a direct line of sight into how decisions taken at Stormont, and beyond, are shaping behaviour in boardrooms across Northern Ireland. It highlights where alignment is lacking, where systems are constraining rather than enabling and where there is a clear opportunity to rebuild confidence between government and industry.

For industry, it provides validation and clarity. It demonstrates that the challenges many firms face are not isolated but systemic. It also reinforces a growing reality that political and policy risk is no longer a peripheral concern but a core strategic consideration.

Above all, this report underscores a central truth that the economic opportunity is there but the conditions to unlock it are not consistently in place.

Unlocking it will not require grand strategies or catchy slogans. The message from business is more pragmatic. It calls for stability over volatility, delivery over bold declarations and a deeper, more authentic understanding of how the economy actually works.

At Confluence, we see our role as helping bridge that gap, bringing business and government into closer alignment through better insight, earlier engagement and more effective decision-making.

This report is intended as a starting point for that conversation and for more informed, more effective decision-making across both government and industry.



# CONFLUENCE

C O N S U L T I N G

## Navigating Complexity, Steering Success.

**Business is an activity conducted on a playing field where the rules are set by government.**

Regulation, planning, taxation, trade, funding and policy decisions are not background noise. They shape markets, define risk and determine what is possible. In a world of constant change, that system is becoming more complex, less predictable and harder to read. By the time many organisations react, the opportunity to influence has already narrowed.

Advantage belongs to those who understand the system early. To those who can see what's coming, engage at the right moment and shape outcomes rather than respond to them.

That's where Confluence excels.

We work at the point where business and government meet, helping organisations navigate complexity, anticipate change and engage with clarity and purpose. We bring together deep political insight, real-world experience and a disciplined, outcome-focused approach to ensure our clients are not just present in the system, but effective within it.

What sets us apart is simple – we understand how decisions are actually made. Our experience at the centre of government and at the highest levels of business means we know when to engage, who matters and what moves the dial.

Where business ambition meets political reality, Confluence turns complexity into creative advantage.



# 6 KEY SIGNALS FROM INDUSTRY

## 01 INVESTMENT ON HOLD

58% of NI firms have actively delayed investment in the last year due to policy uncertainty. Political volatility and decision deadlock is no longer just a headline. It is a direct drain on investment in the economy.

## 02 THE DELIVERY DEFICIT

Only 1% of business leaders rate the follow-up from policy announcements to real-world delivery as "strong", highlighting a significant "Implementation Gap" where announcements are not seen to be translating into action.

## 03 STABILITY OVER AMBITION

Business is asking government to be "boring but predictable." 77% of leaders cite stability as a critical or very important requirement for their future plans, ranking it far above "ambition" or "speed."

## 04 A COMMERCIAL LITERACY CRISIS

9 in 10 business leaders rate the public sector's understanding of business realities as "weak." This suggests a fundamental disconnect in how policies are designed versus how they actually work.

## 05 GROWTH IS A SECOND-TIER PRIORITY

74% of leaders believe the NI Executive routinely deprioritises economic growth in favour of other policy concerns.

## 06 THE INFRASTRUCTURE CEILING

Beyond politics, physical limits are stalling the economy. Wastewater and Planning are now cited as top-tier economic risks, comparable in impact to global geopolitical instability.



# 12 IN-DEPTH INSIGHTS INTO THE BUSINESS OF GOVERNMENT



# 01 EXECUTIVE'S ECONOMIC POLICY ALIGNMENT IS A MAJOR CONCERN

**Political fragmentation is perceived as a primary barrier to consistent economic policy.**

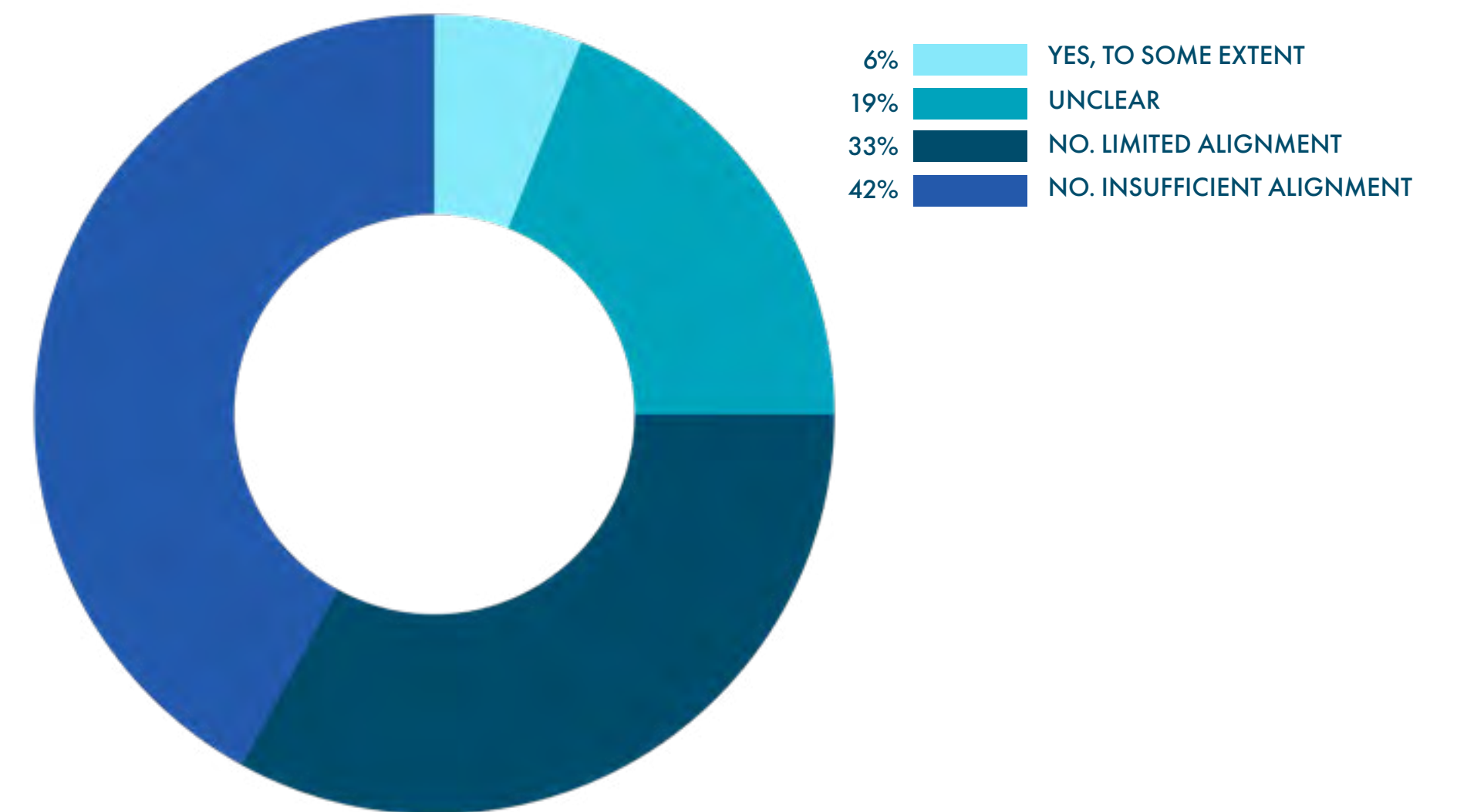
The survey data reveals a stark consensus on political cohesiveness at Stormont.

- 3 in 4 business leaders believe there is either "insufficient" or "limited" alignment within the Executive to provide a consistent long-term economic path.
- Only 6% of respondents feel there is sufficient alignment to some extent. No one surveyed thinks there is strong alignment.

It is striking that such a sizeable majority sees political division as a barrier to a consistent economic plan. This lack of a "single voice" from Stormont is viewed as a primary reason for low confidence.

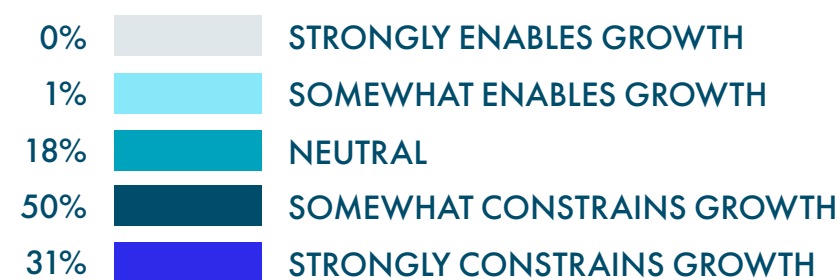
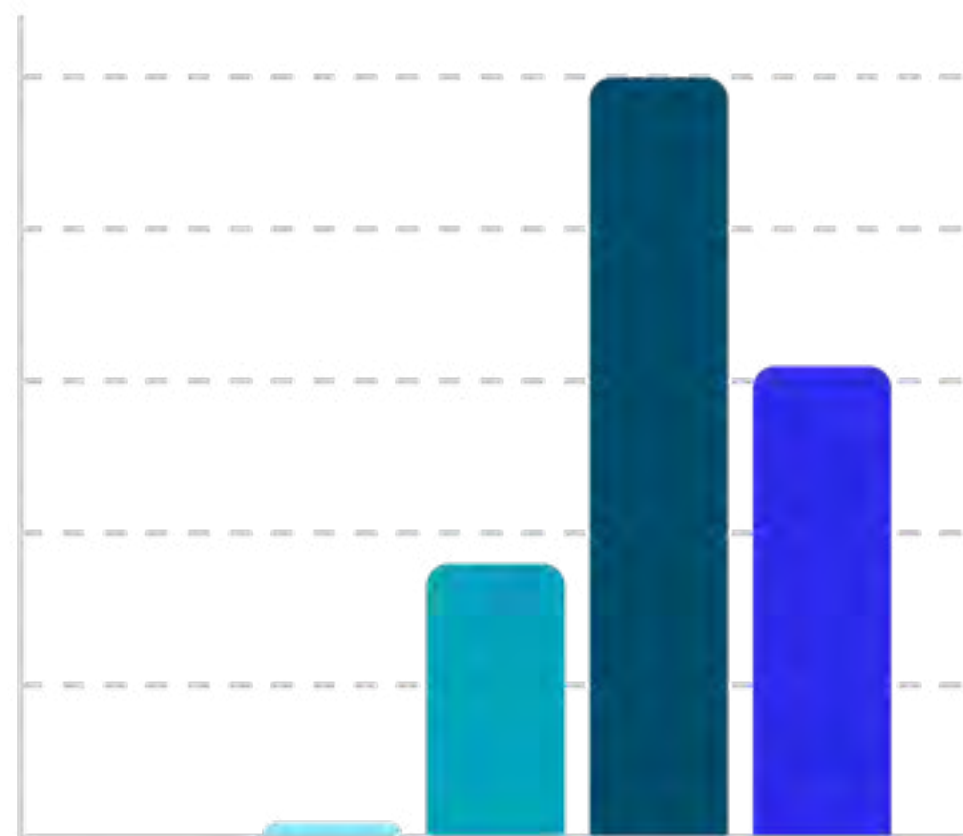
The strong lesson for the NI Executive is that it must demonstrate a genuine shared endeavour when it comes to supporting economic development with a joint commitment to growth, not a collection of separate Departmental silos.

Do you believe there is sufficient political alignment *within* the Executive to provide consistent long-term economic policy?

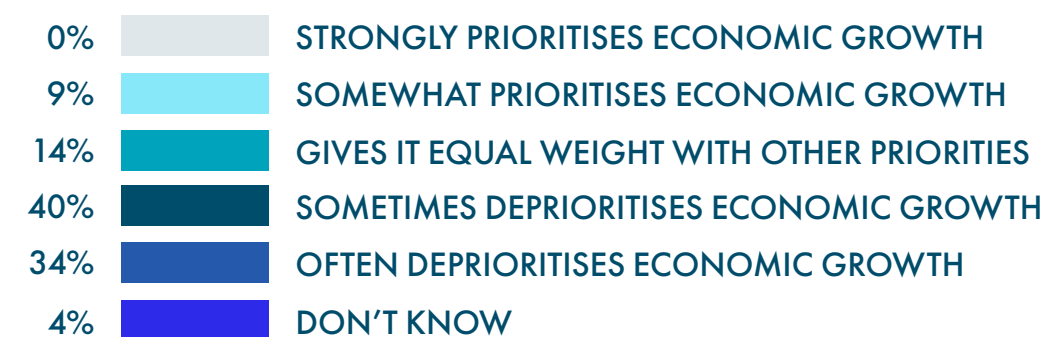
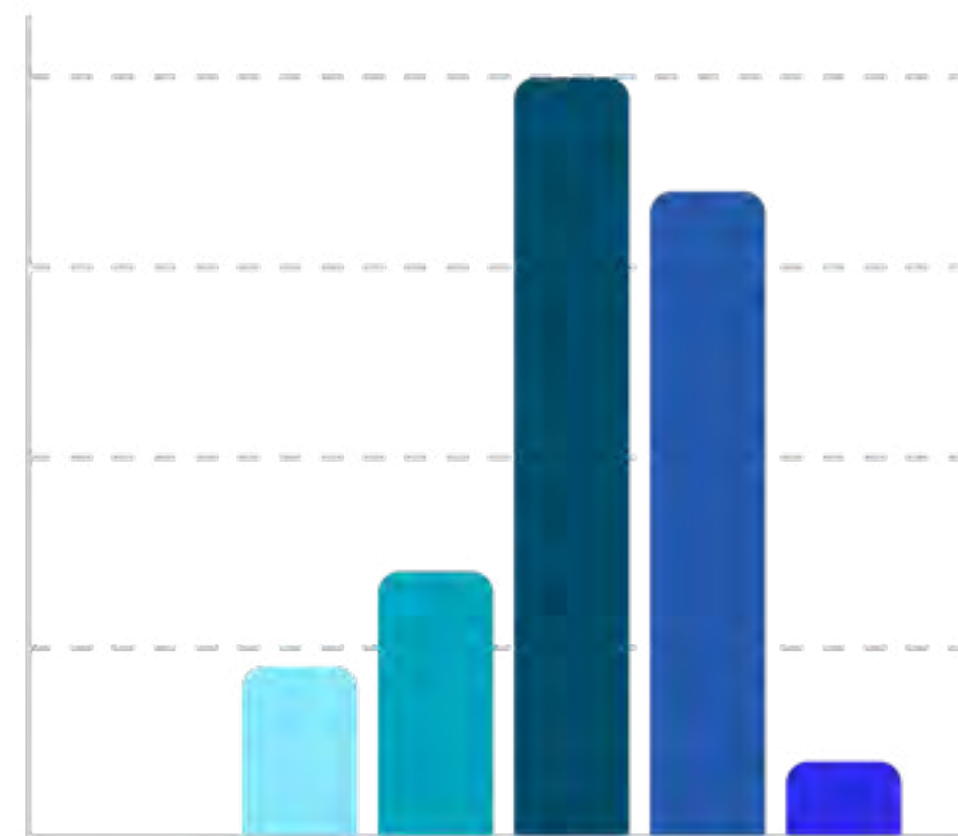


# 02 A SYSTEM THAT CONSTRAINS GROWTH AND A PERCEPTION THAT THE ECONOMY IS NOT THE PRIMARY PRIORITY

To what extent does the current policy and decision-making environment in Northern Ireland enable or constrain business growth?



To what extent do you believe the Northern Ireland Executive prioritises economic growth in its decision-making?



**Economic growth is viewed as being of secondary importance at Stormont.**

- 74% of business leaders believe the Executive either “sometimes” or “often” deprioritises economic growth in its decision-making.
- Only 13% feel that growth is given equal weight with other political priorities.



“The Executive needs to truly prioritise the betterment of society and the economy over point-scoring for the next election.”

Furthermore, the survey reveals a significant consensus that the current system of government actively hinders economic progress.

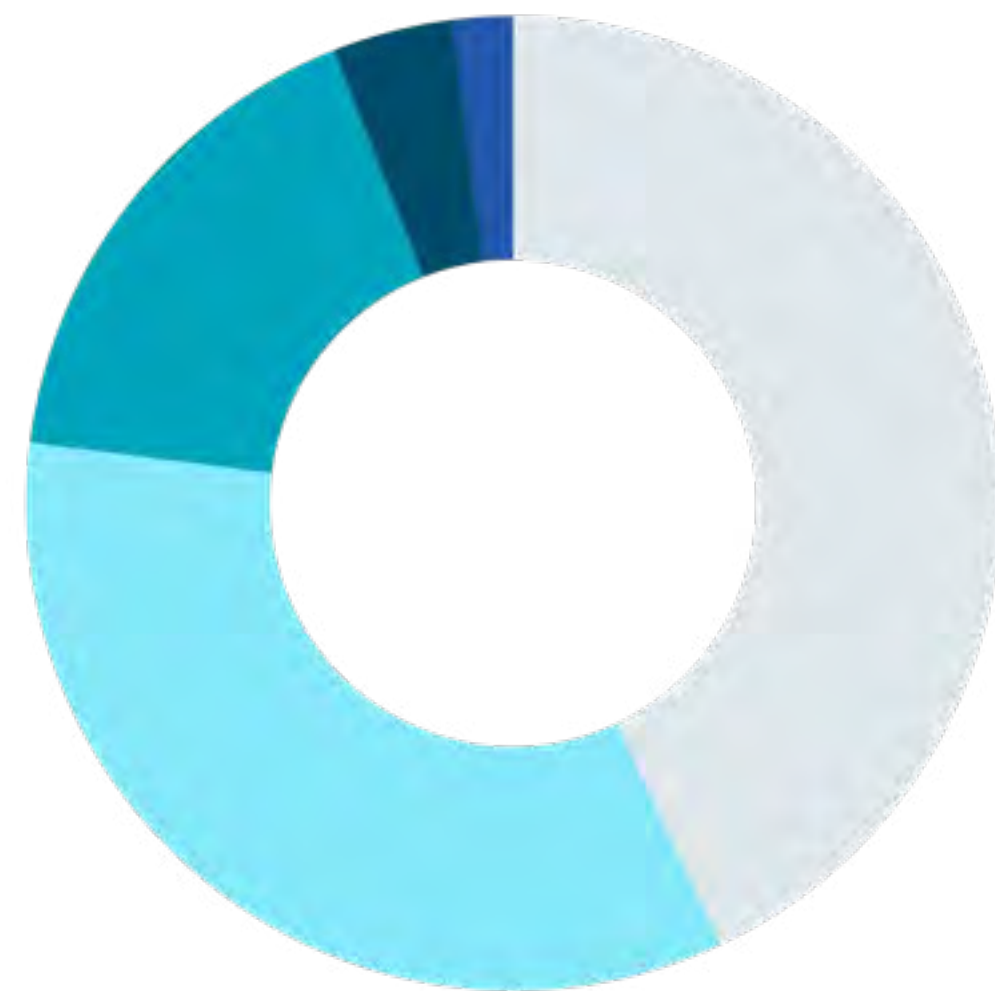
- More than 4 in 5 businesses (82%) say the current policy and decision-making environment at Stormont “constrains growth”.
- Only 1% believe it “somewhat enables” it.

With the data showing that so many business leaders feel that the Stormont system is a constraint on their business, the prevailing industry view is that Northern Ireland’s policy environment is currently geared away from, rather than toward, fostering economic expansion.



# 03 WHAT BUSINESS MOST WANTS IS STABILITY

Looking ahead, how important is greater policy stability to your future plans in Northern Ireland?



43% CRITICAL  
 34% VERY IMPORTANT  
 17% IMPORTANT  
 4% NICE TO HAVE  
 2% NOT IMPORTANT

## Stability and Delivery are the two most valued qualities in government.

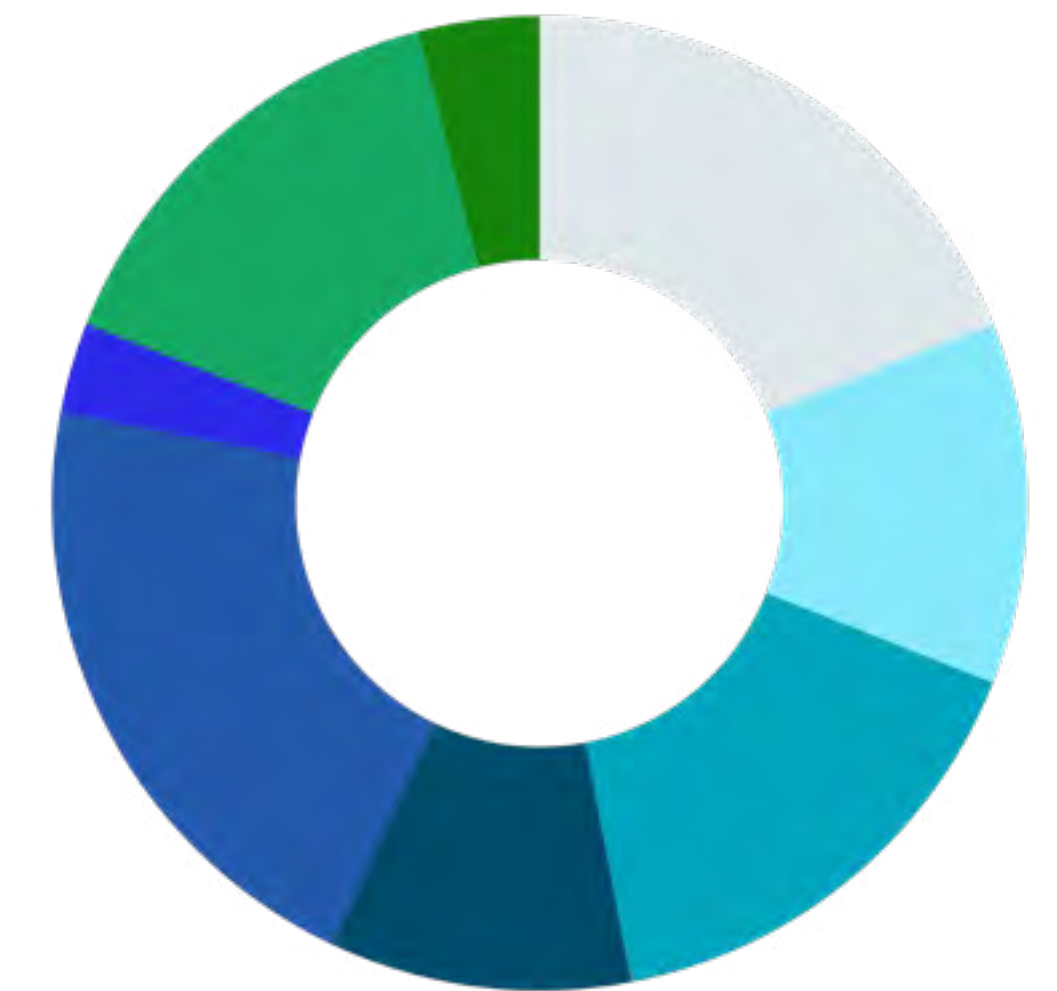
The survey results highlight a business community that prioritises a predictable foundation over aspirational goals. Over three-quarters of respondents (77%) describe greater policy stability as being either “critical” or “very important” to their future plans in Northern Ireland. When the “important” category is included, this figure rises to over 94%, indicating that stability is a near-universal requirement for the local economy.

When asked to identify the qualities in government that matter most for supporting business, a clear hierarchy emerges focused on reliability rather than “grand gestures.”

- Delivery (61%) and Stability (56%) were the top two priorities selected by leaders.
- These were followed by Speed (48%) and Ambition (43%).
- Clarity was also a significant factor, cited by over 1 in 3 leaders as a top-tier requirement.

With more than ¾ of leaders viewing stability as a vital requirement, the data shows that the business community values a predictable operating environment above all else. The findings suggest that government performance is judged primarily on its ability to provide a stable policy landscape and to follow through on its commitments.

Which three qualities matter most for government in supporting business?



19% STABILITY  
 12% CLARITY  
 16% SPEED  
 10% ENGAGEMENT  
 21% DELIVERY  
 3% PREDICTABILITY  
 15% AMBITION  
 4% FAIRNESS



# 04 AN IMPLEMENTATION AND DELIVERY GAP

**A significant majority of business leaders point to a failure in both long-term planning and real-world delivery.**

Business leaders believe that there is “no clear long-term direction” for policymaking at Stormont, and that this lack of strategic clarity is compounded by a perceived inability to follow through on commitments and announcements.

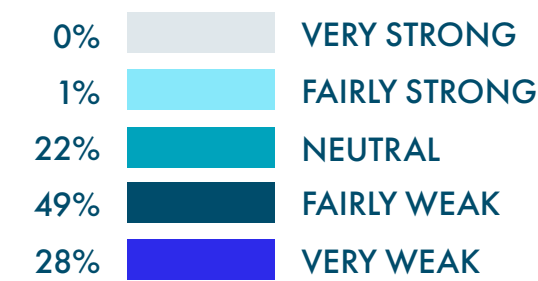
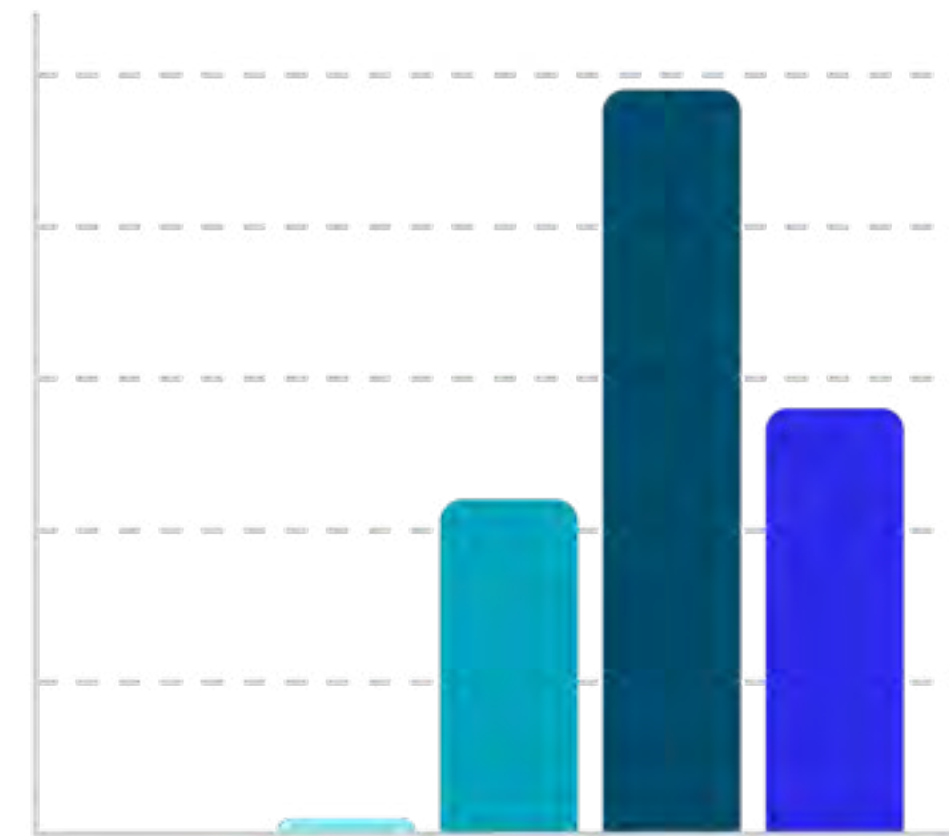
The data highlights a profound gap:

- 70% see no clear long-term policy direction.
- Over 3 in 4 leaders (77%) criticise the follow-up and delivery process.

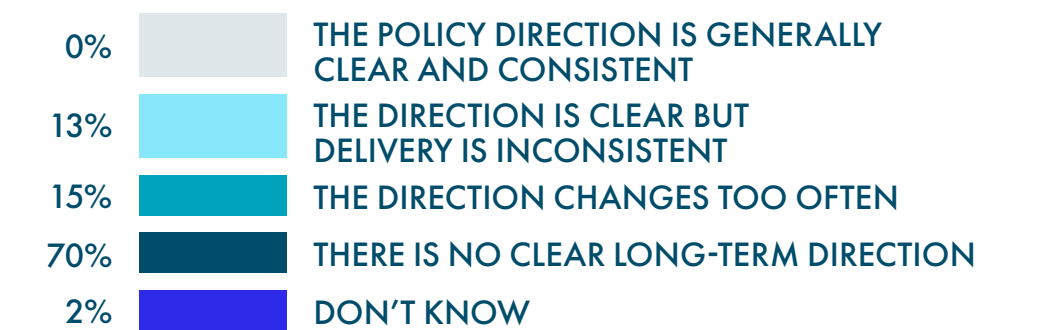
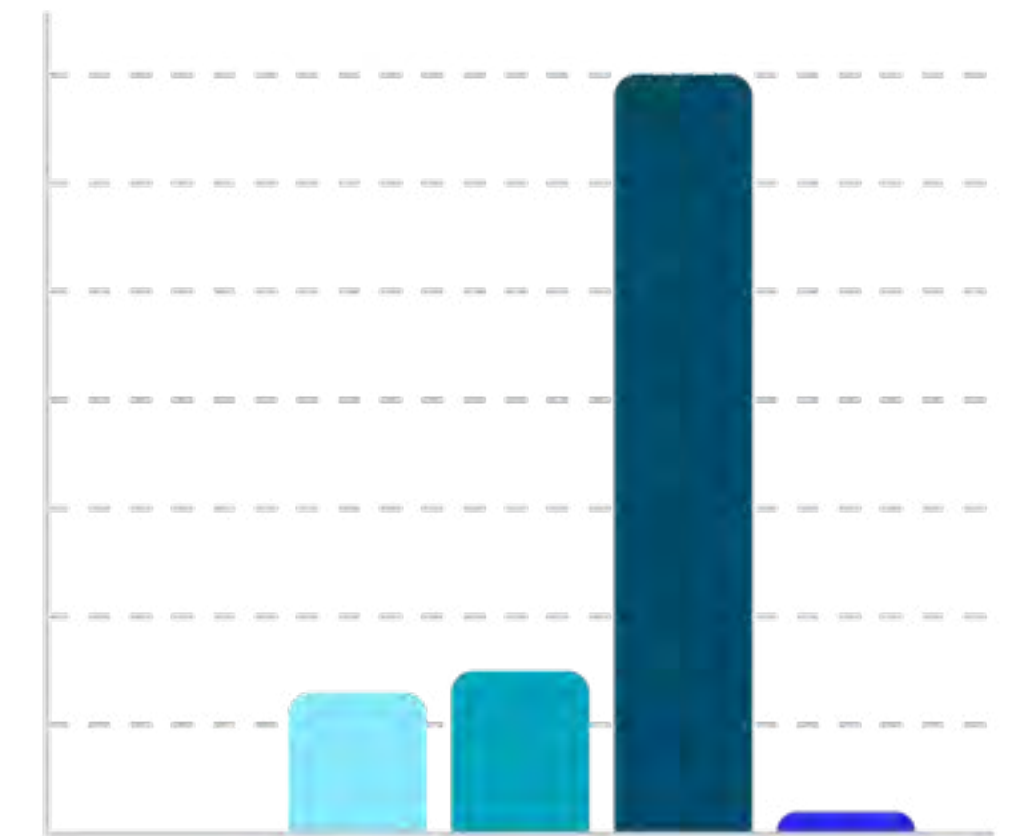
- Only 1% of respondents – just one individual in the entire survey – rated the delivery of policy as “fairly strong.”

With so many businesses seeing no clear direction and also identifying a failure in delivery, the findings show a double-sided challenge for government. It is not just that they see the long-term roadmap as being missing, but that even when specific policies are announced, they are rarely seen as being fully implemented.

How would you rate the follow-up from policy announcements to real-world delivery?



Thinking about policymaking at Stormont in general, which comes closest to your view?



# 05 POOR PUBLIC SECTOR UNDERSTANDING OF BUSINESS

**Business leaders believe that the public sector possesses a “weak” understanding of business operations.**

One of the starkest findings in the survey is the public sector’s perceived gap in commercial understanding. 9 in 10 respondents believe the public sector has a very or fairly weak grasp of business realities.

- 50% described it as “fairly weak,” while 40% called it “very weak.”
- Not a single respondent rated it as “very or fairly strong.”

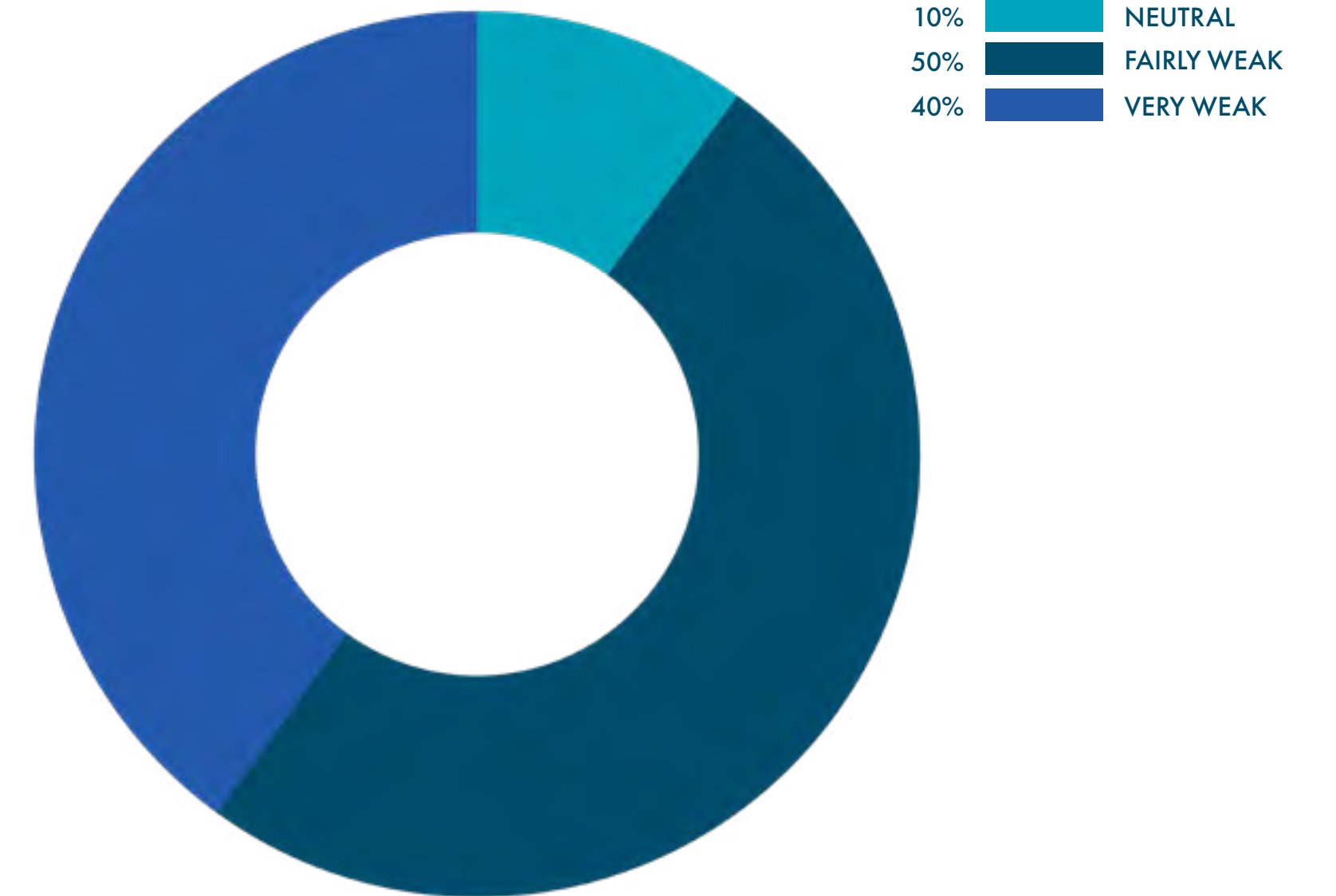
This is not simply a criticism of policy outcomes. It reflects a deeper concern about how well decision-makers understand cost,

risk and operational pressures faced by businesses. Respondents consistently point to the need for greater commercial awareness, more informed and realistic decision-making and stronger day-to-day engagement with industry.

The near-total consensus that the public sector lacks commercial literacy indicates that business leaders feel the people making the rules don’t understand how those rules affect industry.

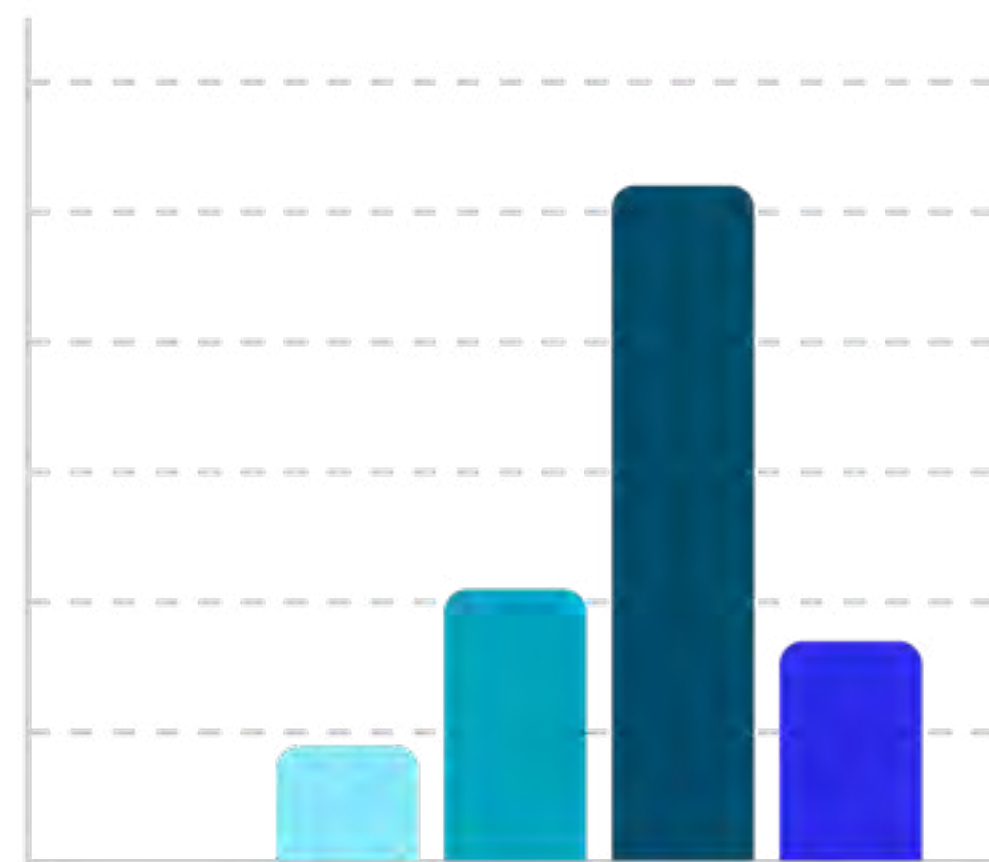
“There is a fundamental disconnect between the political system and the reality of industry. We need a public sector that actually understands a Profit and Loss account.”

How would you rate the public sector’s understanding of commercial realities?



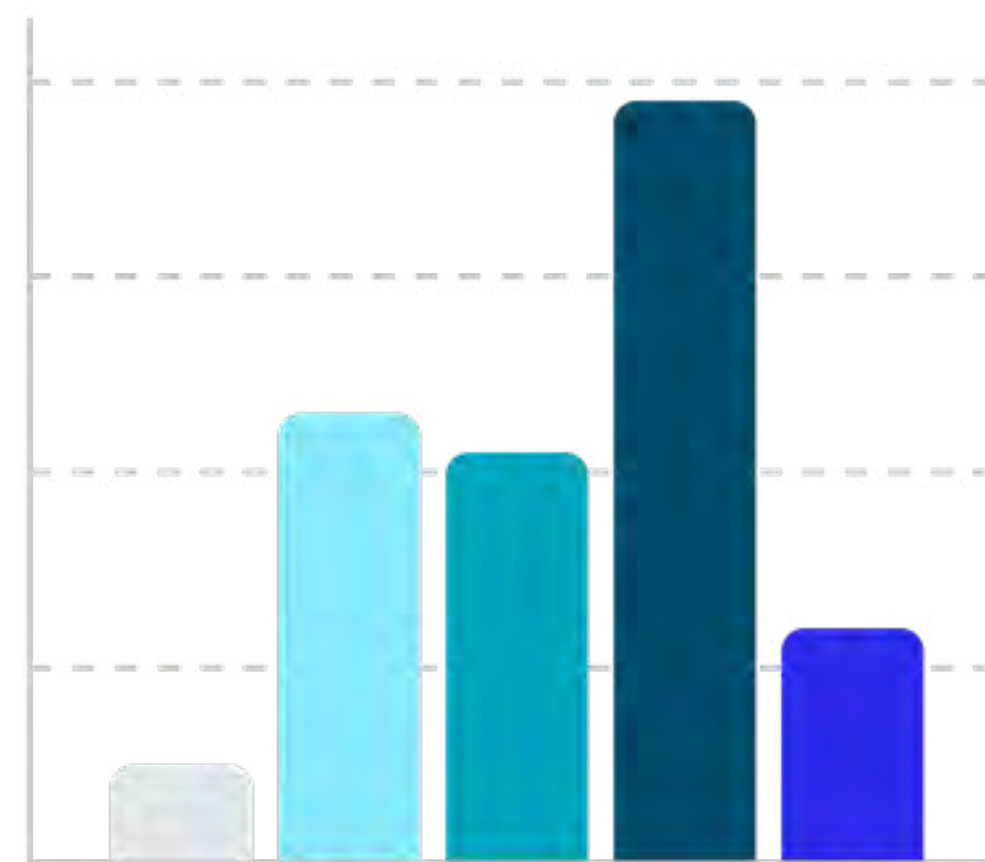
# 06 A SYSTEM THAT IS COMPLEX AND DIFFICULT TO NAVIGATE

How easy or difficult is it to navigate the government and public sector landscape affecting your business?



0% VERY EASY  
9% FAIRLY EASY  
21% NEUTRAL  
52% FAIRLY DIFFICULT  
17% VERY DIFFICULT

How clear is it where responsibility sits between NI Executive, UK Government and Local Council authorities on issues affecting your business?



5% VERY CLEAR  
23% FAIRLY CLEAR  
21% NEUTRAL  
39% FAIRLY UNCLEAR  
12% VERY UNCLEAR

**A sizeable majority of business leaders find it difficult to deal with the public sector.**

Navigating the different layers of government (NI Executive, UK Government and local Councils) is seen as a major chore.

- 7 in 10 respondents find the landscape “difficult” or “very difficult.”
- Only 8% find it “fairly easy” to find their way through the system.

- More than half (51%) think it is very or fairly unclear where responsibility sits between NI Executive, UK Government and Local Council authorities on issues affecting their business.

Seven out of ten leaders describing the government landscape as difficult to navigate, highlights a system that is seen as confusing and time-consuming. This complexity can act as a practical barrier to firms trying to solve problems or get projects started.

“Northern Ireland ties itself up in regulatory and governance issues. The landscape is risk-averse, slow, and far too complex for any business to navigate effectively.”



# 07 A HIERARCHY OF TRUST IN DECISION MAKERS

**While confidence across the board is tempered, there is a clear distinction in who business believes best understand its needs.**

Government policy is not a background factor for businesses with 70% rating it as very or quite significant to business decision-making. However, this importance is not matched by confidence with delivery agencies outperforming political and policy leadership in business confidence.

- Invest NI emerges as the most positively regarded, with just shy of half of respondents (49.5%) having a moderate level of confidence in its understanding of business needs.

- 46% of business leaders do not have “very much confidence” in Executive Ministers to understand their needs.
- More than three quarters of respondents have no or not very much confidence in the NI Civil Service. The same figure for their Whitehall counterparts stands slightly better at 52%.
- Almost 1 in 5 (18.4%) have no confidence in local Councils.

Whether elected representatives or unelected officials, our survey shows a “confidence gap” where the business community has limited confidence in political and official leadership across the board to understand the needs of business.

How much confidence do you have in the following to understand the needs of business?

	No confidence	Not very much confidence	A moderate level of confidence	Quite a lot of confidence	A great deal of confidence
NI Executive Ministers	21%	46%	31%	2%	0%
NI Civil Service	29%	48%	20%	3%	0%
Invest NI	13%	22%	49%	14%	2%
Local Councils	18%	35%	37%	10%	0%
UK Government Departments	14%	37%	37%	11%	1%
Regulators	15%	38%	39%	8%	0%



# 08 INFRASTRUCTURE BOTTLENECKS CREATING A BARRIER TO GROWTH

## Wastewater and Planning are inhibiting the region's economic growth.

While geopolitical volatility and UK fiscal policy often dominate the headlines, Northern Ireland's business leaders identify "local" physical constraints as equally significant barriers to growth.

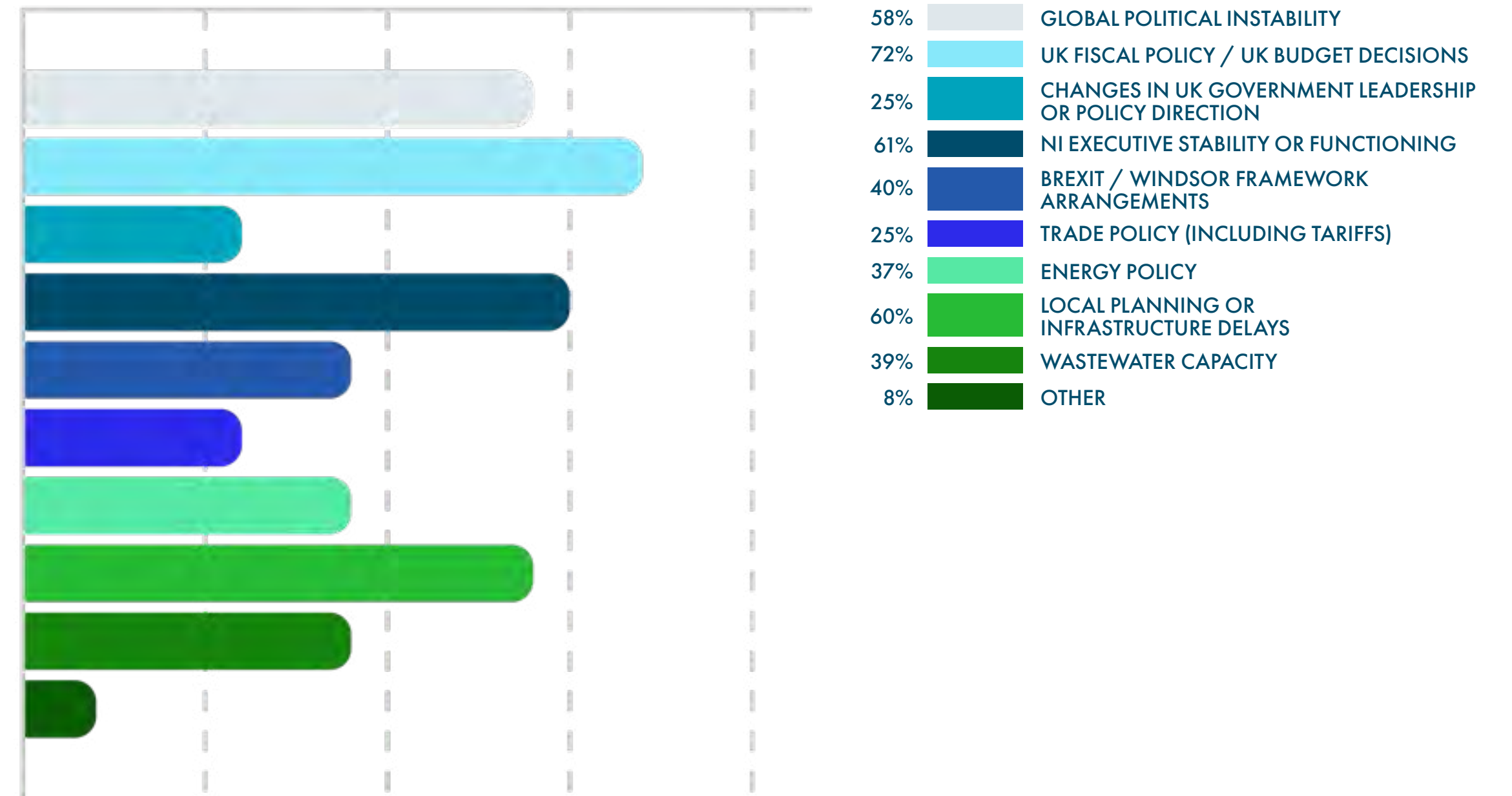
The data reveals that these practical blockages are now actively competing with global events for leadership attention:

- 39% of respondents identified wastewater capacity as having an adverse impact on their business in the past 12 months.
- 3 in 5 (60%) cited local planning or infrastructure delays as recent problems for their business.

- When asked what contributes most to policy uncertainty, business leaders ranked these domestic infrastructure failures alongside major external shocks like the conflict in the Middle East.

Our findings suggest that for many firms, the physical limits of the Northern Ireland landscape, specifically wastewater and planning, are now viewed as serious concerns for the entire business community, not just sectors like property and construction. By ranking these issues alongside global geopolitical risks, the business community is sending a clear signal that domestic infrastructure delivery is now a macro-economic issue that is actively stopping firms from scaling, regardless of the wider global climate.

Which of the following factors have contributed most to political or policy uncertainty affecting your business in the past 12 months?



# 09 NORTHERN IRELAND IS NOT SEEN AS COMPETITIVE AS IT SHOULD BE

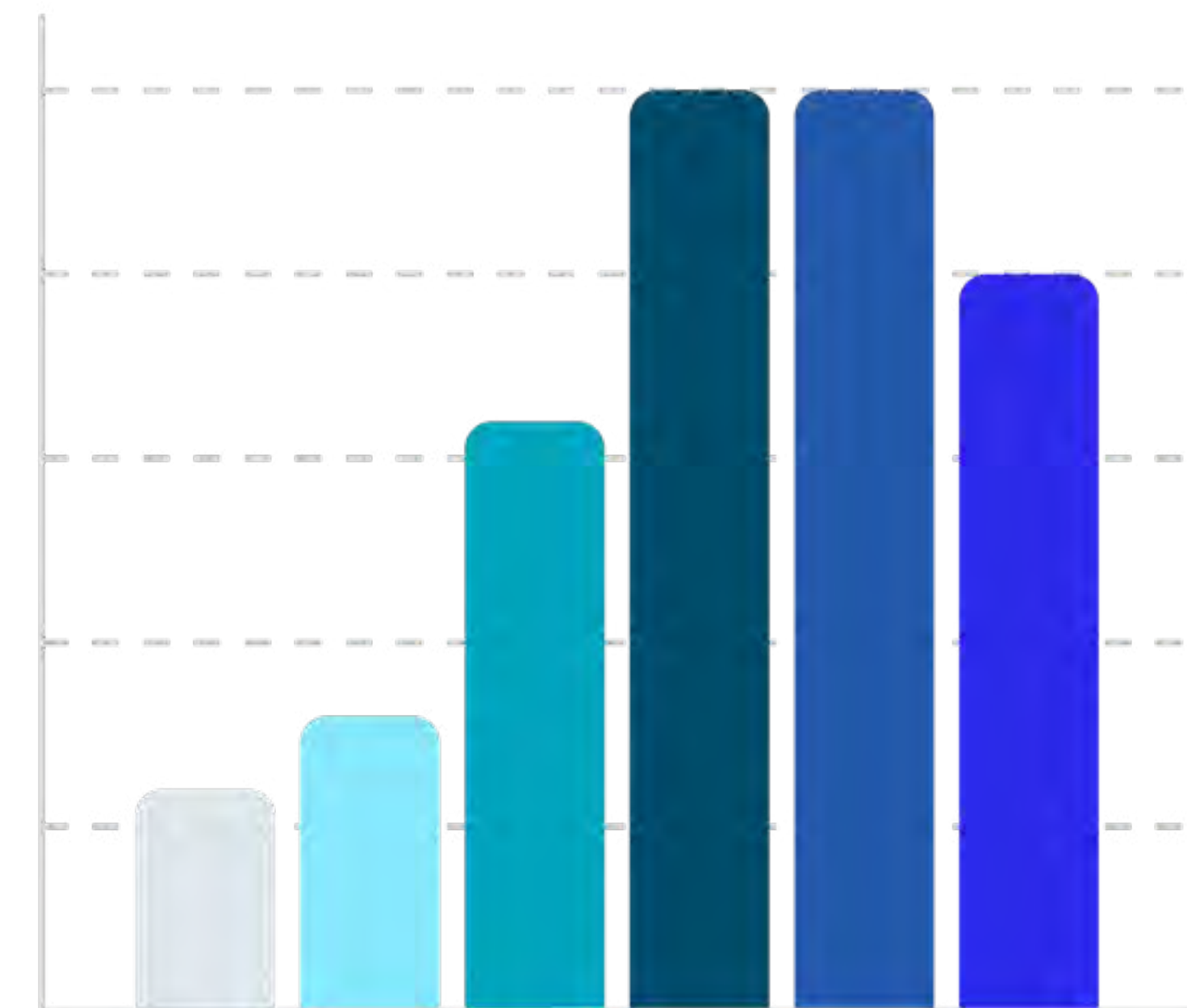
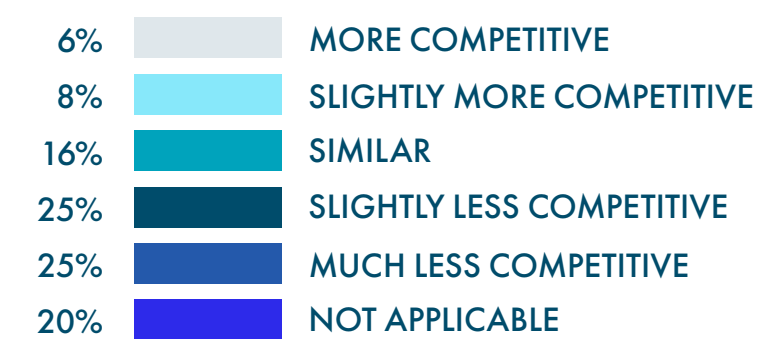
**Over half of firms say NI is less competitive than other regions they operate in. For firms that operate in other places like Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland is falling behind.**

- 51% say NI is “less” or “much less” competitive than other places they do business in.
- Only 13% think NI is currently more competitive than other jurisdictions.

“You get into the habit of just getting on with it yourself. In this climate, success is defined by your own hard work and networks rather than any expectation of local political support.”

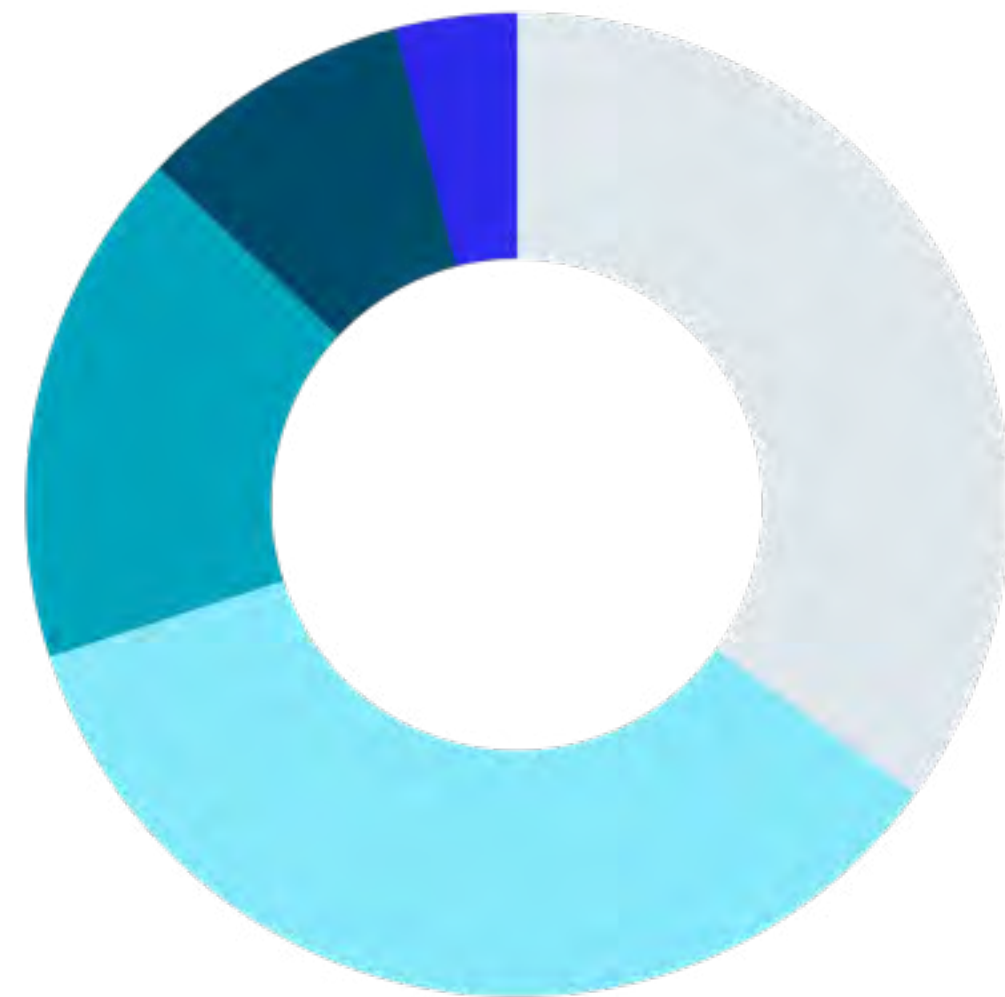
More than half of the businesses surveyed believe Northern Ireland is losing its competitive edge compared to other markets. This result suggests that the local business environment is currently seen as disadvantageous by many industry leaders and could be a warning sign for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) as well as expansion by local companies.

Compared to other jurisdictions you operate in, is Northern Ireland’s environment



# 10 POLITICAL RISK FIRMLY ON BOARDROOM AGENDA

How significant a factor do you consider government policy and political context to be in shaping your business decisions?



- 35% VERY SIGNIFICANT
- 35% QUITE SIGNIFICANT
- 17% MODERATELY SIGNIFICANT
- 9% LIMITED SIGNIFICANCE
- 4% NOT SIGNIFICANT

**Political and policy uncertainty has transitioned from an external concern to a permanent fixture on many company's agenda.**

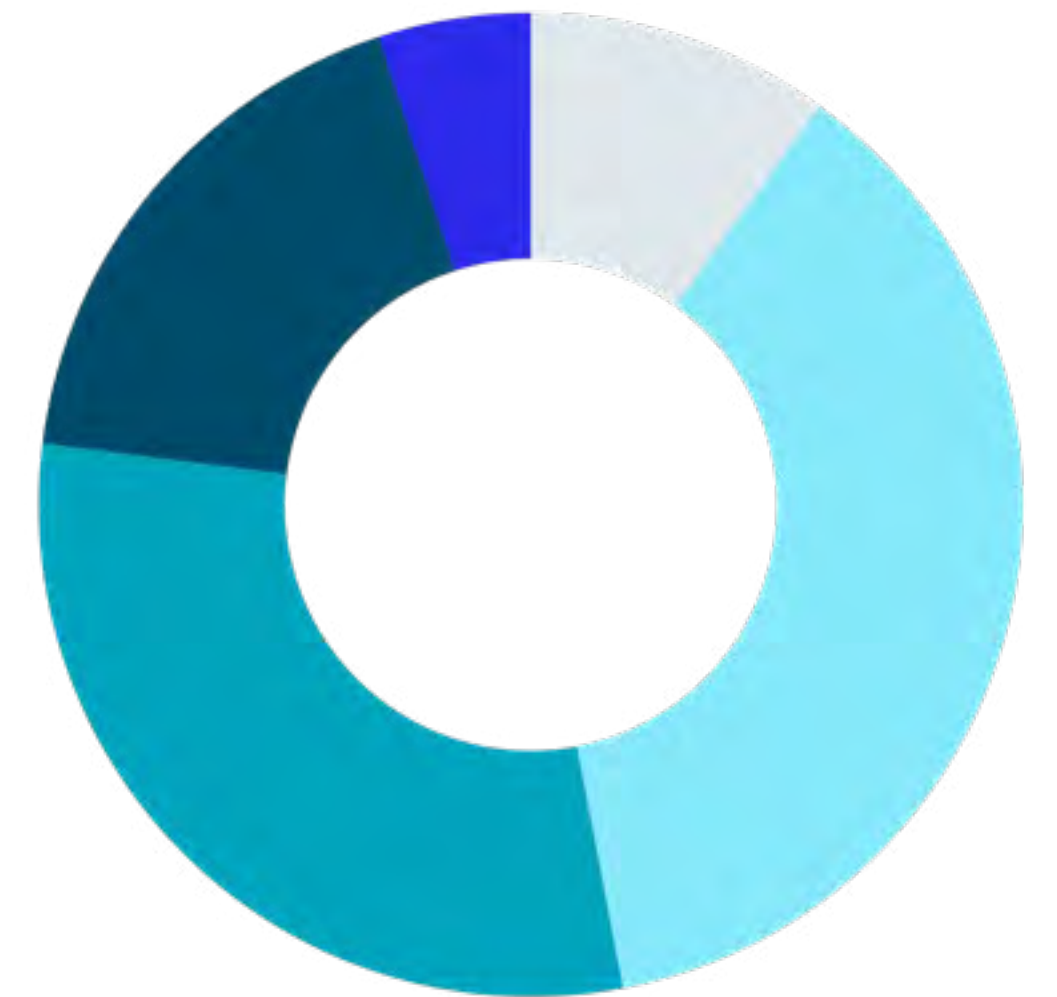
The survey results confirm that navigating the local political landscape is no longer a secondary task for management, but a primary strategic risk that requires constant monitoring for many.

- For nearly half of all respondents (47%), political or policy risk is now a "standing item" or discussed regularly in their Board or senior leadership meetings.
- More than half of the business community (55%) report that political risk is now "much more" or "somewhat more" prominent in their decision-making than it was just three years ago.

- 87% of leaders consider government policy and the political context to be a "very significant" factor in shaping their business decisions, leaving almost no room for a "politics-free" commercial environment.

Our findings demonstrate that political risk has been effectively "priced in" to the daily operations of Northern Ireland's businesses. With close to half of firms tracking policy shifts at a Board level, it is clear that the private sector now views political stability not as a bonus, but as a core operational requirement that directly dictates their willingness to invest and grow.

To what extent is political or policy risk a regular item on your Board or senior leadership agenda?

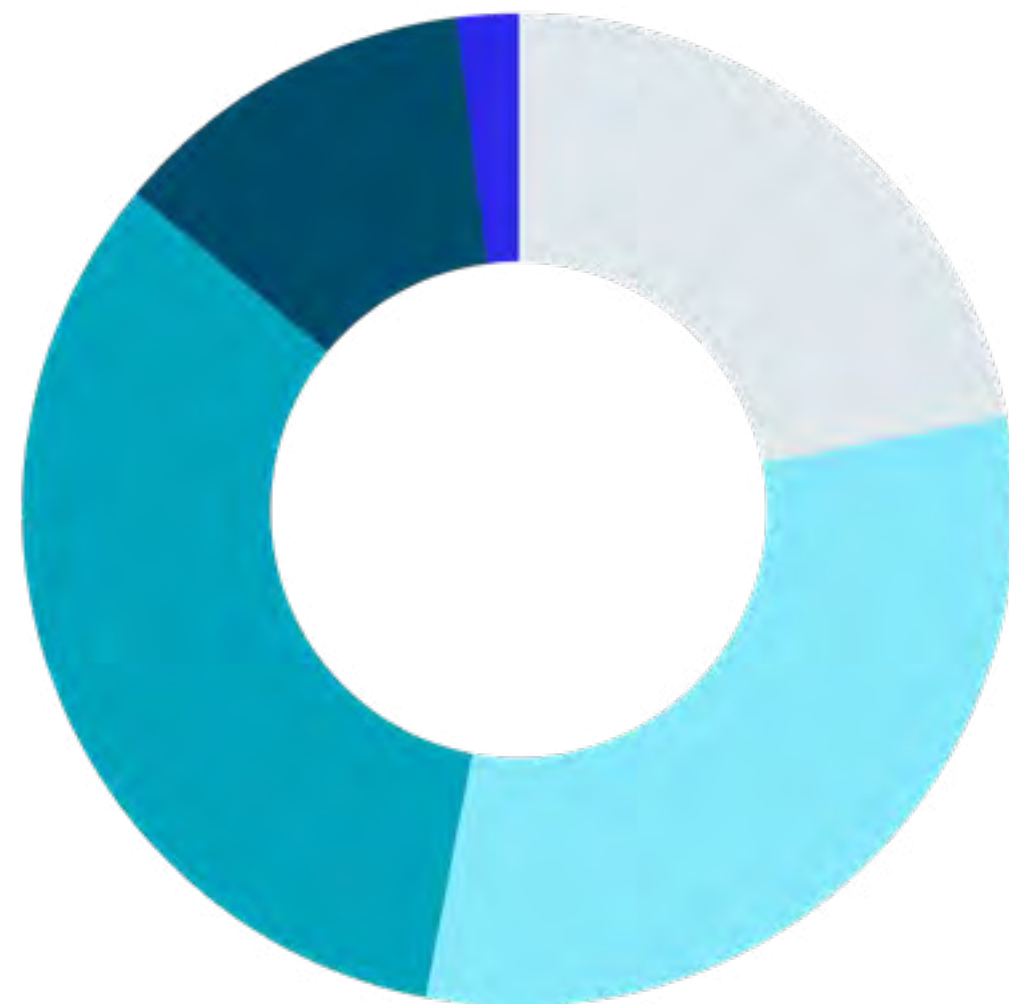


- 10% A STANDING AGENDA ITEM
- 37% DISCUSSED REGULARLY
- 30% DISCUSSED OCCASIONALLY
- 18% RARELY DISCUSSED
- 5% NEVER DISCUSSED



# 11 UNCERTAINTY IS DRIVING DIFFICULT COMMERCIAL DECISIONS

To what extent has political or policy uncertainty affected your business in the past year?



22% A GREAT DEAL  
31% QUITE A LOT  
33% SOME  
12% VERY LITTLE  
2% NOT AT ALL

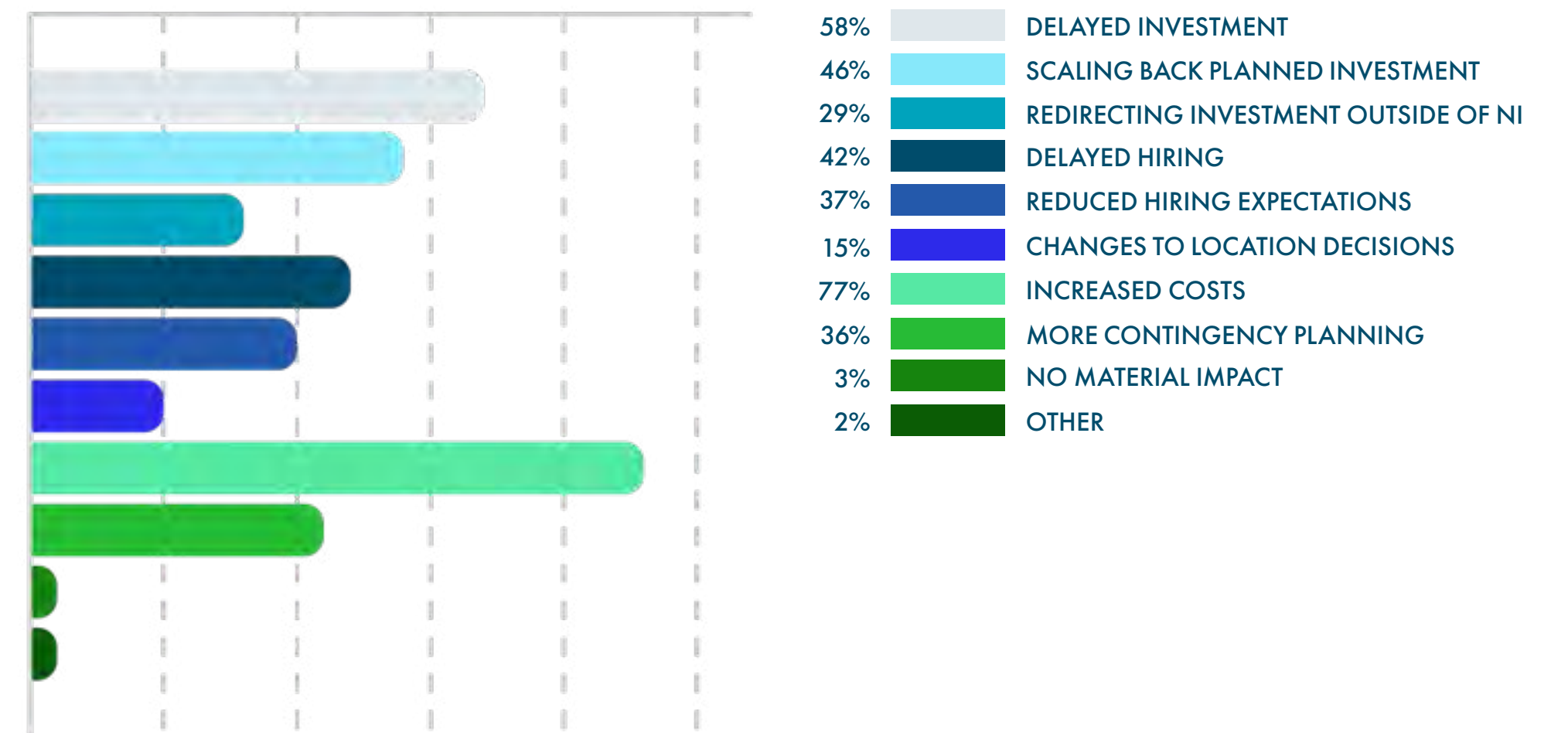
**Policy uncertainty is not a theoretical risk. It is actively affecting the local economy.**

Uncertainty – whether it is geopolitical events, tariffs on trade or UK Government Budget decisions – has tangible consequences. Nearly 3 in 5 (58%) of businesses have delayed investment in the past year specifically due to political or policy uncertainty.

- Beyond delays, more than 1 in 4 have redirected investment outside of Northern Ireland.
- The impact extends to the labour market, with 42% of leaders reporting delayed hiring and 37% reducing hiring expectations.

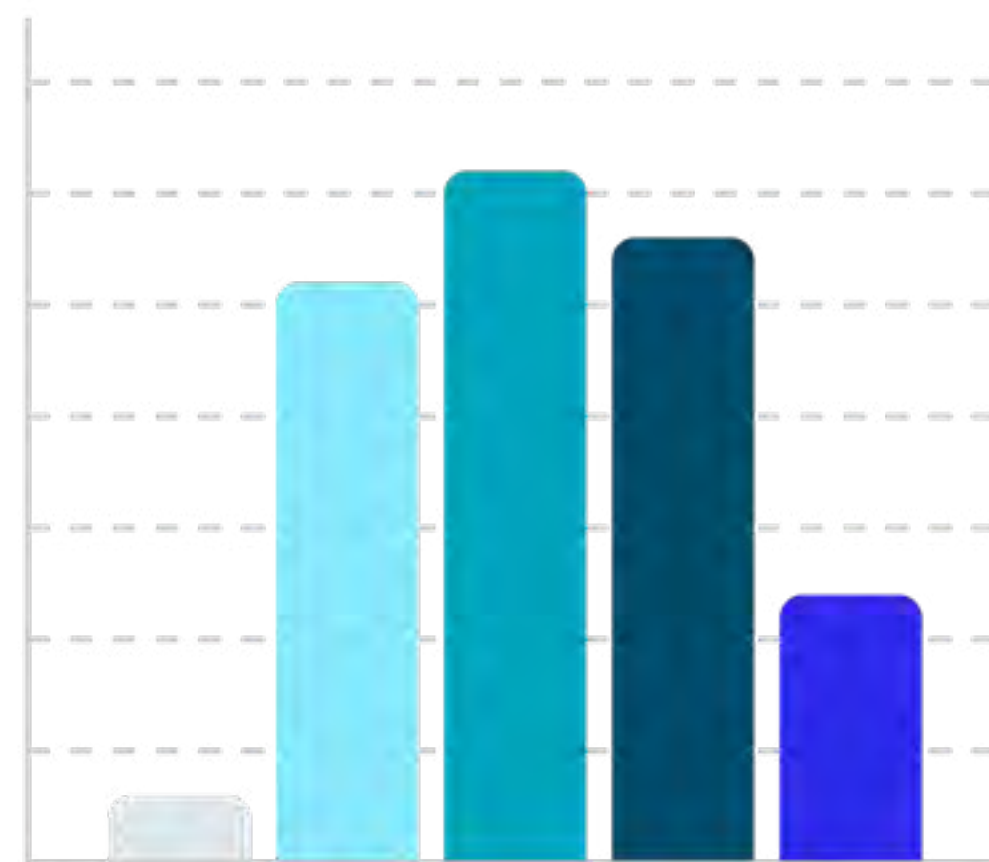
The survey shows that certainty is a valuable commercial commodity. Global, national and regional political and policy volatility is leading to a direct loss of capital and jobs within the local economy.

Has uncertainty contributed to any of the following?



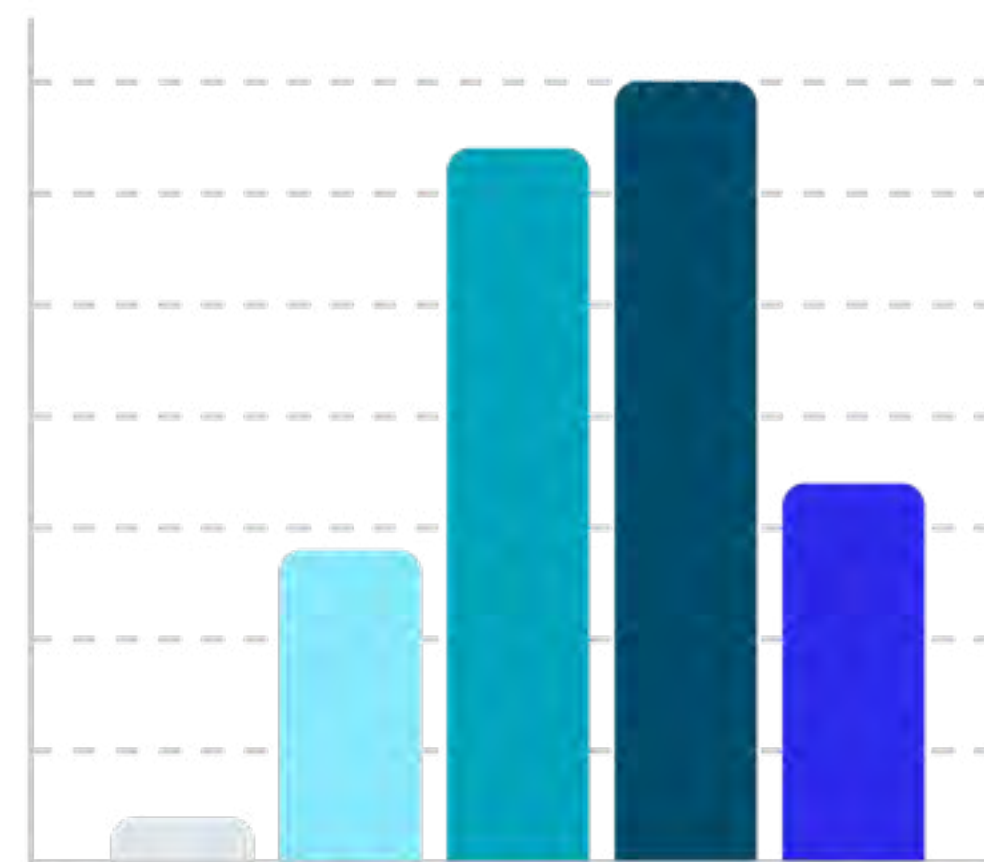
# 12 UNDERSTANDABLE CAUTION ABOUT NI'S ECONOMIC PROSPECTS

Overall, how would you rate the current business environment in Northern Ireland?



3% VERY POSITIVE  
26% SOMEWHAT POSITIVE  
31% NEUTRAL  
28% SOMEWHAT NEGATIVE  
12% VERY NEGATIVE

Looking ahead 12–24 months, do you feel more or less confident about the operating environment for your business in Northern Ireland?



2% MUCH MORE CONFIDENT  
14% SLIGHTLY MORE CONFIDENT  
32% NO CHANGE  
25% SLIGHTLY LESS CONFIDENT  
17% MUCH LESS CONFIDENT

## Only 40% are optimistic about Northern Ireland's economic future

After a number of years of difficult trading conditions and a sustained higher cost of doing business, the economic outlook for Northern Ireland is defined by a strong sense of caution. While there is a clear worry about the future, exacerbated no doubt by global volatility and the Iran War, the data shows a business community that retains some optimism despite these pressures.

- 29% of leaders describe the current business environment as very or somewhat positive, while 31% are neutral.
- Given the international climate, it is unsurprising that confidence is under pressure with 52% of respondents feeling slightly or much less confident about the economy over the next 12–24 months.

- 1 in 3 business leaders (33%) express no change in their confidence levels.

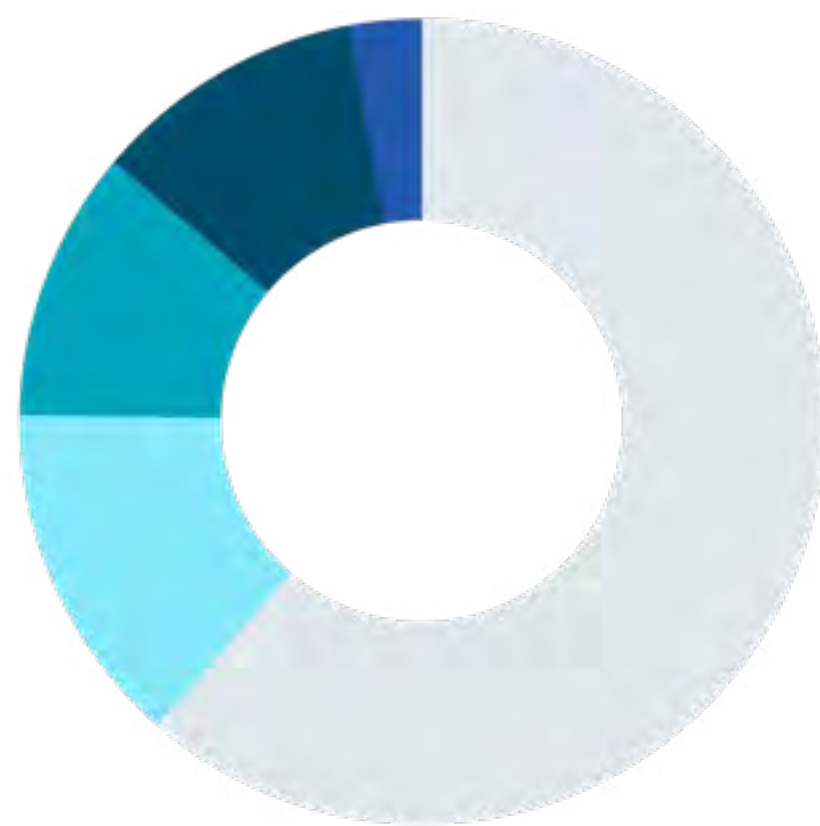
The findings highlight a business community that remains remarkably resilient after years of economic and political turbulence. While over half of the business community is understandably cautious about the future given the global risks, the fact that 60% still view the current state as either positive or neutral suggests a solid foundation that is waiting for more stable conditions to fully unlock its potential.



# WHO WE HEARD FROM

This report reflects the distilled views of some of the employers and wealth creators who make the Northern Ireland economy work. These 106 individuals represent the backbone of our business community, providing jobs and driving growth in every corner of the region. Their feedback offers a clear-eyed assessment of the challenges faced by those tasked with making the daily decisions that shape our economic future

## I Who we heard from?



## Roles

The seniority of the respondents ensures that the data reflects the reality of what is occupying the minds of those sitting in the region's boardroom.

- 97% of those surveyed occupy top-tier leadership roles, with 62% specifically holding the title of CEO or Managing Director.
- A further 35% are Board-level Directors or Senior Executives.

This high concentration of decision-makers means the feedback on political risk and investment delays is coming directly from the people authorised to make those calls.



## Company Size

The data reflects the views of both major employers and the smaller firms who dominate the local economy.

- 30% of respondents represent Large Companies (250+ employees), the anchors of our industrial and service sectors.
- 27% represent Medium-sized firms (50-249 employees), providing a balanced view of the challenges faced by companies trying to scale within the current system.
- 43% represent Smaller Firms (under 50 employees), highlighting that certainty is a valuable commercial commodity for the agile, local businesses that are often the first to feel the impact of a shifting policy environment.

## Sectors

To ensure the report provides a holistic view of the Northern Ireland economy, we engaged leaders from across the primary sectors of industry. While Tourism and Hospitality (20%) and Professional Services (14%) form the largest single cohorts, the findings are rounded out by significant representation from Construction and Property, Energy, Finance, Technology and Telecoms, Agri-Foods and Manufacturing, Health and Life Sciences, and Retail.

This diversity of input ensures that the insights identified in this report are not industry-specific frustrations, but are instead structural issues felt across the entire breadth of the Northern Ireland business community.



# THE BUSINESS OF GOVERNMENT

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