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American Foreign Policy

NORTHERN IRELAND EMERGING LEADERS

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POLICY REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

Emma DeSouza

Director, Northern Ireland Emerging Leaders Program

This year marks the 27th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement; there is much to celebrate: the political institutions have remained operational for the past twelve months, and peace has been sustained.

However, the slow pace of progress in addressing the underlying causes of conflict – inequality, social deprivation, and segregation – raises the question of how deep Northern Ireland's peace is and how evenly it is felt by those who call Northern Ireland home. All of us who support the peace process must challenge our ambitions with the understanding that peace is more than the absence of violence.

Continuing on from NCAFP's long-standing commitment to Northern Ireland, NCAFP launched its inaugural Northern Ireland Emerging Leaders Program in 2023. Now in its second year, the program provides a space for the next generation of leaders to turn their policy ideas into action.

This year's cohort features twelve participants addressing complex policy areas, including education, human rights, tackling violence against women, ethnic minority rights, political institutions, community health, the arts, and rural youth.

The diversity and range of the areas covered highlight the scale of the challenge we face, and yet, there is hope. Each emerging leader provides us with a blueprint, an innovative and creative approach to addressing socioeconomic challenges that can not only have a real impact in Northern Ireland but globally.

As we enter into a period of geopolitical uncertainty, maintaining transatlantic links and strengthening connections and cooperation is critical. The papers produced by this year's cohort present us all with an opportunity to interrogate our understanding of peace and reconciliation, and ask us to seek greater impact.

A positive peace requires political stability, economic prosperity, human capital, and acceptance of others. Building the foundations of a positive peace, rather than accepting a negative peace that addresses violence alone, should be our collective goal for the future of Northern Ireland and other regions experiencing conflict.

EMERGING LEADERS

Dr. Jack Armstrong

PhD Graduate, Queen's University Belfast

Ciara Campbell

International Policy Analyst

Aoife Clements

Founder, 50:50 NI and PhD Researcher, Queen's University Belfast, School of Law

Dr. Anne Devlin

Economist

Doire Finn

Social Democratic and Labour Party, Arts and Culture Spokesperson

Conor Forker

Chairperson of Clonmore Youth Club

Carla Hannan

Vice-Chair of Northern Ireland Youth Forum

Rachel Kenny-Cardoso

Advice and Outreach worker for Migrant Centre NI

Justin kouame

Advocacy Officer, Migrant Centre NI

Stephen McCrystall

Equality & Human Rights Officer, Education Authority Northern Ireland

Dr. Matthew O'Neill

Chair of Integrated AlumNI and Climate Project Lead at the Institute for International and European Affairs

Austin Orr

UK Civil Service Policy Advisor

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Reform of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive

Dr. Jack Armstrong

PhD Graduate, Queen's University Belfast

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The foundations of Northern Ireland's political settlement, established through the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement in 1998, have been successful in ensuring peace but not successful in ensuring long-term and effective governance. Northern Ireland's consociational system of government, designed to ensure power-sharing between British unionists and Irish nationalists, has resulted in long periods in which the Assembly is suspended and the Executive cannot function. This is because one of the two largest parties can resign anytime and refuse to nominate members to relevant positions, leading to political instability. This policy paper focuses on proposed policy solutions to ensure the Assembly and Executive are no longer subject to such suspensions while maintaining the fundamental principles of power-sharing.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ***Eliminating Community Designations:***
This would promote equality among all Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) and shift the focus of politics away from ethno-national divisions.
- ***Replacing Cross-Community Voting with a Weighted Majority:***
While key decisions would still require the support of both unionists and nationalists, this would remove the single-party veto granted to the largest party in each designation.
- ***Reforming the Process for Nominating the First Minister and Deputy First Minister:***
If either of the two largest parties refuses to nominate, the position would be offered to the next largest party, or both positions could be included in the d'Hondt process.
- ***Subjecting the Entire Executive to a Weighted Majority Vote:***
This would ensure accountability and collective responsibility for the entire Executive within the Assembly.

INTRODUCTION

The key question of this research topic is: **How can the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive be reformed to ensure a more effective government and prevent further suspensions and collapses?** To answer this question, this paper explores the institutional set-up of the Assembly and Executive under the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement (GFA) and how it was influenced by consociational theory. It seeks to identify the institutional flaws that have been exploited by several parties to collapse the Assembly and prevent it from functioning for years.

This paper considers each key mechanism within the Assembly and Executive designed to facilitate power-sharing. This includes designations, cross-community voting, the petition of concern, and the nomination of Ministers, including the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (FM and DFM). It considers how each could be reformed to ensure they better facilitate power-sharing instead of being used to block and undermine it. The paper, therefore, includes recommendations on how best to reform the political structures in Northern Ireland, based on consociational theory and the experience of nearly three decades of the current political system.

CONSOCIATIONAL THEORY

Consociationalism is a key academic theory that inspired the GFA and is the basis for the current political system in Northern Ireland. Consociationalism is a political theory that facilitates power-sharing between different groups in a deeply divided society. Lijphart identified four key characteristics of consociationalism:

- *A grand coalition* involving the political leaders of all main communities,
- *A mutual veto* to protect the interests of each community,
- *Proportionality* to public roles based on population, for example, the police and civil service, and
- *Segmental autonomy* for each community to make their own decisions.¹

Consociationalism has been applied to a number of divided societies, including Bosnia and Herzegovina through the 1995 Dayton Agreement, which involves power-sharing between three different ethnic groups, Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats,² and Lebanon, which reserves positions in government based on religion to ensure Christians, Sunni Muslims, and Shi'a Muslims are represented.³

However, consociational theory is most closely associated with Northern Ireland. McGarry and O'Leary have written extensively on consociationalism in Northern Ireland, describing it as an improvement over Lijphart's original model since the political system is comparatively flexible compared to others like Bosnia and Herzegovina and Lebanon.⁴

¹ Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 25.

² Patrice McMahon and Jon Western, "The Death of Dayton: How to Stop Bosnia From Falling Apart," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 5 (2009): 73.

³ Imad Salamey, "Failing Consociationalism in Lebanon and Integrative Options," *International Journal of Peace Studies* 14, no. 2 (2009): 83.

⁴ John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, "Power Shared after the Deaths of Thousands," *In Consociational Theory: McGarry and O'Leary and the Northern Ireland Conflict*, ed. Rupert Taylor, (London: Routledge, 2009).

One example is that parties outside the main ethno-national blocs are not excluded from the grand coalition, as the Alliance Party has participated in several Executives. Larger parties do not have to take up the positions they are entitled to, as the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) chose not to do in the brief 2016-17 mandate.

Consociationalism has been criticized for two main reasons. One is the institutionalizing and deepening of existing divisions instead of seeking to overcome them. McCulloch describes how consociational systems often freeze ethnonational conflicts at a single moment in time for the basis of future governing, which, given the nature of those conflicts, means this is often the time of greatest polarization.⁵ In the case of Northern Ireland, it is based on the politics of 1998 rather than the politics of 2025. Consociationalism has also been criticized on democratic grounds. If every party with a small number of seats is entitled to a place in the government, removing a party from government becomes difficult.

ASSEMBLY: DESIGNATIONS, CROSS-COMMUNITY VOTING, AND THE PETITION OF CONCERN

The Northern Ireland Assembly consists of ninety members, called Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs). Five are elected to each constituency; eighteen constituencies are identical to those used in Westminster general elections.

There were previously more MLAs, six per constituency and 108 overall. This was reduced to ninety in 2017. MLAs fulfill the roles typically expected of politicians worldwide: they propose and vote on legislation, scrutinize the Executive through questions, and deal with local constituency issues. However, in the GFA and its various amendments, several consociational mechanisms are designed to ensure that unionists and nationalists have safeguards to protect their interests. These reflect the second of Lijphart's four characteristics of consociationalism, the 'mutual veto.'

In their first sitting, MLAs sign into the Assembly and must designate in their first sitting, 'unionist,' 'nationalist,' or 'other.' This is necessary because a cross-community vote is needed for certain votes. In addition to an overall majority, these votes require either 'parallel consent,' meaning a majority of unionist and nationalist members, or a 'weighted majority,' comprising at least sixty percent of all members plus at least forty percent of unionists and forty percent of nationalists.⁶ There is also the petition of concern, which, if signed by thirty Assembly members from at least two parties, forces a cross-community vote on any issue, effectively providing a veto to enough unionist or nationalist MLAs.⁷

These mutual vetoes provided to both ethnonational communities are intended to protect their interests, which was important in the Northern Ireland context for nationalism given the historical discrimination against nationalists from the unionist majority Government from the 1920s to 1970s.

⁵ Alison McCulloch, *Power-Sharing and Political Stability in Deeply Divided Societies*, (London: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 508.

⁶ Donald Horowitz, "Exploring the Northern Ireland Agreement: The Sources of an Unlikely Constitutional Consensus," *British Journal of Political Science* 32, no. 2 (2002): 194.

⁷ McCulloch, *Power-Sharing and Political Stability*, 506.

In recent years, these vetoes have been relied upon by unionists, who lost their majority in the Assembly in 2017,⁸ and increasingly feel marginalized in an Assembly where nationalists and ‘others’ have a clear majority on a range of social and economic issues, as well as a consensus on more significant constitutional issues such as Brexit and the Northern Ireland Protocol.⁹ However, these mutual veto mechanisms have become very controversial, particularly the petition of concern. The petition of concern was used 115 times in the 2011-16 Assembly mandate, 86 of which were from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the only party with over thirty MLAs. Sinn Féin and the SDLP both used the petition of concern 29 times. Undoubtedly, the most controversial issue of the petition of concern was the DUP using it to veto same-sex marriage five times.¹⁰ Opponents argued this was an abuse of a mechanism intended to protect minorities, being used to deny rights to another minority instead. The GFA did not define the circumstances in which the use of a petition of concern should be appropriately utilized.¹¹ Though there have been minor amendments to the petition of concern, for example, the New Decade, New Approach agreement added a qualification that the support of two parties would be needed for a petition of concern, therefore removing a one-party veto.

The most prominent criticisms of cross-community voting and the petition of concern come from the centrist and non-aligned parties, particularly the Alliance Party. Writing in 1998, then leader Seán Neeson and future deputy leader Stephen Farry criticized the institutionalization of ‘two communities’ through designations and cross-community voting, placing “too much emphasis on the interests and rights of groups rather than individuals,” and reinforcing “the divisions in a divided society by corporatising the different groups.”¹² In a practical sense, Alliance criticizes cross-community votes for disadvantaging their votes and the votes of ‘other’ MLAs, compared to unionists and nationalists, which they argued reinforces sectarian divisions and encourages voters to remain within their ethnonational bloc. “This institutionalisation of sectarianism works against center parties; there are disincentives for voters to support them as they will at times have less influence in the Assembly.”¹³

The wider problem with cross-community voting is how it can be used to prevent the operation of the Assembly, even when a clear majority of MLAs want to see the Assembly functioning. This is because the first decision the Assembly must take, before it can conduct any other business, is to elect a Speaker and Deputy Speakers. Since the election of the Speaker requires a cross-community majority, both of the largest unionist and nationalist parties can block their election and, therefore, prevent the Assembly from sitting.

⁸ John Stanton and Craig Prescott, *Public Law*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 384.

⁹ Cillian McGrattan, “Alienation and Destabilisation: Northern Ireland in the Age of Brexit,” *In Conservative Governments in the Age of Brexit*, eds. Matt Beech and Simon Lee, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 312.

¹⁰ Alison McCulloch, “The Use and Abuse of Veto Rights in Power-Sharing Systems: Northern Ireland’s Petition of Concern in Comparative Perspective,” *Government and Opposition* 53, no. 4 (2018), 750.

¹¹ Alex Schwartz, “The Problem with Petitions of Concern,” *Queen’s Policy Engagement* (2015), <http://qpol.qub.ac.uk/the-problem-with-petitions-of-concern/>.

¹² Stephen Farry and Seán Neeson, “Beyond the ‘Band-Aid’ Approach: An Alliance Party Perspective Upon the Belfast Agreement,” *Fordham International Law Journal* 22, no. 4 (1998), 1245.

¹³ Farry and Neeson, “Beyond the ‘Band-Aid’ Approach,” 1237.

This occurred seven times from May 2022 to February 2024, when the DUP was boycotting the institutions in protest against the Northern Ireland Protocol. The DUP held just 25 of the 90 seats but a majority of the 35 unionist seats and, therefore, could block a majority of over two-thirds in the Assembly. This emphasizes the most extreme example of how veto mechanisms designed with good intentions are used to block the institutions they were intended to protect.

If implemented, three specific solutions would remove the remaining one-party vetoes, permit the Assembly to function when the majority wishes, and maintain genuine vetoes for the two main communities for key issues.

The first proposal is to abolish community designations, ensuring all MLAs are treated equally. The second proposal would no longer require designations to replace cross-community voting with a weighted majority for key decisions. For issues that currently require a cross-community majority, instead of needing a majority of unionist and nationalist MLAs, therefore giving the DUP and Sinn Féin a veto, these decisions would require a majority of 60-65% of all MLAs regardless of affiliation. This would serve the same purpose of protecting the interests of unionists and nationalists without privileging their votes over 'others.'¹⁴ If every unionist MLA or every nationalist MLA opposes a key decision, it can be blocked under these numbers. However, if the UUP votes with the nationalists and other parties, or vice versa, with the SDLP voting with unionist and other parties, then the DUP and Sinn Féin, respectively, cannot block them exclusively. This would have permitted the election of a Speaker immediately after the 2022 Assembly election.

The petition of concern should continue as a vital last resort of protection. Still, its current use for almost every issue is too broad and unnecessary to ensure progress. Therefore, this paper proposes that the petition of concern is limited to a narrow range of issues. Schwartz suggested three broad categories that a petition of concern should be limited to:

- Decisions with an obvious ethno-national significance;
- Decisions relating to the history and legacy of the conflict in Northern Ireland;
- Decisions relating to the GFA structures.¹⁵

Since it is impossible to define certain issues exactly within these parameters, an impartial panel should be established to determine whether a petition of concern would be appropriate for a specific case. This could consist of independent figures such as judges or academics with expertise in constitutional law. They would have a set time to determine whether a petition of concern could be used, and if they agree that it is appropriate, then the vote can be reassessed to ensure a weighted majority is released; otherwise, the vote can be annulled.

¹⁴ John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, "Consociational Theory, Northern Ireland's Conflict, and its Agreement 2. What Critics of Consociation Can Learn From Northern Ireland," *Government and Opposition* 41, no. 2 (2006), 273.

¹⁵ Schwartz, "The Problem with Petitions of Concern."

There is precedent for such a mechanism; in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Constitutional Court can be called on to review the use of the 'vital national interest' veto.¹⁶ There is a risk that such a mechanism could be used as a delaying tactic, dragging out contentious issues to avoid coming to a decision, which is why such a panel should be time-limited. These changes would introduce genuine equality between MLAs while maintaining specific vetoes for the two communities. Most importantly, it would prevent one party from blocking the election of a Speaker and, therefore, the operation of the Assembly.

EXECUTIVE: NOMINATION OF FIRST MINISTER, DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER, AND OTHER MINISTERS

The Northern Ireland Executive consists of twelve Ministers. Eight represent specific departments, and the overall Executive is led by the FM and DFM, both of whom have one Junior Minister within their Department, known as the Executive Office. As with the Assembly, the Executive used to be larger, with ten departments from 1998 to 2010 and eleven from 2010 to 2016. However, it was also reduced as several departments with similar responsibilities were merged.

In the GFA, FM and DFM were jointly elected by a cross-community vote. This occurred with the election of David Trimble (UUP) and Seamus Mallon (SDLP) as FM and DFM, respectively. When Mallon retired in 2001, his successor Mark Durkan was only elected along with Trimble because Alliance MLAs redesignated as unionists for one day to prevent the institutions from collapsing, which caused significant discomfort to them as then leader David Ford was keen to emphasize: "I don't think anyone in our party could stomach being a unionist or nationalist for more than 24 hours." The election of the FM and DFM were significantly amended in the 2006 St. Andrews Agreement, negotiated by the DUP and Sinn Féin when they became the largest parties. The largest party nominates the FM, and the largest party from the other designation nominates the DFM. This was a change that the DUP, in particular, pushed for so their nominee would not have to be elected on a joint ticket with the Sinn Féin nominee. Still, critics have accused the party of using this process as an election tactic, arguing that only they can stop a Sinn Féin First Minister by uniting the unionists to support them, despite the two positions being equal.¹⁸ Sinn Féin successfully used this tactic in 2022 to become the largest party and therefore claim the FM position despite unionism remaining the most significant designation.

¹⁶ Schwartz, "The Problem with Petitions of Concern."

¹⁷ John Hunter, "Alliance Saves Stormont from Collapse," *The Guardian*, 4 November 2001.

¹⁸ Joanne McEvoy, *Power-Sharing Executives: Governing in Bosnia, Macedonia, and Northern Ireland*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

Seven of the eight remaining Ministers are allocated proportionally based on party strengths in the most recent election using the d'Hondt method of calculation.¹⁹ This ensures that every party with a sufficient mandate is entitled to a seat in the Executive. The exception is the Justice Minister, who was devolved separately in 2010. This position is filled through a cross-community vote due to the particular contentiousness of policing and justice in Northern Ireland.²⁰ Since the DUP does not want to support a Sinn Féin Justice Minister, and vice versa, both have consistently supported Alliance nominees since 2010. Alliance turned down the position once in 2016. Instead, it went to the only independent MLA, Claire Sugden, a designated unionist. This system, in which parties are automatically entitled to government positions regardless of political differences, is often described as a 'mandatory coalition', especially by its critics. However, McGarry and O'Leary prefer to describe it as "inclusionary (rather than compulsory)" because no party is obligated to take up the Executive seats they are entitled to. Provisions were recently introduced for an official opposition if a party turns down a seat in the Executive or if they received more than 8% of the seats in the last election. The SDLP fulfilled the latter requirement and is now the official opposition.

This appointment of Ministers, with co-equal leaders from different communities, closely reflects the first of Lijphart's four principles of consociationalism, the 'grand coalition' involving all major communities. While supporters of consociationalism have praised the system for bringing former opponents and enemies together and ensuring they work together, others have criticized this form of power-sharing for encouraging individual parties and departments to work in isolation. There are a few incentives to promote cross-departmental working. A practical difficulty is that the positions of FM and DFM depend on each other as a joint office; the resignation of one leads to the resignation of the other, which occurred when Sinn Féin resigned in 2017 and the DUP resigned in 2022, leading to the other party losing their position too. This represents the easiest and most effective method to prevent power-sharing. Although the remaining Ministers may stay in office for up to six months, they cannot convene as a full Executive, make important decisions, or establish policy objectives.

Some parties, such as the UUP and SDLP, have called for a return to the initial, cross-community election of the FM and DFM under the GFA. This would still provide single-party vetoes to the largest unionist and nationalist parties and, therefore, doesn't solve the collapse issue. Thus, a more effective solution would be to treat the FM and DFM positions on the same basis as other Ministers. They are offered to the two largest parties initially, but if either turns it down, it is provided to the third largest.

¹⁹ McCulloch, *Power-Sharing and Political Stability*, 508

²⁰ McEvoy, *Power-Sharing Executives*, 101.

²¹ McGarry and O'Leary, "Consociational Theory," 261-2.

This removes the incentive to block either position from being filled if both parties realise a political rival can take it. Outside of FM and DFM, another proposal to improve cooperation within the Executive requires the entire Executive to be subject to a weighted majority vote to ensure accountability and collective responsibility, including an agreed programme for government and multi-year budgets.

CONCLUSION

These proposals are intended to ensure stability in the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive and provide greater cross-party cooperation while maintaining the fundamental protections designed under the consociational structures of the GFA. In the long-term, the full normalization of Northern Ireland politics can only be achieved by moving gradually and eventually to a system of voluntary coalition, where parties work together on shared issues instead of because they are forced to. However, these changes should be implemented in the short term; these changes should be implemented to deliver the effective government that a post-conflict society like Northern Ireland urgently requires.

NORTHERN IRELAND EMERGING LEADERS BIO

DR. JACK ARMSTRONG

PhD Graduate, Queen's University Belfast

Jack completed an undergraduate LLB in Law with Politics from Queen's University Belfast in 2017 and a postgraduate LLM in Law from Trinity College Dublin in 2018, focusing on international and human rights law. In 2024, he graduated from Queen's with a PhD in Politics, with his thesis titled *Preferential Voting and Moderation in Deeply Divided Societies: The Case of Northern Ireland*. His research examined whether preferential voting systems like the Single Transferable Vote contribute to moderating political parties in divided societies, using Northern Ireland as a case study. While studying in Dublin, Jack volunteered with a Senator in Leinster House and worked with an MLA in the Northern Ireland Assembly. In these roles, he drafted speeches, reviewed and prepared briefings on committee papers, and developed Private Members' Bills. Currently, he works with a mental health charity.

Implementation of International Human Rights Law in Northern Ireland

Ciara Campbell

International Policy Analyst

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

International law is the basis of peace agreements. The rules-based international order defined at the end of the Second World War is maintained by trust between nations and bilateral actions. This is the global environment where peace accords and post-conflict peacebuilding processes are enabled, from the European Union on the macroscale to Northern Ireland on the microscale.

At the end of the Troubles, the Good Friday Agreement required the formation of new institutions for Northern Ireland, corroborated by the implementation of International human rights law into the domestic context. To this day, not all of the Good Friday Agreement has been implemented, with the lack of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. Despite the challenges of navigating a post-conflict society, the UK and Ireland have continued to work together bilaterally to address issues.

The “Legacy and Reconciliation Act” is a unilateral action by the UK that violated international human rights law. It caused widespread criticism from a range of domestic and international stakeholders, including almost all political parties in NI and UN human rights officials. The UK has accepted the criticism and will seek to amend the Legacy Act. The institutions of the “Legacy Act” are already in place. To revert to the bilateral consensus, this paper recommends replacing the institutions of the Legacy Act with the proposed institutions of the 2014 bilateral Stormont House Agreement.

This appointment of Ministers, with co-equal leaders from different communities, closely reflects the first of Lijphart’s four principles of consociationalism, the ‘grand coalition’ involving all major communities.

A society can only heal once the past has been addressed. Northern Ireland will continue to build peace through trust in institutions, a rules-based order, and collaborative and democratic actions.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Remove the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery and replace it with the Historical Investigations Unit envisioned by the Stormont House Agreement.
- Incorporate all provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) into domestic law and ratify the Optional Protocol to the ICCPR.
- Draft a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights through a democratic process in consultation with civil society, interest groups, and political parties.
- Implement a bereavement payment scheme, as proposed by the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors Ian Jeffers.

To go beyond a post-conflict society means creating a society that trusts institutions and state-led processes to address grievances. The implementation of international human rights law is what underpins the existing peace and institutions in Northern Ireland. The “Legacy Act” is an example of the UK acting unilaterally and not in accordance with international law. To regain societal trust, it is necessary to revert to the institutions proposed by the bilateral Stormont House Agreement of 2014.

THE NECESSITY OF INTERNATIONAL LAW FOR THE PEACE PROCESS

International human rights law is the foundation block of the peace process in Northern Ireland. The central constitutional agreement that ended the Troubles and began the post-conflict reconstruction was the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (GFA). The GFA was a bilateral peace agreement between the Irish and UK governments and ratified by voters on the island of Ireland. The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) underpins the institutions of the GFA, including that all NI Assembly Acts and devolved Ministers must comply with the ECHR and that Ireland and the UK incorporate the provisions of the ECHR into domestic law. The ECHR helped to fundamentally ensure “mutual respect” between communities.¹ In 1998, the assumption that both the British and Irish governments would remain part of the European Union, which naturally included the ease of the Single Market and the application of the ECHR, allowed for the flexibility and ambiguity of the GFA settlement to ensure a lasting peace and disarmament process. However, there were issues with the implementation of international human rights commitments into domestic NI law. The ECHR was incorporated into domestic NI law through the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

¹ “The Good Friday Agreement and the European Convention on Human Rights,” *UK Human Rights Blog*, August 29, 2023, <https://ukhumanrightsblog.com/2023/08/29/the-good-friday-agreement-and-the-european-convention-on-human-rights/>

It was not a full implementation, as there were no provisions for an overarching truth commission or other transitional justice mechanisms (per Article 2 of the ECHR),² despite public discussions about methods of dealing with the past.³ The most significant absence of implementation is the lack of the Northern Ireland Bill of Rights, despite that it was called for in Strand 3 of the GFA. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) produced an extensive and comprehensive report in 2008⁴ recommending a Bill of Rights to fulfill the dual purpose of implementing supplementary ECHR rights and international human rights law signed by the UK into NI law. This proposal was rejected by the NI Office as it was not specific to the circumstances of NI, instead falling under the remit of an overall UK Bill of Rights.⁵

As a devolved nation of the United Kingdom, the responsibilities of international human rights law apply to NI through the other conventions and treaties to which the UK has become a State Party. The UK ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1976. It is legally binding internationally, but not all of the Covenant was incorporated into domestic law. It was partially brought down into domestic law by the aforementioned Human Rights Act 1998.⁶ As a signatory, the UK is obliged to uphold Article 2, which includes guaranteeing an effective remedy for victims of human rights violations. Under General Comment no. 31 of 2004 (Human Rights Committee),⁷ signatories have an obligation to investigate human rights violations and bring those responsible to justice. The duty to provide remedies is non-derogable.⁸ These obligations mean that the UK is obliged under international human rights law to address grievances through investigations and effective remedies. As a devolved nation, Northern Ireland and questions of the past fall under the responsibility of the UK. It is widely recognized in international human rights law that combating impunity is a binding legal obligation on states.⁹ Associated obligations include the duty to investigate, to inform victims, the right of families to know what happened to their relatives, and the right of societies to know the truth about past historical events.

These obligations have not been upheld within the context of Northern Ireland. With the lack of implementation of international human rights law in Northern Ireland, legacy cases were addressed on an ad-hoc basis, influenced by the relentless campaigning of victims' families. A potential solution to this untenable situation was negotiated by the Stormont House Agreement (SHA) in December 2014, a bilateral agreement between the Irish and UK governments and the political parties in NI. The Agreement proposed the creation of two new bodies: a Historical Investigations Unit (HIU) and an Independent Commission on Information Retrieval (ICIR).

² *Bitter Legacy: State Impunity in the Northern Ireland Conflict*, Report of the International Expert Panel (April 29, 2024), <https://www.jus.uio.no/smr/english/about/id/docs/bitter-legacy-29-april-24.pdf>.

³ Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern, "A Truth Commission for Northern Ireland?", *ARK, Research Update Number 46*, October 2006, <https://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/sites/default/files/2018-08/update46.pdf>.

⁴ *A Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland*, NIHRC, December 10, 2008, [bit.ly/43PGBtf](https://www.nihrc.org/43PGBtf)

⁵ *A Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland*, JUSTICE, <https://justice.org.uk/bill-rights-northern-ireland/>.

⁶ "The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights," The British Institute of Human Rights, February 2024, [bit.ly/3RUZVOM](https://www.bihrights.org/3RUZVOM)

⁷ "General Comment No. 31: The Nature of the General Legal Obligation Imposed on States Parties to the Covenant (2004)," OHCHR, March 29, 2004, [bit.ly/41xcu07](https://www.ohchr.org/41xcu07)

⁸ "International Law and the Fight Against Impunity," ICJ, 2015, [bit.ly/42cD5la](https://www.icj.org/42cD5la)

⁹ *Bitter Legacy: State Impunity in the Northern Ireland Conflict*.

These solutions would be compliant with international human rights law.¹⁰ The HIU would conduct investigations in compliance with the ECHR, and the ICIR would allow families to seek information about the deaths of their relatives.

BREACHING INTERNATIONAL LAW IN A BREXIT WORLD

In June 2016, the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union in the Brexit referendum. Upending the established assumptions of the rules-based multilateral international order, the resulting decision to implement the referendum signified a desire to “take back control” from international law, a desire for national sovereignty of laws as opposed to the primacy of European Union and international law. The complexities of Northern Ireland remained central to the Brexit negotiations. While the context remains outside the scope of this paper, a specific moment exemplifies the epochal turn. In September 2020, when discussing the Brexit trade arrangements for NI, the NI Secretary of State Brandon Lewis MP admitted, “Yes. This does break international law in a very specific and limited way.”¹¹ The situation was resolved, but the admission is an example of the UK’s ability to disregard international law in favor of its own unilateral actions in the name of national interest. The international context of this quote is important: The COVID-19 pandemic had countries breaking trade agreements to ensure their own supplies.

In June 2022, the UK Secretary of State for Justice Dominic Raab proposed a UK Bill of Rights,¹² which would repeal and replace the Human Rights Act 1998, which gives effect to the ECHR. This sought to rebalance the powers between the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and the UK’s domestic courts, including the Supreme Court. Judgements and decisions of the ECtHR would no longer be binding on UK courts.¹³ Not only is this not a Bill of Rights that would adhere to the ECHR rights called for by the GFA, but it would have undermined the basis of international law that underpinned the peace process in NI. This was the context in which the Legacy Act was developed.

THE LEGACY ACT AND IMPUNITY

The Legacy Act was first made public in the March 2020 Written Ministerial Statement (WMS) by the then-Secretary of State Brandon Lewis.¹⁴ The same official spoke later that year about breaching international law. The WMS signalled the abandonment of the 2014 bilateral Stormont House Agreement. In September 2023, the Legacy Act was passed. It proposed a new body to settle historical grievances – the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Recovery (ICRIR). The Act halted all existing investigations, inquests, and civil litigation, provided a unilateral definition of the Troubles, and introduced a form of amnesty via the community immunity scheme.¹⁵

¹⁰ “Bitter Legacy: State Impunity in the Northern Ireland Conflict.”

¹¹ Northern Ireland Protocol: UK Legal Obligations,” UK Parliament, September 8, 2020, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2020-09-08/debates/2F32EBC3-6692-402C-93E6-76B4CF1BC6E3/NorthernIrelandProtocolUKLegalObligations>.

¹² Alice Donald, “The Bill of Rights Bill,” UK in a Changing Europe, July 11, 2022, bit.ly/3Eq475E.

¹³ Emma Guy, “25 Years On: Is Northern Ireland Closer To A Bill Of Rights?” Each Other, April 6, 2023, <https://eachother.org.uk/25-years-on-is-northern-ireland-closer-to-a-bill-of-rights/>.

¹⁴ “Addressing Northern Ireland Legacy Issues,” UK Parliament, March 18, 2020, <https://shorturl.at/fh8ua>

¹⁵ “The Road to the Northern Ireland Troubles (Reconciliation and Legacy) Act 2023 – A Narrative Compendium of CAJ Submissions,” Committee on the Administration of Justice, November 16, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/344k7kh3>

The process of developing the Legacy Act did not obey the usual demands of scrutiny and transparency. Requests from the Westminster Northern Ireland Affairs Committee were sidelined; there was no public consultation.¹⁶ The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland twice investigated the NIO, finding that, on both occasions, it had breached procedural duties on policy development in the statutory Equality Scheme.¹⁷

The Legacy Act was widely condemned by a range of stakeholders and actors. Critics included civil society, victims' groups, international human rights institutions, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, all political parties in Northern Ireland, the Oireachtas Committee on Implementation of the GFA, Amnesty International, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, the Committee of Administrative Justice Northern Ireland, and Church leaders, among others.¹⁸ In December 2022,¹⁹ the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence, and the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions issued a statement calling for the withdrawal of the Legacy Bill. In January 2023, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, raised concerns that the Legacy Bill would obstruct the rights of victims to effective remedies and would be incompatible with the UK's international human rights obligations.²⁰ This was a startling situation. The Legacy Act was condemned by all actors involved with transitional justice and the peace process within Northern Ireland and by the international human rights institutions to which the UK held legal obligations. Despite this, the UK unilaterally continued with the Legacy Act and rushed to implement it before the June 2024 UK General Election.

The Legacy Act has faced ongoing challenges in both domestic and international courts. This policy paper cannot comment on or predict any future court rulings. The families of victims have challenged the Act in Northern Ireland courts, leading to these several judgments. In February 2024, the Northern Ireland High Court ruled that the ICIR was lawful. However, it also found that the provisions granting immunity from prosecution and halting civil litigation were not compatible with the ECHR. Articles 2, 3, and 6 of the ECHR were violated. The Court of Appeal and the domestic courts have determined that the ICIR legal framework conflicts with the ECHR and the rights protected under Article 2 of the Windsor Framework.

An independent panel of human rights experts found that the Legacy Act was part of a "widespread, systematic and systemic" practice of impunity to protect members of the security forces and their agents from accountability.²¹ The Panel concluded that the ICIR possesses a significantly weaker investigative mandate compared to the judicial and police-led bodies it replaced.

¹⁶ Diane Duggan, "The Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 and the Irish Government Response," Royal Irish Academy, January 5, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/26x5y5a2>

¹⁷ *Equality Commission Finds Legacy Bill Process Breached NIO Equality Scheme*, Equality Commission, March 22, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/2v33ucuz>

¹⁸ Duggan, "The Northern Ireland Troubles."

¹⁹ "Rights Experts Urge UK to Redraft Controversial Northern Ireland Bill," UN News, December 15, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/3tpm2ear>

²⁰ "UK: Rights of Victims and Survivors Should Be at Centre of Legislative Efforts to Address Legacy of Northern Ireland Troubles – Türk," OHCHR, January 19, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/01/uk-rights-victims-and-survivors-should-be-centre-legislative-efforts-address>.

²¹ "Bitter Legacy: State Impunity in the Northern Ireland Conflict," Report of the International Expert Panel, April 29, 2024, <https://www.jus.uio.no/smr/english/about/id/docs/bitter-legacy-29-april-24.pdf>.

Other issues in the Legacy Act include the potential for the Act to interfere with devolved powers concerning policing and justice matters without obtaining the required consent from the legislature GFA.²²

The Legacy Act is a continuation of issues surrounding the implementation of international human rights law around impunity in Northern Ireland. The Panel found only a few examples where the UK Government complied with its obligations relating to Article 2 of the ECHR. According to their opinion, the State did not conduct fair and effective investigations into state killings, and the investigations failed the relatives' rights to truth, justice, and reparation. The Panel found that impunity has been afforded to the vast majority of those committing offences that would qualify under Article 3 of the ECHR.²³

The paragraphs above have discussed how the Legacy Act violates international human rights law politically and legally. There has been widespread international condemnation. Due to the court cases' rulings, reform must be taken so that the Legacy Act is compliant with international human rights law. But what type of action will be taken?

CHANGE OF COURSE?

In the 2024 King's Speech, the new UK Government committed to repealing and replacing the Legacy Act.²⁴ In July 2024,²⁵ Hilary Benn announced that the new Government would drop the appeals against the High Court ruling as they related to the ECHR incompatibility of the amnesty scheme and the ban on civil proceedings. This is essentially an admission by the UK Government that they did indeed infringe international law and will have to take action to amend it. This was a positive step towards returning to engagement with international law.

The UK Government's announcement of an inquiry into the death of Pat Finucane was also welcome, as international and domestic actors had called for it for a considerable period. However, campaigning by families for certain high-profile individuals is no substitute for the state's obligation to settle the past on a societal level. There are many forgotten and disappeared injustices of the Troubles, and they all deserve memory, truth, and justice. The Written Ministerial Statement of 7 October 2024²⁶ made it clear that the UK Government intends to enact minor reforms of the ICIR so that it would emulate inquests. The UK Government will only act to resolve the issues raised by the court cases, not to resolve the broader grievances with the entire Legacy Act raised by the international community. In December 2024, Hilary Benn addressed the criticism.²⁷ However, the issue is the lack of trust caused by the Legacy Act, which can only be solved by substantial reform. The ICIR was not designed to deliver reconciliation across multiple levels effectively.²⁸

²² Duggan, "The Northern Ireland Troubles."

²³ "Bitter Legacy: State Impunity in the Northern Ireland Conflict."

²⁴ "The King's Speech 2024," UK Government, July 17, 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-kings-speech-2024>.

²⁵ "Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy & Reconciliation) Act 2023," UK Parliament, July 29, 2024, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2024-07-29/hcws30>.

²⁶ "Written Ministerial Statement - Legacy - Northern Ireland," UK Government, October 7, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/d8rj634w>.

²⁷ "Northern Ireland: Legacy of the Troubles," UK Parliament, December 4, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/4umy8es6>.

²⁸ "[LPNI0016]," UK Parliament.

The then-Tánaiste Micheál Martin set out the position of the Irish Government in relation to the ICIR in a speech at the British-Irish Association Conference on 7 September 2024.²⁹ He called for a substantive “root and branch” reform of the ICIR to make it ECHR-compliant. The Legacy Act does not contain secondary repeal provisions, so to amend it, the UK Government will have to pass a new piece of legislation to either remove or amend the Act.³⁰ Since the process to amend the Act is as onerous as the process to remove it, the UK Government could remove the Legacy Act and use the legislation to transform the existing institution.³¹

The necessary changes to the ICIR to ensure that it is ECHR compliant already exist within the Stormont House Agreement. Other areas of legislative reform include independent appointments, removal of the national security veto, caseload provisions to ensure outstanding cases requiring ECHR-compatible investigations are investigated, financial autonomy, and independence requirements for investigators and oversight structures. There is already physical and financial infrastructure created for the ICIR – a building, IT systems, funding of up to £250 million – that could be used for a Historical Investigations Unit envisioned by the Stormont House Agreement. The Stormont House Agreement remains the basis for “maximising political consensus” on legacy.³² Other policy recommendations are shown below.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Remove the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery and replace it with the Historical Investigations Unit envisioned by the Stormont House Agreement.
- Incorporate all provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) into domestic law and ratify the Optional Protocol to the ICCPR.
- Draft a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights through a democratic process in consultation with civil society, interest groups, and political parties.
- Implement a bereavement payment scheme, as proposed by the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors Ian Jeffers.

²⁹ “Optimistic, but Not Complacent”: Tánaiste Calls for Reform to Avoid Another NI Political Stalemate,” *The Journal*, September 7, 2024.

³⁰ Luke Moffett, “Repealing the Legacy Act and Redressing the Troubles,” Queen’s Policy Engagement, July 8, 2024.

³¹ “What Could Substantive ‘Root and Branch’ Reform of the ICIR Look Like? And Would It Be Enough?” Committee on the Administration of Justice, November 28, 2024.

³² *Addressing the Legacy of Northern Ireland’s Past: The Model Bill Team’s Response to the NIO Proposals*, Queen’s University Belfast, 2021.

CONCLUSION

This paper argues that international law underpins the peace process and highlights international human rights obligations that remain unfulfilled in Northern Ireland. The Legacy Act exemplifies the UK's unilateral actions that violate international law. To fully change course, it is essential to return to the 2014 bilateral Stormont House Agreement and transform the ICRIIR into the HIU as envisioned there.

However, there is a broader context surrounding this paper. International law defines the current rules-based international order created at the end of the Second World War. Just as nations are imagined communities, international law is a shared belief between nations, an agreement and commitment for global consensus. This is the environment in which peace accords and post-conflict peacebuilding processes are enabled, from the European Union on the macroscale to Northern Ireland on the microscale. A rules-based international society is one of trust, where actors commit to their promises and where negotiations result in mutual action. Do we agree to a society where rules are obeyed and promises are kept? Can we trust each other? To have the ECHR's "mutual trust" in Northern Ireland, it is essential to repeal the Legacy Act and replace it with the institutions proposed by the Stormont House Agreement.

NORTHERN IRELAND EMERGING LEADERS BIO

CIARA CAMPBELL

International Policy Specialist

Ciara is an international policy specialist, with in-depth knowledge of UN and EU processes. She holds a BA in Politics from Queen's University Belfast and an MA in EU International Relations and Diplomacy from the College of Europe, Bruges. With a background in local community youth work and all-island peacebuilding initiatives, she has a range of experience across different policy areas, including education, trade, energy and human rights.

Digital Threats to Democracy: Tackling Online Violence Against Women in Northern Irish Politics

Aoife Clements

Founder, 50:50 NI and

PhD Researcher, Queen's University Belfast, School of Law

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Violence against women in politics (VAWP) has rapidly evolved with the rise of digital platforms, exposing women politicians to unprecedented levels of online abuse. The urgency of this issue cannot be overstated; it demands immediate attention and action. Online VAWP encompasses a range of gendered attacks, all of which threaten women's political participation and democratic integrity.² The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) categorizes cyber violence into three primary forms: cyberstalking, cyber harassment, and non-consensual pornography.³ The psychological toll of online abuse is severe, discouraging women from running for office, engaging in political discourse, and remaining in leadership positions. This further entrenches gender inequalities in governance, a reality that demands our empathy and understanding. In NI, online abuse against women in politics is exacerbated by a historical context of violence, sectarianism, and paramilitary influences.⁵ Despite existing laws criminalizing various forms of online abuse, gaps remain. The NI Executive Office's Strategy on Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) acknowledges these issues. However, a specific, unified policy targeting online VAWP is urgently needed to address this complex issue comprehensively.⁶

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Expand legislation on revenge porn to include deepfakes.
2. Create a toolkit outlining legal protections and reporting mechanisms.
3. Provide digital security and self-defense training.
4. Establish a peer support network for legal, mental health, and solidarity.
5. Update the NI Assembly's Code of Conduct to address online abuse.

Tackling online violence against women and girls is essential for safeguarding democratic participation, fostering gender equality, and achieving sustainable peace in Northern Ireland.

¹ End Violence Against Women Coalition and Glitch UK, *The Ripple Effect: COVID-19 and the Epidemic of Online Abuse* (2022).

² European Institute for Gender Equality, *Cyber Violence against Women and Girls*, (2017)

³ Ibid.

⁴ OSCE, *Addressing Violence against Women in Parliaments*, (2022)

⁵ Siobhán McAlister et al., "Gender, Violence and Cultures of Silence: Young Women and Paramilitary Violence," *Journal of Youth Studies* 25, no. 9 (2022): 1148.

⁶ NI Executive Office, *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls: Strategic Framework* (2024)

INTRODUCTION

Integrating social media and digital communication tools into politics has brought new opportunities for engagement. Still, it has also exacerbated the harassment and abuse faced by women in political spaces. VAWP is a persistent issue, with online platforms becoming the primary battleground where misogynistic abuse is weaponized to silence, intimidate, and deter women from political participation.⁷ This paper examines the prevalence, impact, and policy responses to online VAWP in NI. In this region, the intersection of gender-based abuse and political intimidation creates unique risks for women in public life.

Research from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and Glitch UK has documented the psychological, professional, and democratic costs of online abuse. A 2016 IPU study found that 81.8% of women politicians had experienced psychological violence, with online platforms being a major facilitator of harassment.⁹ In the UK, 75% of young women interested in politics cited online abuse as a deterrent to pursuing public office.¹⁰ Online VAWP is not merely an extension of general political violence; it is a gendered form of intimidation that aims to exclude women from decision-making spaces.¹¹

NI presents a particularly complex landscape for online VAWP. Sectarian divisions, the legacy of paramilitary activity, and entrenched gender biases mean that politically active women face dual layers of harassment, both as women and as public figures. Recent elections have seen female candidates targeted with deepfake pornography, orchestrated harassment campaigns, and threats of violence, with limited legal or institutional recourse to address these abuses.¹²

While existing legislation, such as the Justice Act (NI) 2016¹³ and the Online Safety Act (2023),¹⁵ offers some protections, gaps remain in areas like deepfake regulation, social media platform accountability, and victim-survivor support systems.

CONTEXT

VAWP is not a new issue and has been the subject of discourse and discussion since the 2000s.¹⁵ As new technologies have emerged in recent decades and political communications and discourse have moved to online platforms, democratizing media and politics, VAWP has begun manifesting in new ways.

⁷ Mona Lena Krook and Juliana Restrepo Sanín, "Violence Against Women in Politics: A Defense of the Concept," *Política y Gobierno* 23, no. 2 (2016): 459–490. https://mlkrook.org/pdf/pyg_2_eng_2016.pdf.

⁸ Glitch UK, *The Ripple Effect: COVID-19 and the Epidemic of Online Abuse*.

⁹ OSCE, *Addressing Violence against Women in Parliaments*.

¹⁰ Krook and Sanín, "Violence Against Women in Politics."

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² BBC News, "Why Are Female Politicians Still Facing So Much Abuse Online?"

¹³ Northern Ireland, *The Justice Act (2016)*.

¹⁴ UK Parliament, *The Online Safety Act (2023)*.

¹⁵ UN Women, *Violence Against Women in Politics: Expert Group Meeting Report and Recommendations*.

The integration of the internet and social media into our everyday lives has created new ways for perpetrators to enact violence against women (VAW) and, in particular, women in politics. A study by the Interparliamentary Union (IPU) in 2016 found that 81.8% of respondents, who were women in politics from across 39 countries, reported experiences of psychological violence.¹⁶ Online VAWP is a massive contributor to women in politics' experience of psychological abuse.

This paper examines online VAWP and presents key policy recommendations. In 2016, a survey carried out in the UK among young women who were participating in a program for aspiring women leaders showed that 75% of these women said online violence was a concern they considered when considering whether they would pursue a role in public life. VAWP and its online manifestations are a global problem, with similar statistics reported in Peru, Sweden, Bolivia, and Australia. It is essential to state that VAWP is a highly gendered issue, not merely a subset of more general violence against politicians, as some have argued.¹⁸ Mona Lena Krook and Juliana Restrepo Sanín convincingly assert that VAWP is distinct from general political violence.¹⁹ The abuse and harassment that women in politics experience online are very often gendered in language, taking the form of sexual harassment, rape threats, stalking, and online abuse.²⁰

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) categorizes online VAW, or as they have named it, cyber violence, in 3 categories: Cyberstalking and cyber Harassment,²¹ as well as Non-Consensual Pornography or 'revenge porn.' There are also emerging trends of live-streamed sexual assaults and the creation and distribution of deepfake pornography.²²

Online violence against women is alarming, prevalent, and highly harmful. The adverse effects of online VAWP are numerous and include **psychological harm** to the victim-survivors as well as **self-censoring and/or removing oneself from social media or politics altogether.**²⁴ Glitch UK, a leading non-profit around online safety, found that 77% of women who experienced online abuse modified their online behavior. In comparison, 72% reported feeling differently about using technology and social media. Online VAWP is, therefore, a serious and legitimate **threat to our democracy.** In addition, women in politics play a vital role in peacebuilding and cross-party collaboration. Historically, in NI, women have been central to community building, good relations, and working across divides. If online violence deters women from entering politics in NI, it is also a **threat to our peace process and ongoing reconciliation efforts.**

¹⁶ OSCE, *Addressing Violence against Women in Parliaments.*

¹⁷ Mona Lena Krook, 'Violence Against Women in Politics: A Defense of the Concept.'

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ionel Zamfir, *Violence Against Women Active in Politics in the EU, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), 2024,* [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2024\)759600](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2024)759600).

²⁴ Glitch UK, *The Ripple Effect: COVID-19 and the Epidemic of Online Abuse*

²⁵ UN Women, *Violence Against Women in Politics: Expert Group Meeting Report and Recommendations*

Women's right to equal and full participation in politics is enshrined in multiple international agreements and charters, including Article 21 of The UN Charter on Human Rights, Article 7 of The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention), UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, Sustainable development goals (SDGS) 5, gender equality and 16, Peace justice and strong institutions as well as The Good Friday Agreement Itself. Making online VAWP not only an issue of democracy but a **violation of women's human rights**.²⁶

In June 2016, Jo Cox, a British MP, was murdered. This was a somber and harrowing example of how online threats can manifest as real-world violence. Research has shown a direct link between the murder of Jo Cox and online violence, with studies showing her death was followed by 50,000 tweets celebrating her death.²⁷ The **link between online and offline violence** is particularly concerning in NI. This region has the highest rates of violence against women in Western Europe, making the likelihood of violence manifesting in political spaces unsurprising.²⁸

The harm that online VAWP causes to the human rights, psychological health, and physical safety of women, as well as the harm to our democracy and peacebuilding, means that addressing online VAWP requires urgent legislative and policy reforms. These reforms must ensure that women have access to robust and accessible reporting mechanisms to police and on social media platforms, that women can easily access justice for this harm via our criminal justice system, and that facilitators of this violence, such as social media platforms, are held to account for the role they play in enabling this violence.

ARGUMENT

The issue of online VAWP has gained international recognition in the last decade, prompting many states to be proactive about implementing various regulatory frameworks to address it. In the European Union (EU), the Digital Services Act (DSA) introduced stricter obligations for online platforms to remove illegal content, including gender-based abuse and disinformation campaigns targeting women in public life.²⁹ Bolivia explicitly criminalized the harassment of women in politics in 2012, and Canada's Online Harms Act mandates data reporting from tech platforms, providing a clearer picture of online harassment trends.³⁰ As established in the previous section, online VAWP is a gendered issue, distinct from general political violence.³¹ It exists within a broader framework of violence against women and misogyny, requiring a multi-faceted approach integrated into broader strategies addressing violence against women and girls.

²⁶ OSCE, *Addressing Violence against Women in Parliaments*.

²⁷ Diyana Dobрева, Daniel Grinnell, and Martin Innes, "Prophets and Loss: How 'Soft Facts' on Social Media Influenced the Brexit Campaign and Social Reactions to the Murder of Jo Cox MP," *Policy & Internet* 12, no. 1 (2020): 144, <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.213>.

²⁸ McAlister and others, 'Gender, violence and cultures of silence: young women and paramilitary violence.'

²⁹ European Union, *The Digital Services Act* (2022).

³⁰ UN Women, *Violence Against Women in Politics: Expert Group Meeting Report and Recommendations*.

³¹ Mona Lena Krook, 'Violence Against Women in Politics: A Defense of the Concept.'

In NI, online violence, mainly targeting women in politics, is recognized by the NI Executive Office's Strategy on Violence Against Women and Girls.³² This strategy highlights various forms of technology-facilitated violence, including cyberstalking, cyber flashing, sexual harassment, grooming for exploitation or abuse, image-based sexual abuse, and threats via emerging technologies such as Internet of Things (IoT) devices³³. Notably, it underscores the need for specific interventions to address the harassment of women in public life. As the first of its kind in NI, the strategy also addresses the accountability of perpetrators, aiming to support and challenge them to change their behavior, an essential step in combating online abuse.

CURRENT LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Several pieces of legislation in NI criminalize different forms of online violence:

- **The Justice Act (NI) 2016** criminalizes the non-consensual sharing of private sexual images or videos with the intent to cause distress.³⁴
- **The Communications Act and Malicious Communications (Northern Ireland) Order** make it an offense to send threatening, offensive, or distressing messages via email, text, or social media.³⁵
- **The Protection from Stalking (NI) Order and Harassment (NI) Laws** extend legal protections to victims of cyberstalking and online harassment.³⁶
- **The Fraud Act 2006** protects internet users from online fraud, impersonation, catfishing, and financial scams.³⁷
- **The Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Act (NI) 2022** criminalizes skirting.³⁸
- **The Domestic Abuse Act 2021** covers tech-facilitated coercive control, such as excessive social media monitoring, spyware use, digital threats, and tech-enabled sexual violence like revenge porn.³⁹

While this legislative framework is extensive, it faces three significant challenges, two of which remain unaddressed. The first major issue with the current legislative framework in NI is the **low conviction rates and lack of data**. Another issue is **legislative gaps, particularly concerning deepfake pornography**. The creation and distribution of deepfake pornography are not yet criminalized in NI. During the 2022 Assembly election, two MLA candidates were targeted with deepfake pornography.⁴⁰ As of January 2025, the perpetrator remains unidentified, leaving the victims without legal recourse or justice.⁴¹ The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) has stated that inadequate legislation and insufficient investment in cybercrime technology have hindered their ability to investigate and prosecute such offenses.⁴²

³² The Executive Office, *Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls* (Belfast: The Executive Office, 2024), <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/topics/ending-violence-against-women-and-girls>.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ireland, *The Justice Act*.

³⁵ Northern Ireland, *Communications Act (2003)*

³⁶ Northern Ireland, *The Protection from Stalking Act (2022)*

³⁷ Northern Ireland, *Fraud Act (2006)*

³⁸ Northern Ireland, *The Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Act (2022)*

³⁹ Northern Ireland, *The Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (2021)*

⁴⁰ News, 'Why are female politicians still facing so much abuse online?'

⁴¹ Ibid.

While NI law criminalizes the distribution of revenge porn, it fails to address deepfake pornography, a rapidly growing form of online sexual assault. The third major issue is a lack of accountability for social media platforms. The legal framework does not hold online platforms accountable for enabling abuse. The Online Safety Act 2023 addresses this gap at the UK level by introducing new legal responsibilities for tech companies, including being required to reduce harm by removing all harmful content from their platforms.⁴³ This bill establishes the Office of Communication (Ofcom), the UK's communications regulator, as the chief regulator and imposes criminal penalties for non-compliance.⁴⁴ The Act extends to NI and, in theory, complements existing legislation by holding online platforms accountable alongside perpetrators. However, scholars such as Huber and Ward have criticized the Act for focusing primarily on significant platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram while overlooking the role of smaller, problematic platforms, forums, and niche websites.⁴⁵ Activists have also highlighted the inefficiency of reporting mechanisms on social media platforms, with Glitch's report on online violence during the COVID-19 pandemic revealing that 83% of respondents had their abuse reports ignored or dismissed.⁴⁶

Currently, NI operates under a fragmented system where most forms of online violence are governed by separate laws rather than a unified legislative framework. Many women may realize that specific online abuses are criminal offenses. Additionally, the anonymity of online perpetrators makes identification challenging, and even when abusive users are removed from platforms, they can easily create new accounts without verification.⁴⁷

While the Online Safety Act introduces necessary accountability for tech companies by requiring harm prevention measures and increased transparency, it does not fully address the structural disconnection between NI's Department of Justice and Ofcom, the regulatory body responsible for enforcing the Act. The NI Strategy on Violence Against Women acknowledges this issue but, as a newly introduced initiative, lacks an established, unified policy specifically addressing online VAWP.

UN WOMEN AND OHCHR EXPERT RECOMMENDATIONS

In March 2018, UN Women, The Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR), The UN Special Rapporteur on VAW, its causes and consequences, The Interparliamentary Union (IPU), and The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) gathered 40 experts, including politicians, academics, activists, policymakers and UN professionals, to an expert group meeting in New York.⁴⁸ This group of experts discussed VAWP's causes and effects and recommended tackling this issue.

⁴³ Parliament, *The Online Safety Act*.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Zara Ward and Antoinette Raffaella Huber, "Non-Consensual Intimate Image Distribution: Nature, Removal, and Implications for the Online Safety Act," *European Journal of Criminology* 12, no. 1 (2024): 144-160, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14773708241255821>.

⁴⁶ N Glitch UK, *The Ripple Effect: COVID-19 and the Epidemic of Online Abuse*.

⁴⁷ Ward and Huber, "Non-Consensual intimate image distribution."

⁴⁸ UN Women, *Violence Against Women in Politics: Expert Group Meeting Report and Recommendations*.

The report covering this specialist group meeting has five overarching recommendations for preventing online VAW, protecting victim-survivors, and offering recourse to justice for VAW.⁴⁹ While these recommendations are focused on VAWP, I believe they provide a robust and thorough framework for tackling Online VAWP in NI. The recommendations address this issue's legal, technological, cultural, and institutional dimensions. In the following sections, I will briefly highlight each of the five recommendations and provide international examples of best practices in this area.

Strengthening Legal Protections

A strong legal framework is essential for combating VAWP effectively. Countries like Bolivia provide an example of this. Bolivia's Law No. 243 (2012) was the first legislation to criminalize political violence and harassment against women in politics explicitly.⁵⁰

Holding Social Media Platforms Accountable

Regulating social media companies is key to tackling online violence. Canada's Online Harms Act requires platforms to remove illegal content quickly, report enforcement measures, and establish mandatory content moderation protocols.⁵¹

Empowering Women Politicians Through Digital Security and Self-Defense

Women in politics face more significant risks online and require specialized training and peer support to keep themselves safe online. UN Women's global initiatives provide digital security training to female politicians. Some Nordic countries have implemented state-supported networks for women in politics to share experiences and strategies for online safety.⁵²

Raising Awareness and Promoting Cultural Change

Cultural attitudes underpin the normalization of online VAWP. Political parties and institutions must take the lead in shifting norms. Examples of how this has been tackled include the UK Parliament's Code of Conduct, which provides for online conduct.⁵³

Improving Data Collection and Research

A data-driven approach is critical for tracking patterns of abuse and shaping policy responses. Canada mandates data reporting from tech platforms, providing a clearer picture of online harassment trends.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

LESSONS FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Applying this approach to NI requires a nuanced understanding of the political, cultural, and security landscape that shapes online violence in this context. Online abuse in NI is distinct from that in other regions due to the intersection of misogyny and sectarianism, with politically active women often targeted through a combination of gendered harassment and sectarian intimidation.⁵⁵ For some, particularly those from unionist backgrounds, paramilitary-linked threats remain a genuine concern, exacerbating the dangers of engaging in political discourse online.

In terms of strengthening legal frameworks, one of the most pressing gaps in NI's response is the absence of a dedicated legal framework addressing online political violence against women. While existing laws address revenge porn and malicious communications, deepfake pornography remains unregulated, enabling perpetrators to exploit this loophole.⁵⁶ Strengthening legal protections would be a critical step in closing this gap. However, any new legislation must be accompanied by precise enforcement mechanisms to ensure that legal reforms translate into fundamental protections for women in politics.

Platform accountability remains another crucial area of concern. The UK's Online Safety Act can potentially improve tech company responses to online violence, but Ofcom's enforcement in NI needs monitoring to ensure compliance.⁵⁷ More must be done to ensure that platforms have accessible and user-friendly reporting mechanisms that result in timely actions, as most reports are currently ignored or overlooked.⁵⁸

Empowering women politicians through digital security training and peer networks is particularly relevant in NI, where the risks of online violence are high. Establishing cross-party peer support networks would offer a safe space for women politicians to share their experiences, report abuse, and develop strategies for navigating digital threats.⁵⁹ Currently, no cross-party peer network that functions in this manner in NI. Learning from Nordic countries, NI could incorporate digital self-defense training into political institutions, ensuring that women in politics have the skills and resources to protect themselves online.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ McAlister and others, 'Gender, violence and cultures of silence: young women and paramilitary violence.'

⁵⁶ News, 'Why are female politicians still facing so much abuse online?'

⁵⁷ Parliament, *The Online Safety Act*

⁵⁸ Ward and Huber, "Non-Consensual Intimate Image Distribution."

⁵⁹ UN Women, *Violence Against Women in Politics: Expert Group Meeting Report and Recommendations*

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Promoting cultural change is necessary to challenge the normalization of misogynistic and sectarian abuse in online political spaces. In NI's political landscape, many women encounter VAWP from within their own parties. Therefore, political parties should lead by example and establish internal anti-harassment codes of conduct that hold their members accountable online. Public awareness campaigns should present online harassment as a wider threat to democratic participation, rather than merely a personal issue that impacts individual women.⁶¹

Finally, improved data collection and research are essential for understanding the scale and impact of online violence in NI. A dedicated reporting mechanism for VAWP cases, combined with research into the intersection of misogyny and sectarianism, would provide valuable insights into how these forms of abuse manifest in NI's political landscape. Mona Lena Krook's work on the cultural context of political violence reinforces the need for tailored research that reflects the unique challenges faced by women politicians in NI.⁶²

This approach provides a comprehensive roadmap for tackling online VAWP in NI. By drawing insights from Bolivia's legal model, Canada's platform accountability framework, and Nordic empowerment strategies, NI can adopt a multi-faceted approach that ensures legislative reform, cultural change, and robust enforcement mechanisms.

A collaborative effort among government agencies, political parties, law enforcement, and civil society is essential to ensuring that NI's democratic institutions are safe and inclusive for women in politics.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A multidimensional, culturally specific approach is essential for effectively combating online VAWP in Northern Ireland. The following policy recommendations suggest key measures to enhance legal protections, empower women in politics, and ensure accountability for online abuse.

1. Expand Legislation on Revenge Porn to Include Deepfakes

The rise of deepfake technology threatens women in public life. Current revenge porn laws should be amended to criminalize the creation and distribution of non-consensual deepfakes intended to degrade or silence women. NI should adopt platform takedown requirements that are aligned with the EU's Digital Services Act.

⁶¹ Mona Lena Krook, 'Violence Against Women in Politics: A Defense of the Concept'

⁶² UN Women, *Violence Against Women in Politics: Expert Group Meeting Report and Recommendations*

2. Develop a Guide/Toolkit for Women in Politics

A practical guide should outline legal protections, detail the steps for reporting incidents, and describe available support services. It should include:

- Provide a clear overview and explanation of relevant cyber harassment laws.
- Detail reporting procedures for law enforcement and social media.
- Connect individuals to mental health and legal resources.
- Be regularly updated.

3. Implement Online Safety and Self-Defense Training

Mandatory training for women in politics should include the following:

- How to identify and respond to online abuse.
- Digital security basics: privacy settings, encryption, and secure apps.
- Coping strategies for psychological resilience.

4. Establish a Peer Support Network

This network should:

- Connect experienced and new women representatives.
- Provide access to legal, digital, and mental health experts.
- Partner with law enforcement on cybercrime.

5. Update the NI Assembly Code of Conduct

Revise the Assembly's Code to include online conduct. Parties should adopt internal rules that ban:

- Online harassment, hate speech, and cyberbullying.
- Retaliation against women reporting abuse.
- Coordinated disinformation targeting women in politics.

NORTHERN IRELAND EMERGING LEADERS BIO

AOIFE CLEMENTS**Founder and CEO, 50:50 NI**

Aoife is the Founder and CEO of 50:50 NI, a non-profit organization focused on advancing gender equality in Northern Ireland by increasing women's representation in politics. With a strong background in politics and women's rights, she leads initiatives that empower women to pursue political careers by offering training, resources, and support. Aoife holds a BA in Anthropology and Law from the London School of Economics, an MA in Socio-cultural Anthropology from Durham University, and is currently pursuing a PhD at Queen's University Belfast, researching the legal system's response to domestic abuse in Northern Ireland. Her work combines academic research and practical advocacy to address systemic barriers that hinder women's political representation, with a deep commitment to ensuring women's voices are heard and valued in public life.

Reassessing Academic Selection: Implications for Northern Ireland Education

Dr. Anne Devlin, PhD

Economist

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy paper examines Northern Ireland's selective academic selection system, which combines academic and religious segregation with ability-based streaming at the end of primary education. Unlike other parts of the UK and beyond that have moved towards inclusive educational models, Northern Ireland's approach raises concerns about equity and access. Intended to support disadvantaged students, the policy has ironically widened inequalities, as evidenced by significant disparities in educational outcomes between grammar and non-grammar schools. Despite parental resistance to the selection system, many feel compelled to engage with it for better opportunities, perpetuating social immobility and creating barriers for marginalized groups, including ethnic minorities and students with special educational needs. This paper proposes recommendations to promote a more equitable education system in Northern Ireland.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Initiate a transition plan away from selective education through comparative studies and by addressing the needs of the community.
2. Bring together stakeholders in a working group to facilitate the work above and the overall process of removing the selection system.
3. End the use of academic selection for admission to secondary education, as has been done in the rest of the UK.
4. Use the cost savings from reduced segregation to support those from disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed and thrive at school.

INTRODUCTION

Northern Ireland's (NI) education system is unique, even by global standards, due to its two-pronged segregation model. The system is divided along religious lines, with Catholic maintained schools primarily serving Catholic students, while the Controlled sector, consisting of state-managed schools, mainly enrolls Protestant students.

In addition to religious segregation, schools are categorized based on academic ability. This results in various types of institutions, such as Catholic-maintained grammar schools, Controlled Grammar schools, Catholic-maintained secondary schools (non-selective), and Controlled secondary schools.

The educational landscape is further complicated by the fact that some schools are segregated by gender. However, there is a small but growing number of integrated schools that aim to educate children from all faiths and backgrounds. Additionally, the Irish-medium sector is expanding, offering more opportunities for students to learn through the Irish language.

Another key feature of the Northern Ireland (NI) education system is academic selection, a process in which students, typically around the age of 10, take tests to determine their eligibility for grammar schools. This system, which sorts students into different post-primary schools based on perceived academic abilities, has been a subject of controversy for decades. While academic selection was introduced in Northern Ireland in 1947, similar to other parts of the United Kingdom, it remains the only region in the UK that continues to maintain this system.

While the education system in Northern Ireland has been lauded as world-class, recent research has challenged this view and highlighted significant issues of underachievement. While the education system performs well for some students, it does not adequately serve others. This has been, at least in part, attributed to the continued use of academic selection.¹

Those in grammar schools (selective schools) have much higher levels of educational attainment at ages 16 and 18 than those who attend non-selective schools.² A range of reports and studies over the years have found that children from less advantaged backgrounds have lower levels of educational attainment, and this is mainly the case for working-class Protestant boys.³ Given the documented relationship between socioeconomic background and the likelihood of attending a selective school, it is evident that academic selection plays a role in the underachievement of working-class children and overall exacerbating social inequality. The Human Rights Commission has made strong recommendations for the abolishment of a selective system within the NI education system.

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¹ Anne Devlin, Seamus McGuinness, Adele Bergin, and Emer Smyth, "Education Across the Island of Ireland: Examining Educational Outcomes, Earnings and Intergenerational Mobility," *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 34, no. 2 (2023): 30–47, <https://doi.org/10.1353/isia.2023.0001>.

² "Year 12 and Year 14 Examination Performance at Post-Primary Schools in Northern Ireland 2023/24." Northern Ireland Department of Education, December 5, 2024.

³ Noel Purdy, Joyce Logue, Mary Montgomery, Kathleen O'Hare, Jackie Redpath, and Feyisa Demie. "Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland," Northern Ireland Department of Education, May 2021.

⁴ "Annual Statement," Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, 2018.

CONTEXT

Academic selection was introduced in the United Kingdom in 1947 to provide better education opportunities to disadvantaged students. However, as evidence emerged, it became clear that the system did not work as intended and was exacerbating social inequalities.

When the actual outcomes of the policy became evident in the 1960s, there were moves away from this approach in Great Britain (GB) as it was deemed to not be inclusive, with those who did not go to grammar schools faring much worse and this being highly correlated with socioeconomic background. The post-primary education sector, as a result, then moved towards a comprehensive approach to schooling, where most young people attended the school closest to their homes. However, despite these changes in GB and the recognition of the inequalities it exacerbates in NI within an already divided society, academic selection as a policy, while changed to some degree, has been maintained in NI.

In 2022/23, there were 154,313 post-primary students enrolled in schools across Northern Ireland. Over sixty-five thousand were enrolled in grammar schools, equating to 43% of the post-primary population.⁵ There are considerable socioeconomic differences between those in grammar schools and those in non-selective secondary schools. Thirty-two percent of those enrolled in non-selective schools in 2022/23 were entitled to free meals. For grammar schools, this figure was 11%. The attainment gap between those eligible for free school meals and those who aren't is stark, with 57% of those entitled to free school meals receiving 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C, including English and Math, compared to 82% of those not eligible for free school meals.

ARGUMENT

The official school statistics reveal significant socioeconomic disparities between grammar and non-grammar schools, as well as stark differences in the outcomes for children attending selective schools compared to those attending comprehensive or non-selective schools. While causal research is complicated, it is clear that students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are often neglected because of the academic selection system. A robust study of underachievement in education in NI found that the continued use of academic selection had significant economic, social, and educational impacts on children.⁶ Furthermore, studies show that many parents do not support selection.⁷ Although they may enroll their children in the system, they often disagree with it, and still seek the best outcomes for their children. The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, along with numerous academics and other stakeholders, has also voiced opposition to the current practice.

⁵ Northern Ireland Department of Education, "Northern Ireland School Census: Irish Medium Education," 2023.

⁶ Leanne Henderseon, Jonathan Harris, Noel Purdy, and Glenda Walsh, "Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland," Belfast: Stranmillis University College Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement, 2020.

⁷ Smyth et al., "A North-South Comparison," 2022

Given that NI has the lowest spending per pupil on education in all UK jurisdictions, reducing segregation in the education sector is likely to have significant financial benefits (Education Policy Institute, 2021). While few studies examine the cost burden of segregating students by perceived academic ability and religion, it is likely, given the financial constraints in NI, that such division levels are inefficient. However, studies have examined the cost of religious segregation. Religious segregation, the costs associated with duplicating provision, and the costs associated with attempting to deal with division cost £226 million per year.⁸ The UU EPC has estimated that the education sector in NI takes somewhere between £16.5 million and £95 million extra to function compared to comparable UK regions.⁹

Furthermore, while academic selection was designed to identify and encourage perceived academic ability, its effects on various demographic groups, such as ethnic minorities and children with special educational needs, lead to exacerbating pre-existing inequalities. Young people from minority ethnic backgrounds face additional barriers in accessing grammar schools. These barriers include language difficulties, lack of familiarity with the education system, and limited access to preparatory resources. Therefore, ethnic minority students are underrepresented in grammar schools compared to their peers. This underrepresentation suggests that the current selection process may not adequately accommodate the diverse needs of these students, which is particularly important as NI becomes increasingly diverse.

Given this underrepresentation, ethnic minority young people may experience cultural and social isolation in grammar schools, which can impact their potential academic performance and overall well-being. This is also a problem for those from very disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, regardless of ethnicity, as they can feel very different from peers from more affluent backgrounds who have very different lived experiences both within and outside of the education system. Even if children are well assimilated within NI, parents from minority ethnic backgrounds may have less knowledge about the academic selection process and the benefits of grammar schools, thus affecting their children's chances of gaining admission or stopping their engagement with the process.

Children with special educational needs are often underrepresented in grammar schools, in part because high-stakes entrance exams are poorly suited to their needs. As a result, many of these children—particularly those with neurodiverse profiles who may excel academically with the right support—are excluded from the perceived advantages of a grammar school education. Children with SEN may already struggle with self-esteem and confidence due to the challenges they face in the education system. Experiencing failure in selection exams can intensify these issues and have a lasting impact on their emotional well-being.

⁸ Stephen Roulston and Matt Milliken, "The Cost of Division in Northern Ireland," Belfast: Ulster University (2023).

⁹ UUEPC, 2016.

This underrepresentation has broader implications. Non-selective secondary schools tend to have a higher proportion of students with SEN, which places additional demands on teaching staff. These schools often face these challenges with fewer resources than grammar schools typically have, further compounding the difficulties for both students and educators.

Although government-sanctioned academic selection no longer exists, its absence has been filled by private-sector testing. This shift risks further entrenching socioeconomic disparities, as families with greater means can access private tutoring and other resources to prepare their children for these exams. Issues have also been raised about the potential of these private tests to distort the curriculum¹⁰ and of their ‘dubious validity, reliability and comparability.’¹¹ Academic selection at the end of primary school must be abolished to ensure equal access to opportunities and strive for a world-class education system for all pupils in NI. The Northern Ireland Executive should legislate to abolish this practice. The Burns and Costello reports both recommended moving away from high-stakes testing towards more continuous assessment methods and more significant parental input. Despite widespread agreement among parents, teachers, and academics that academic selection does not serve young people well, political contention has stood in the way.

Given Northern Ireland's financial challenges with underfunded public services, there is a pressing need for reform across the public sector, particularly the education sector. Increased efforts to offer inclusive education in local schools would be more economical and help lower early school leaving rates, which are significantly higher in Northern Ireland than in other areas. Our neighbours to the south, in the Republic of Ireland, now have impressive educational attainment and student retention levels, despite having outcomes similar to those in Northern Ireland as recently as 2005. This is partly due to a more comprehensive schooling system, along with significant efforts to address educational disadvantage through policy, which also encompasses a variety of targeted initiatives such as the DEIS program.¹² Additionally, given the levels of segregation within NI society, reducing any form of segregation at the school level should positively impact societal cohesion.¹³

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The ongoing use of academic selection in Northern Ireland's education system poses several significant challenges, and notice must be paid to the range of stakeholders against the practice.

First, maintaining an education system segregated twice—by religion and perceived academic ability—is not financially viable, particularly considering the current budget limitations within NI and their effect on public services in NI.

¹⁰ Claire Shewbridge, Martin Hulshof, Deborah Nusche, and Lars Stenius Stær, *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Northern Ireland, United Kingdom*, Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2014.

¹¹ Jannette Elwood, “Assessment and Opportunity to Learn in the Context of Northern Ireland: Assessment and Examination Policy and Practice Development – for What and for Whom?” Keynote, Association of Educational Assessment Europe 12th Annual Conference (Belfast), 2011.

¹² Government of Ireland Department of Education (2020)

¹³ Hughes & Loader (2022)

Second, academic selection is harmful to children, contributing to stress and anxiety, as well as having long-term impacts on self-esteem and feelings of inferiority.

Third, academic selection limits the broadening of young people's networks, restricting their exposure to peers from similar areas and socioeconomic backgrounds; this will harm personal development and, more broadly, social cohesion.¹⁴ Secondary schools face higher relative needs due to social disadvantages, an increased share of SEN, and new communities, all of which require additional support and resources.

Therefore, this paper presents the following recommendations:

1. Initiate a transition plan away from selective education through comparative studies and by addressing the needs of the community.

Constructing a plan requires thorough research and comparative studies. While it may be challenging to find research on similar transitions elsewhere—especially since academic selection was removed in GB some time ago—developing a practical and logistical plan to support all schools and students is essential. There should be an emphasis on elevating everyone's opportunities. One consideration is how schools can fill their available places. Various options exist, such as prioritizing admission based on proximity to students' homes or using other criteria the department had previously applied when academic selection was discouraged. Various options exist, such as prioritizing admission based on proximity to students' homes or using other criteria the department had previously applied when academic selection was discouraged. Allowing pupils to attend the school closest to them could foster stronger communities around these schools, which is vital for supporting student success.

2. Bring together stakeholders in a working group to facilitate the work above and the overall process of removing the selection system.

The working group should include stakeholders from all school types, parents, children's representatives, academic experts in this area, and other stakeholders (e.g., Skills Council). This group could facilitate research and engagement with schools, staff, parents, and young people, enabling a stakeholder-informed approach to eliminating the selective system. Additionally, the working group could provide the Department of Education with feedback on best practices and practical steps to take. Surveys of parents and young parents, along with consultations, should inform the practical aspects of the steps.

¹⁴ Hughes & Loader (2022)

3. End the use of academic selection for admission to secondary education, as has been done in the rest of the UK.

However, given the increasing prevalence of SEN and the heterogeneity in students' abilities, some form of streaming may be useful within schools to allow children to follow the most suitable pathways for them and support teachers in their teaching.

4. Use the cost savings from reduced segregation to support those from disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed and thrive at school.

Utilize cost savings from reduced segregation to implement the measures recommended in the 'Fair Start' report. As has already been acknowledged in NI, tackling educational disadvantage will take a holistic, whole-community approach rather than just education interventions.¹⁵ In conclusion, this should lead to the case of 'rising tide lifts all boats.'

CONCLUSION

Academic selection does not have our children's well-being at its core and has significant negative ramifications for many of our young people. The grammar system fosters socioeconomic inequality between those from more socio-disadvantaged backgrounds and those from more affluent backgrounds. This is particularly important given the religious segregation, a feature of the NI education system. In a bid to reduce the socioeconomic segregation that the 11+ fostered, the shift from state-sanctioned selection to private-sector selection has only further exacerbated inequalities, as access to private tuition is now more important and thus more reliant on a family's financial resources. This system is not conducive to promoting equality, social mobility, and overall well-being for NI children, nor is it promoting societal cohesion in an already divided society. Supporting those from disadvantaged backgrounds would enable us to reduce that long tail of underachievement and, factually, claim that we do have a 'world-class education system' for all young people.

¹⁵ Purdy et al. (2021)

NORTHERN IRELAND EMERGING LEADERS BIO

DR. ANNE DEVLIN

Economist

Dr. Anne Devlin is a Research Officer in the Economic Analysis Division at the Economic and Social Research Institute in Dublin, focusing on labor economics, the economics of disability, the economics of education, and social inclusion. Her research also covers the Northern Irish and all-island economies, including education, cross-border workers, and the labor market. Anne holds a PhD in Economics from Queen's University Belfast, where her research explored the relationship between high levels of disability in Northern Ireland and the conflict. She has taught at Queen's and Ulster University and is a Visiting Researcher at Queen's Business School. Anne actively shares her research through media, blog posts, podcasts, and social media.

Arts in Our Culture

Doire Finn

Social Democratic and Labour Party, Arts and Culture Spokesperson

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Northern Ireland faces a growing crisis in public services, exacerbated by cost-of-living issues and government instability. Although the restoration of the Executive and Assembly in February 2024 provided some stability, significant damage to public services remains, particularly affecting arts programs that operate on limited funding.

Despite some funding from government departments, this paper advocates for a more integrated approach to enhance the cultural and societal impact of arts initiatives. It emphasizes the need to strategically embed arts programs within the operations of various government departments in Northern Ireland.

Sections 1 to 3 discuss practical projects that can be implemented to better incorporate arts and culture into societal frameworks while respecting budget limitations. The analysis shows how the arts can improve health, education, and overall well-being outcomes.

Currently, arts funding in Northern Ireland is primarily overseen by the Department for Communities. This paper identifies opportunities for other departments to make arts more central to their agendas, suggesting that redistributing responsibilities and addressing funding gaps could strengthen the arts sector and foster interdepartmental collaboration within the Northern Ireland Executive.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Social prescribing pilot for arts activities with young people**, using the Crisis Café model as a case study.
- **Creation of the 'Save a Seat' initiative**, which would involve schools partnering with local theatres to establish a fund for school-age students to attend the performances.
- **Establishment of an all-island arts and culture register** to better track and support the development of arts and cultural initiatives across the region.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

In Northern Ireland, the arts sector faces severe financial challenges due to a decade of substantial funding cuts. Over the last ten years, a 40% reduction in the Arts Council budget has profoundly affected local artists, producers, and the cultural community.¹ These cuts harm an already fragile arts community and speak to a culture where systemic underfunding of the arts in Northern Ireland has become normalized.

Compared to other regions, Northern Ireland, along with the broader UK, exhibits a concerning trend of underfunding the arts, reflecting a clear lack of prioritization in cultural investment.

Figure 1 provides a regional perspective on spending, showing the difference between Northern Ireland and its neighbors, particularly the Republic of Ireland and England. This data is particularly striking when you consider the geographic proximity of locations on either side of the border, which receive vastly different levels of investment.

Arts spending in the UK is relatively low compared to Europe, as it falls toward the bottom of the spectrum. Specifically, the UK's cultural spending is 0.46% below the average.²

FIGURE 1: CULTURE SPENDING PER CAPITA IN THE UNITED KINGDOM ²

LOCATION	SPEND PER CAPITA
Northern Ireland	£5.07
Republic of Ireland	£25.90
England	£9.50
Scotland	£16
Wales	£10.51

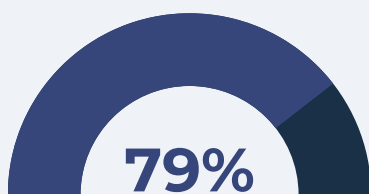
¹"Creatives Unite on Northern Ireland Arts Funding Call." 2025a. Equity. February 4, 2025. <https://www.equity.org.uk/news/2025/creatives-unite-on-northern-ireland-arts-funding-call>

² Ibid.

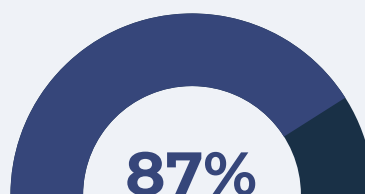
The Northern Ireland Arts Council, the funding and development organization for the arts in Northern Ireland, states in its strategic plan for 2024-2034 that it believes the arts hold fundamental value, not only financially but also in their contribution to society's overall well-being and culture richness. This is a view that can be broadly reflected in the opinions of the general population following a 2023 General Population Survey commissioned by the Council and seen in the figure below.³

While the above research indicates that respondents recognize the value of the arts in society, when asked to rank their priorities in the same study, the arts were placed 7th out of 9 priorities, which included health, well-being, and education. This paper explores options for integrating the arts into these higher-priority areas, such as health outcomes, while also highlighting how the arts can contribute to the delivery of other funding priorities.

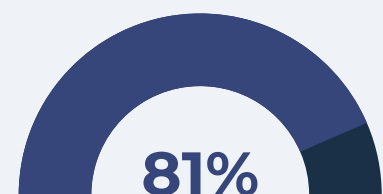
FIGURE 2: 2023 GENERAL POPULATION SURVEY COMMISSIONED BY THE NORTHERN IRELAND ARTS COUNCIL



The percentage of respondents who agreed with the statement **'I believe it is right that there should be investment in arts and cultural organisations'**



The percentage of respondents who believe that arts and creativity play a role in good **health and wellbeing**



The percentage of respondents who believe that arts and creativity **contribute to creating a shared future/cohesive communities**

INITIATIVE 1: SOCIAL PRESCRIBING & CRISIS CAFÉ

This section presents a case for implementing social prescribing in arts initiatives, highlighting the Crisis Café in Newry as a model for testing and developing this approach for other organizations. It emphasizes the potential impact of this organization on community well-being and mental health.

³ Arts Council of Northern Ireland, General Population Survey 2022-23, <https://artscouncil-ni.org/resources/general-population-survey-2022-23>.

Social prescribing involves helping patients improve their health, well-being, and social welfare by connecting them to community services often run by a council or a local charity.⁴ In Northern Ireland, there are several notable examples of social prescribing where sports have been used as a tool. Similarly, the arts can help reduce stress, improve physical health, and support mental health, allowing participants to engage creatively with others.

Take the Crisis Café as an example. This youth-focused organization provides a safe place for young people in crisis or who need mental health support. The café was opened to bridge the gap in young people's access to mental health support and to overcome the obstacles to accessing this help.

Crisis Café runs a comprehensive program of activities for young people, including café training alongside mental health facilities for young people. Despite providing these essential services, they receive no central funding from the Department of Health.

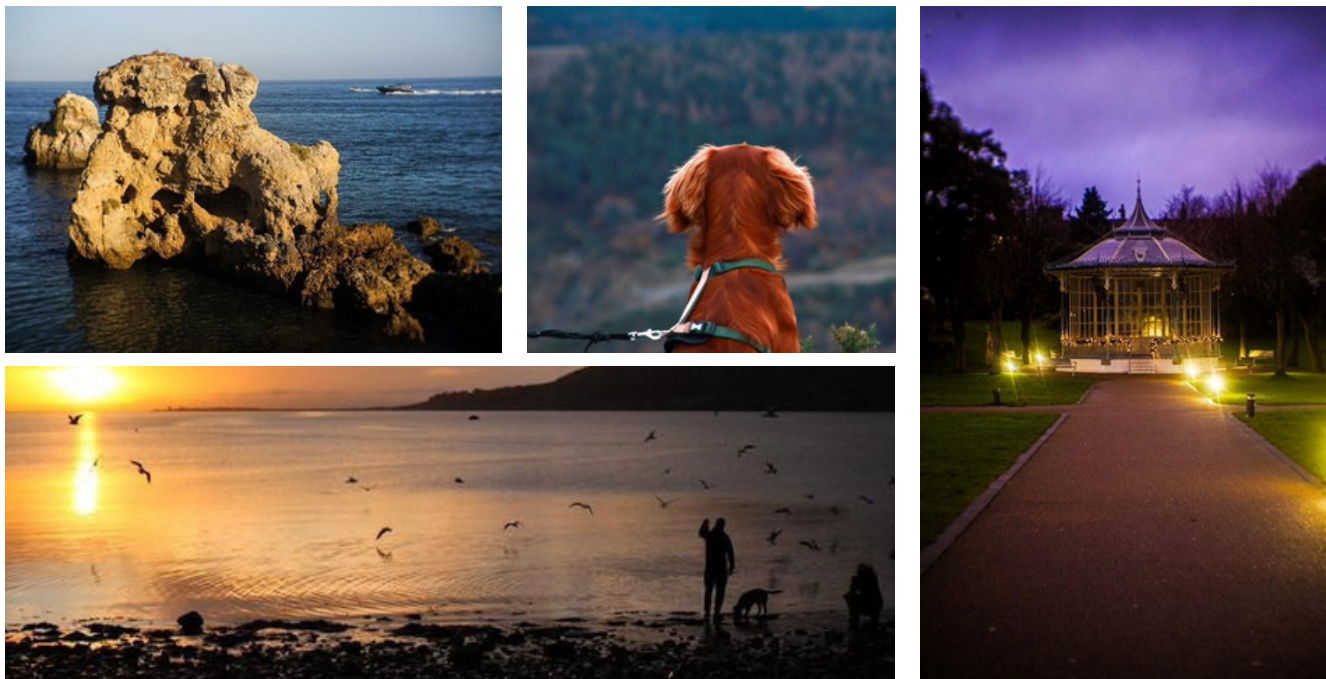
The organization offers a range of artistic classes, such as music, photography, and crafts, making it an excellent example of social prescribing in action within a community. The young people are supported in taking on leadership roles within the café, drawing on their strengths and talents and using them to benefit other members of the café. This holistic approach empowers young people and fosters a sense of community and personal growth, demonstrating the profound impact of integrating arts and mental health support.

The lived experience of the café can be conveyed through one of its attendees, Jack Cunningham. Jack attended the Crisis Café for support and participated in photography workshops, as this was something that he was passionate about. Throughout his time in the café, he developed his photography skills and now runs classes with other participants. He said that his favorite part of the café was witnessing the impact of attending groups like photography and music on the young people who participated. Jack's reflections on the benefits he received from the Crisis Café are echoed by the café's manager, Louise Quinn, who described the transformation as incredible. She highlighted the contrast between the young people who walk through the café doors for the first time and those who spend time working with her and their peers.

The model of the Crisis Café in Newry provides a real-world, working example of how the social prescribing model has the potential to provide mental health support to young people in communities through artistic and cultural activities.

⁴ NHS England. 2019. "NHS England» Social Prescribing." England.nhs.uk. 2019. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/contact-us/privacy-notice/how-we-use-your-information/public-and-partners/social-prescribing/>.

VISUAL INSIGHTS FROM CRISIS CAFÉ:
PHOTOGRAPHS BY A PROGRAM PARTICIPANT



Images shared by participant Jack Cunningham (mentioned above), reflecting his positive experiences at Crisis Café.⁵

INITIATIVE 2: THE 'SAVE A SEAT' PROGRAM

This section presents the 'Save a Seat' program, enhancing theatre access for low-income communities in Northern Ireland through seat donations. It highlights cultural participation as a human right and addresses barriers faced by disadvantaged groups in attending arts events.

The "Save a Seat" program aims to improve theatre access for low-income communities by partnering with theatres and schools across Northern Ireland. The initiative would create a platform for theatre-goers to donate seats, enabling school students to attend performances either for free or at a significantly discounted rate. This effort seeks to make theatre more accessible and inclusive, giving students from all backgrounds the opportunity to experience the arts.

The UN Declaration of Human Rights enshrines the right of every individual to freely participate in and enjoy cultural life, including access to artistic expression and creative experiences.⁶ Unfortunately, in the lived experience of many in Northern Ireland and beyond, this is not always the case.

⁵Jack Cunningham, *photographs from Crisis Café*, in author's possession.

⁶"Universal Declaration of Human Rights Preamble." n.d. Accessed April 1, 2025. <http://un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2021/03/udhr.pdf>.

Recent statistics from the Department of Communities cite cost as a significant reason adults cannot attend arts events.

A central component of the initiative will be the option for theatre attendees to purchase an additional seat (or partially contribute to the cost of a seat) for a performance at the theatre or venue. These organizations will then partner with schools or local youth groups, particularly those who are underrepresented or low-income, so that they can attend a live theatre performance.

Although this initiative might not fit every theatre or arts event – such as community theatres with limited seating, short performance runs, or specific dates – it presents various advantages. It can significantly improve engagement with the arts and theatre among diverse socioeconomic groups, promote access for school attendees to matinée and off-peak performances, and positively influence the host organization by reducing empty seats during these less busy times.

INITIATIVE 3: CREATION OF AN ARTS AND CULTURE REGISTER

This section emphasizes the need for a unified approach to support the arts and culture sector by proposing a culture register aimed at enhancing engagement and securing funding.

The island of Ireland is renowned worldwide for its rich cultural and artistic presence. Our creative cultural output means we punch well above our weight compared to our relatively small population size. Although our cultural communities are rich and diverse, they remain fragmented and can be difficult to engage with, even for those within these communities.

With this in mind, this paper proposes establishing an arts and culture register to enable creatives across the island, beginning with Northern Ireland, to connect. Such a register would be a centralized database or directory, enabling creatives across the island, starting with Northern Ireland, to connect. This would greatly facilitate knowledge-sharing and resource-pooling, providing a clear picture of projects undertaken, highlighting surpluses and deficits in each of these projects, and identifying areas experiencing funding shortages.

The need for a centralized register has been statistically supported. According to recent figures from the Department of Communities, illustrated in figure 4, the distribution of funding for the arts in Northern Ireland is significantly inequitable across our council areas, even when considering the relative populations of these areas.⁷

⁷ Northern Ireland Assembly, *The Northern Ireland Assembly*, Hansard, January 14, 2025, [NI Assembly Hansard. 2025. "The Northern Ireland Assembly." Niassembly.gov.uk. 2025. https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/report.aspx?&eveDate=2025-01-14&docID=422083#AOO%201351/22-27](https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/report.aspx?&eveDate=2025-01-14&docID=422083#AOO%201351/22-27).

FIGURE 3: FUNDING DISTRIBUTION FOR THE ARTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND BY THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITIES ⁸

EXCHEQUER AND LOTTERY FUNDING	2022/23	2023/24
LOCAL AUTHORITY AREA	PERCENTAGE (%)	PERCENTAGE (%)
Antrim and Newtownabbey	0.61	0.98
Ards and North Down	2.20	2.40
Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	2.66	2.51
Belfast	70.75	71.06
Causeway Coast and Glens	1.83	1.83
Derry and Strabane	12.97	12.00
Fermanagh and Omagh	1.65	1.61
Lisburn and Castlereagh	0.94	0.76
Mid and East Antrim	0.41	0.64
Mid Ulster	1.42	1.40
Newry, Mourne and Down	2.60	3.18
Other	1.97	1.64
Grand Total	100.00	100.00

⁸ Northern Ireland Assembly, *The Northern Ireland Assembly*.

While most arts organizations are located in Belfast, the figures presented in Figure 4 clearly show that the distribution of the already limited funding available is far from equitable. This issue could be attributed to the absence of a comprehensive view of arts organizations operating in Northern Ireland. Insufficient information makes it nearly impossible to guarantee that all groups receive timely and appropriate support.

Establishing an arts and culture register would yield numerous benefits. It would allow artists across Northern Ireland to register the nature of their work, the services they provide, and the individuals who can participate. Such information would enhance public access to the arts within their communities, enrich these cultural institutions, promote increased community engagement in the arts, and even create opportunities for individuals to participate and create themselves.

This register would also greatly benefit local organizations by enabling them to share assets, resources, and connections with other groups working on similar projects. For example, when organizing a stage show, sourcing sets, props, costumes, and other essential elements can be difficult and costly. The register would make it easier for organizations to pool, loan, and exchange these resources. By integrating this program, organizations could reduce waste, minimize unnecessary spending (often from artists' own pockets), and lower the risk of lacking the necessary resources for successful projects.

Being listed on this register would also enable the Northern Ireland Arts Council to more effectively identify key opportunities. The register enhances the visibility of organizations, increasing the likelihood that their funding requests will be recognized and considered. It would allow artists and organizations to submit detailed funding requests that clearly outline their needs and project timelines. With more transparency and easily accessible information, the Arts Council would be better positioned to pinpoint the most promising opportunities and allocate resources where they are needed most.

The register of artists provides an opportunity to foster a thriving ecosystem of creatives across Northern Ireland. If such a program is successful, it could act as a powerful case study to advocate an expansion towards an all-Ireland platform. Collaborating with institutions such as the Shared Island initiative could establish a comprehensive compendium of cultural actors across the island, maximizing the creative potential of this wonderful place.

SECTION 3: PROMOTING CULTURAL INTEGRATION AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

This policy paper outlines multiple strategies to integrate the arts more deeply into our culture by improving funding distribution across various government departments in Northern Ireland. While some initiatives are already underway, numerous unexplored opportunities remain that can be cultivated to strengthen the role of the arts in governance. Northern Ireland boasts a vibrant and internationally recognized arts scene, fueled by the dedication of talented professionals and passionate volunteers who operate on limited budgets. By promoting the arts within government departments, we can foster a culture that values the arts sector and allows departments to participate in collaborative projects that could ultimately lessen redundant spending over time.

The greatest potential of these initiatives is in better recognizing the value that cultural institutions bring to our communities. By achieving this, we can greatly enhance the opportunities for our citizens to engage with arts and culture in their lives.

This paper has examined only a few of the Stormont Departments; many more areas could be explored to enhance the integration of the arts into the government. If the policy recommendations presented in this paper are implemented, their positive results could serve as compelling evidence to gain support from other departments.

SECTION 4: CONCLUSION

This paper outlines the case for embedding within a selection of our government departments. If these actions were to be implemented, they would provide a foundation for a society that places the right amount of value on our artists while at the same time allowing those who may not have had the chance to experience our outstanding cultural communities. It will support the development of an ecosystem where artists can connect, share knowledge, and collaborate. Successfully integrating these initiatives would combine art with our public services, enabling us to achieve goals they are currently struggling to meet.

Northern Ireland is a hub for arts, culture, and creativity; however, our government departments have yet to adequately recognize and support these areas effectively. Through creative thinking and pragmatic policy implementation, we can make artists feel valued and simultaneously enrich the lives of our citizens while placing the arts at the heart of our culture.

APPENDIX

1: Follow up to Oral Question AQO 1351/22-27 raised January 14, 2025 at the Northern Ireland Assembly assessing the current budgetary position of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.⁸

EXCHEQUER AND LOTTERY FUNDING	2022/23	2023/24
Local Authority Area	Percentage (%)	Percentage (%)
Antrim and Newtownabbey	0.61	0.98
Ards and North Down	2.20	2.40
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Causeway Coast and Glens	1.83	1.83
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Fermanagh and Omagh	1.65	1.61
Lisburn and Castlereagh	0.94	0.76
Mid and East Antrim	0.41	0.64
Mid Ulster	1.42	1.40
Newry, Mourne and Down	2.60	3.18
Other	1.97	1.64
Grand Total	100.00	100.00

⁸ Northern Ireland Assembly, "AQO 1351/22-27," accessed April 16, 2025, <https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/questions/oralsearchresults.aspx?&qf=0&qfv=1&ref=AQO%201351/22-27>.

NORTHERN IRELAND EMERGING LEADERS BIO

DOIRE FINN

Social Democratic and Labour Party, Arts and Culture Spokesperson

Doire is a 30-year-old SDLP Councillor from Newry. She co-founded the political advocacy group Our Future Our Choice Northern Ireland, aware as a young woman from a border area of the devastating impacts that Brexit would have on Northern Irish society. Following this work Doire began working for the SDLP with Northern Ireland opposition leader Matthew O'Toole MLA.

Rural Roots, Future Leaders: A Comprehensive Review of Rural Youth Work

Conor Forker

Chairperson of Clonmore Youth Club

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rural youth work in Northern Ireland is crucial for supporting young people in dispersed communities, comprising nearly one-third of the region's population. However, it faces significant challenges, including underfunding, logistical issues, and limited mental health support. While rural youth work fosters personal growth, reduces social isolation, and promotes cross-community engagement, it is often overlooked and vulnerable to sudden closures due to reliance on short-term grants and volunteers.

Many rural areas are disadvantaged by population-based funding criteria, leaving young people without consistent, local services that could improve their social and emotional well-being. Mental health concerns are particularly acute, with higher rates of youth anxiety and depression, compounded by intergenerational trauma from the region's conflict. Access to specialist services like Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and special educational needs support (SEND) is limited, further isolating rural youth.

This paper offers key recommendations to address these issues: (i) developing a co-designed Rural Youth Strategy with cross-departmental collaboration; (ii) introducing a Rural Youth Fund and rural weighting in funding formulas; (iii) improving transport and accessibility with a Rural Youth Travel Pass and community services; (iv) expanding mental health support through youth worker training and mobile units; and (v) strengthening the rural youth workforce with salary uplifts, training, and volunteer support.

CURRENT CONTEXT

With approximately one-third of Northern Ireland's population residing in rural areas, promoting youth voices, ensuring equitable access to opportunities, and providing socio-emotional support for personal development are key priorities for youth workers. In particular, volunteers often lead youth work in rural areas, and these services frequently become essential for young people. They serve as meeting spaces for friends, educational centers, food and internet providers, and emotional and social hubs where young people can explore and connect with the world around them.

Youth Work in Northern Ireland combines voluntary and community-led provisions and statutory provisions provided by the Education Authority (EA), often centered in the large towns and cities throughout the province. "A Model for Effective Practice" has primarily been the definitive framework utilized by the Youth Service across Northern Ireland through Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion principles. The framework promoted by the Department of Education has largely been successful in helping to standardize the delivery of youth work across the region while ensuring that youth work continues to operate based on core values of voluntary participation, meeting young people "where they are," and promoting a program to test their moral values and beliefs.¹

However, despite the vital role of youth work in peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, rural youth services have remained underdeveloped in favor of centralized youth work in urban populations. Many rural settlements have no access to any youth services, resulting in increased social isolation and voluntary sector instability. In 2022/23, the Education Authority engaged over 130,000 young people through 1,403 registered youth organizations.² However, those in villages and dispersed rural settlements continue to face logistical challenges.³

As in many countries and regions, rural and coastal communities often face geographical isolation due to limited transport links and poor infrastructure connecting villages, resulting in a high need for families and young people to drive outside their communities to access many essential services. The need to travel to access schools, work, and other social activities can lead to poor intercommunity links, resulting in many rural communities relying on volunteers to staff and manage youth programs, extracurricular activities, and social opportunities. Chronic underfunding impedes these programs, and the absence of dedicated venues obstructs consistent engagement and growth for the organization.

Going beyond this funding crisis, many young people facing mental health challenges or needing specialist neurodivergent provision can struggle to fully access these voluntary rural youth programs, which may not be adapted to suit their needs, exacerbating their feelings of isolation.

¹ Youth Work NI, "Youth Work: A Model for Effective Practice," 2003, http://credni.open.wp-dev.web.tibus.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Core_Principles_full_colour_doc_.pdf.

² Department of Education, "Youth Service | Department of Education," Education, September 3, 2015, <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/youth-service>.

³ Education Authority Youth Service, "Needs of Rural Young People," June 1, 2019, <https://eanifunding.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/EA-Youth-Service-Research-Needs-of-Rural-Young-People-2019-1.pdf>.

While youth workers frequently step in as informal counselors and mentors, they often lack the necessary resources and specialized training to address more complex psychological needs.

This review shows similar challenges in rural regions across the UK and the Republic of Ireland. However, Northern Ireland's unique legacy of conflict and persistent political and financial uncertainties complicate the delivery of youth services. Without the development of a focused rural youth work strategy to address the specific demands of rural communities, disparities will continue to widen.

CHALLENGES FACING RURAL YOUTH WORK

The unique blend of funding shortfalls, volunteer shortages, and limited access to basic services continuously places pressure on the volunteers and communities supporting rural youth work. Despite its vital role in keeping young people engaged, supported, and connected to their communities, many rural-based young people often have few opportunities to voice their opinions, with many crucial regional youth organizations located in Belfast or Derry. Without targeted investment and policy action, rural youth services in Northern Ireland will continue to face significant challenges, leaving thousands of young people at a disadvantage compared to the opportunities available to their urban peers. Each challenge is outlined and discussed below.

FUNDING SHORTAGES AND SERVICE SUSTAINABILITY

Adequate funding is the cornerstone of any sustainable youth service; however, chronic underinvestment has hindered rural youth work in Northern Ireland. Public funding allocations are determined by population density and deprivation indices, which can disadvantage rural communities where needs are more dispersed. Youth clubs and projects in small towns and villages often operate on shoestring budgets, making them vulnerable to closure when grants are cut or delayed. Stakeholders across Ireland consistently highlight inadequate funding for rural youth services as a critical concern. In the Republic of Ireland, for example, youth workers reported that current funding fails to meet the extra costs of delivering services in remote areas (such as transport for outreach) and does not scale to the specific needs of rural youth.⁴ Northern Ireland's rural youth groups face similar struggles.

In 2023, the Department of Education proposed significant cuts to Youth Service programs as part of budget savings, but a last-minute U-turn spared youth services from immediate cuts.⁵ This uncertainty creates a volatile environment for rural projects trying to plan for the long term, highlighted by a 50-year-old youth club in South Armagh threatened with closure after an initial £33,000 cut to core funding, which led to total loss of all funding.

⁴ Marie-Claire McAleer, "Youth Work in Rural Ireland," National Youth Council for Ireland, November 2019, <https://www.youth.ie/Wp-Content/Uploads/2019/11/NYCI-Youth-Work-In-Rural-Ireland-Draft-V18aw.pdf>.

⁵ Department of Education, "Department of Education Protects Funding for Vulnerable Children and Young People," Education, June 1, 2023, <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/department-education-protects-funding-vulnerable-children-and-young-people>.

Local councilors described the process as “nothing short of a disgrace,” noting that the club serves one of the most deprived rural areas yet was deemed ineligible under the new criteria.⁶ This example highlights how funding processes often ignore deep-rooted rural needs, jeopardizing longstanding services.

To tackle the significant challenges rural youth services face, dedicated funding models have been successfully implemented across the UK, providing valuable insights for Northern Ireland. Children in Need’s Big Sky Fund exemplifies this approach by delivering targeted, multi-year grants specifically designed for small organizations in isolated rural areas, factoring in increased transport, staffing, and sustainability costs to build long-term capacity.⁷ Similarly, Scotland’s Youth Scotland Rural Action Fund highlights the effectiveness of sustained, rural-specific investments.⁸ Adapting these models—particularly by establishing stable, multi-year funding streams that consider the unique financial barriers of rural service delivery—could significantly enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of Northern Ireland’s rural youth work sector.

GAPS IN MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING SUPPORT

Rural youth in Northern Ireland regularly face significant challenges in accessing mental health and well-being services. While not a unique issue to NI, Youth Wellbeing NI Survey highlighted that one in eight children and young people (12.6%) had an emotional disorder such as anxiety or depression, and studies indicate that adults in Northern Ireland experience 25% higher rates of common mental health disorders than England, Scotland and Wales.⁹ The widespread prevalence of poor mental health is underscored by a recent report showing that 45.2% of 16-year-olds exhibit signs of probable mental ill-health, with the rates even higher among females (52.9%).¹⁰ Mental health is a significant issue for young people, especially in rural areas with limited services, compounded by the lasting effects of intergenerational trauma from the Troubles.

One of the foremost barriers to accessing mental health services for rural youth is geographic isolation. As a County Waterford youth worker in ROI notes, “all the services for issues like anxiety are based in the city,” making it difficult for young people in rural areas to access professional support.¹¹ Mental health facilities and specialist support services—including Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), support for disabilities and special educational needs (SEND), and dedicated LGBTQ+ resources—are typically located in urban centers. Consequently, young people in rural areas must travel significant distances to access essential services, a burden exacerbated by inadequate public transport and infrastructure in these regions.

⁶ Donal McMahon, “South Armagh Youth Club Facing Closure after 50 Years Thanks to Cuts,” Belfast Live, February 28, 2023, <https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/education-authority-accused-gaslighting-south-26353750>.

⁷ BBC Children in Need, “Big Sky Programme - BBC Children in Need,” BBC Children in Need (BBC Children In Need, March 13, 2025), <https://www.bbcchildreninneed.co.uk/grants/the-work-we-do/our-focussed-funding/a-million-and-me/a-million-and-me-partners-and-collaborations/big-sky-programme/>.

⁸ Youth Scotland, “Rural Action Fund,” Youth Scotland, March 5, 2025, <https://www.youthscotland.org.uk/programme/rural-action-fund/>.

⁹ L Bunting et al., “The Mental Health of Children and Parents in Northern Ireland: Results of the Youth Wellbeing Prevalence Survey,” 2020, https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/219940525/Youth_Wellbeing_FINAL.pdf.

¹⁰ Nicole Bond and Siobhan O’neill, “Factors Affecting Mental Health and Wellbeing in Children and Young People in Northern Ireland,” 2023, https://www.mentalhealthchampion-ni.org.uk/files/mentalhealthchampionni/2023-08/MHC%20KLT-YLT%20Report%20FINAL_1.pdf.

¹¹ McAleer, “Youth Work in Rural Ireland.”

This transport issue is particularly acute in border areas, where services may be divided by jurisdictional boundaries, creating additional logistical and administrative barriers for young people seeking support.

Furthermore, the availability of mental health services is highly uneven. The Western Health and Social Care Trust covers large rural areas and has one of the highest CAMHS waiting lists, with 353 young people waiting over nine weeks for assessment in late 2024.¹² In contrast, the Southern Health Trust, which encompasses large rural communities around dense urban centers, currently has a reduced waiting list, with no young people waiting longer than nine weeks, highlighting stark regional disparities. Such discrepancies demonstrate the systemic neglect faced by rural communities and underscore the urgent need for policy-driven solutions designed to ensure equitable access to mental health resources for all young people, irrespective of location.

Youth work is a vital tool for reducing the prevalence of mental health issues. With many rural clubs operating on small weekly sessions, these can have an overwhelming impact, counterbalancing some of the challenges felt due to the lack of rural mental health services. By offering social spaces and trusted adults, these communities can prevent minor struggles from escalating into major mental health issues, providing meaningful engagement and a supportive network for their members. Many youth clubs provide key learning opportunities, such as emotional regulation, through various arts and crafts, sports, and educational programs. These all help to prevent young people from internalizing distress, combat isolation, and reduce the risk of depression, self-harm, or substance misuse.

DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT ON MARGINALIZED RURAL YOUTH

Youth work can also help to overcome the social stigma in tight-knit rural communities, which also acts as a significant deterrent to seeking help, particularly for young people from LGBTQ+ backgrounds or those experiencing family difficulties (Mental Health Champion NI, 2023b). In small communities, the fear of being recognized when attending counseling or seeking dedicated LGBTQ+ support can prevent young people from accessing services.

Similarly, Traveller youth face severe marginalization, often living in remote, under-serviced areas with restricted healthcare, education, and basic infrastructure. Persistent poverty and discrimination contribute to alarmingly high suicide rates—six times greater than the general population.¹³

Minority ethnic and migrant youth frequently experience racism, linguistic barriers, and cultural isolation, which heighten anxiety and depression. The fragmented availability of culturally inclusive youth services in rural areas further isolates these young people.

¹² Department of Health, "Publication of 'CAMHS Waiting Time Statistics for Northern Ireland (December 2024)," Department of Health, February 20, 2025, <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/publication-camhs-waiting-time-statistics-northern-ireland-december-2024>.

¹³ HSC - Public Health Agency, "The All Ireland Traveller Health Study (AITHS)," <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/Sites/Default/Files/Health%20Intelligence%20briefing%20on%20Travellers.pdf>

Similarly, young people with disabilities or special educational needs face significant challenges in accessing services due to inadequate infrastructure, which often limits their social and academic participation.

Therefore, youth workers often become community advocates and provide mental health support for local families and young people despite lacking specialist training. National research highlights that many youth workers feel unprepared to manage complex mental health cases, but step in due to a lack of available services. The absence of training and development opportunities outside of the 9-to-5 workweek for volunteers hinders the acquisition of these essential skills and strains already under-resourced clubs that may face workforce shortages. Research has consistently found that youth work is a protective factor for mental health—providing a safe space to socialize, access trusted mentors, and engage in activities that build confidence and resilience.¹⁵

Rural youth services in Northern Ireland face urgent challenges, with limited access to mental health support and personal development opportunities. Unlike urban youth, who have increased access to workshops, drop-in sessions, and peer support groups, rural youth often lack safe, dedicated spaces, relying on shared community or football halls. Without targeted investment, these gaps will continue, leaving young people in rural areas disadvantaged compared to their urban peers. Addressing these issues is crucial for ensuring that all youth have equal opportunities to thrive.

TRANSPORT AND CONNECTIVITY CHALLENGES

As highlighted above, one of the most significant challenges in rural communities is the impact of poor transport links, which limit young people's freedom and opportunities. In Northern Ireland, certain villages lack evening bus services, and daytime routes linking rural areas are often sparse. As a result, teenagers who do not drive—or cannot afford to—often rely on their parents, which is not always feasible. Without parental support or reliable transport alternatives, many rural youths cannot participate in essential youth programs, counseling sessions, or local social activities.¹⁶

Additionally, car usage is incredibly high in rural Northern Ireland—90% of rural workers commute by car, compared to 82% in urban areas.¹⁷ For those under 17 who cannot drive yet and even for those who have passed their test, the high cost of insurance makes it difficult for them to travel. Meanwhile, community transport schemes such as the Down Armagh Rural Transport Partnership are largely volunteer-led and typically geared towards older or mobility-impaired adults. Currently, the Education Authority only provides secondary school-aged young people with transport for journeys to school.

¹⁴ Mental Health Champion for NI, “Key Issues Impacting Children and Young People’s Mental Health and Wellbeing in Northern Ireland” (Mental Health Champion for NI, November 2023), [Add a little bit of body text](#).

¹⁵ National Youth Agency, “Overlooked - Young People and Rural Youth Services,” February 2024, [Add a little bit of body text](#).

¹⁶ McAleer, “Youth Work in Rural Ireland.”

¹⁷ Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), “Key Rural Issues 2023 Publication,” DAERA, February 8, 2024, <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/news/key-rural-issues-2023-publication>.

The limited buses to rural areas prevent these young people from attending after-school or weekend activities, leaving young people again relying on family members to allow them to access the same opportunities as their peers.

ISOLATION AND RESTRICTED SOCIAL CIRCLES

Poor transport is partly to blame for many rural teenagers' isolation, but it is also a more significant issue. In Northern Ireland, many young people live on scattered farms or in small villages with very few people their own age around them. Because rural schools typically have extensive catchment areas, students often live far apart, complicating casual visits with friends outside school hours.

NYA has warned that limited youth services leave “young people. ...vulnerable to isolation and loneliness.”¹⁸ In rural Ireland, teenagers talk about having “nothing to do in [our] town...there are no facilities for us.”¹⁹ That same story plays out all over rural Northern Ireland. Young people often stay home, and while gaming or social media may fill some voids, neither can replace in-person gatherings. If families cannot afford reliable internet or the right devices, that online option is not a backup. For LGBTQ+ individuals and those from ethnic minority backgrounds, this feeling of isolation can be even more pronounced, especially in smaller communities that lack dedicated groups or inclusive, safe spaces.

Being so isolated has significant consequences on mental health, access to information and advice, and a sense of connection to the local community. It can also push young people to move away for better social or job prospects, which continues a cycle of depopulation. In communities still dealing with the fallout of conflict or religious divides, all these problems can be magnified—sectarianism, for example, may limit young people's ability to connect with peers in other areas.

LIMITED YOUTH-FRIENDLY VENUES

One of the clearest signs of these challenges is the lack of youth-specific places to go in rural areas. Unlike urban centers that might have dedicated youth and community centers, rural villages often have just a single shared community space—like a church hall or sports clubhouse—and it might only be open occasionally. A rural Irish teenager described it perfectly: “We have nothing to do. ...there are no facilities for us.”²⁰

A dedicated youth center is more than just a place for young people to hang out; it serves as a suitable venue for workshops and mentoring sessions and a space where youth workers can build relationships with local young people. Without that venue, maintaining regular youth activities or sustaining them over the long term becomes difficult. While a mobile youth van or outreach bus can help, it is never quite the same as having a permanent, welcoming base.

¹⁸ National Youth Agency, “Overlooked - Young People and Rural Youth Services,” February 2024, <https://nya.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Overlooked-Report-NYA-Final.pdf>.

¹⁹ McAleer, “Youth Work in Rural Ireland.”

²⁰ Ibid.

Several rural youth centers in Northern Ireland have closed down in recent years because of shrinking budgets and a national reduction of youth work services. Across England and Wales, more than 1,000 youth centers have closed since 2010—an alarming trend that UNISON says will have lasting adverse effects on young people.²¹ After all, if teenagers do not have a supervised place to gather, their chances of feeling isolated or engaging in risky behavior increase. In areas with sectarian tensions or a history of conflict, creating a neutral space that welcomes all communities is even more important.

WORKFORCE AND VOLUNTEER CONSTRAINTS

Delivery of these vital services often relies heavily on one or two key individuals;²² if those people leave the area or burn out, their departure can result in the collapse of the entire service.²³ Yet we see repeatedly that rural areas struggle to attract and retain skilled workers. Rural posts often offer fewer hours, less development potential, and smaller support networks, so they are not always appealing to potential staff. Recent funding cuts to youth work have led to a decrease in the number of positions available across the entire island of Ireland, including Northern Ireland.²⁴

Volunteers are vital, but there is a limit to how much we can expect from a small, local population. Often, the same handful of enthusiastic individuals help run sports clubs, youth groups, and committees—meaning burnout can happen quickly. Additionally, while essential, safeguarding checks and other regulations can overwhelm these volunteers, as they are already stretched thin by multiple demands in their daily lives and volunteer commitments. Training and networking events are typically held in larger cities, so getting there can be time-consuming and expensive. Additionally, as many of these events are run from 9 am to 5 pm during the workweek, volunteers and part-time staff members are often excluded from these opportunities to grow and develop.

Staff turnover is also high in small organizations reliant on just a few people. The entire group can fold if one leaves or burns out.²⁵ To keep youth services going in rural areas, we must get creative about attracting and supporting professional youth workers and volunteers—offering better career progression, local training solutions, and loads of encouragement to prevent burnout.

²¹ Anthony Barnes, “Closure of More than a Thousand Youth Centres Could Have Lasting Impact on Society | News, Press Release | News,” UNISON National, June 14, 2024, <https://www.unison.org.uk/news/2024/06/closure-of-more-than-a-thousand-youth-centres-could-have-lasting-impact-on-society/>.

²² Centre for Mental Health, “The Space between Us,” August 2020, https://www.bbcchildreninneed.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CentreforMH_TheSpaceBetweenUs.pdf.

²³ National Youth Agency, “Overlooked - Young People and Rural Youth Services,” February 2024, <https://nya.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Overlooked-Report-NYA-Final.pdf>.

²⁴ McAleer, “Youth Work in Rural Ireland.”

²⁵ National Youth Agency, “Overlooked.”

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the challenges outlined above, the following policy recommendations seek to strengthen rural youth services while increasing equity and sustainability:

- **Develop a Rural Youth Strategy:**

Northern Ireland needs a strong Rural Youth Strategy for effective long-term planning, funding, and delivery of youth services in rural areas. This strategy should be co-designed with young people and require cross-departmental collaboration to tackle transport, mental health, and accessibility challenges.

- **Secure Long-Term Funding:**

Rural youth work faces chronic underfunding and depends on short-term grants. Establishing a dedicated Rural Youth Fund and applying rural weighting in funding formulas will address the higher service delivery costs in isolated areas, ensuring sustainability.

- **Improve Transport and Accessibility:**

Young people often lack access to youth services because of inadequate transport. Implementing a Rural Youth Travel Pass, community-managed minibus services, and outreach youth programs would significantly enhance service accessibility in isolated communities.

- **Expand Mental Health Support in Youth Work:**

Accessing mental health services in rural NI is challenging. Youth workers must receive mental health training, and we need mobile mental health units and digital support services for prompt intervention and crisis management.

- **Strengthen the Rural Youth Workforce and Volunteers:**

Rural youth services face staff shortages and volunteer burnout. Policymakers should offer salary enhancements, reimbursements for transport costs, and apprenticeships to attract and retain skilled youth workers. Additionally, training should be offered at convenient times, along with financial support for volunteers to enhance community-led youth work.

CONCLUSION

Youth work in Northern Ireland has played an important role in ensuring opportunities for our young people and supporting communities throughout the political and economic turmoil of the past 50 years. Rural youth work is currently at a pivotal point; without substantial support, we risk losing the vital rural community and voluntary sector, which plays an essential role in connecting and advocating for young people in isolated communities.

The challenges highlighted throughout this review are not unique to rural communities. The community sector is reeling from the impacts of the Great Recession and COVID-19, and the vast disparity in service availability is stark. There is an exacerbated need for urgent and targeted intervention to prevent worsening inequalities between rural and urban youth and ensure that rural young people do not miss out on vital support that could help them thrive.

With the current review of the Youth Work Policy, we must acknowledge that rural youth work is vital to ensure an equitable and prosperous Northern Ireland. By working together to enact these recommendations, we can make a real difference in the lives of young people in rural areas, amplify their voices, and make sure they are heard in decision-making, while championing the voluntary and community sector, whose work is at the heart of rural youth services. A well-supported, well-coordinated, and well-resourced youth sector is essential not only for young people in rural areas but also for the long-term sustainability of all communities.

NORTHERN IRELAND EMERGING LEADERS BIO

CONOR FORKER**Chairperson, Clonmore Youth Club**

Conor founded the Clonmore Youth Club, a grassroots initiative that addressed rural isolation in my local community at the age of 21. Over the course of six years, he served as the Youth Worker in Charge, managing a team of volunteers and developing programmes that significantly improved the well-being, personal development, and social inclusion of young people. Conor is currently the Chairperson of the Board of Trustees. Previously Conor worked with Boys and Girls Clubs NI as a regional board member, advocating for rural and voluntary youth organisations. In September 2023, he joined the Global Fund for Children as the Young Gamechangers Fund Programme Officer, where he coordinates youth-led grant making processes. Conor is a Washington Ireland Programme alumni and was also selected for the Leading NI Scholarship delegation at One Young World.

Building a Safer Future: A Comprehensive Policy Approach to Tackling Domestic Abuse and Coercive Control in Northern Ireland

Carla Hannan

Vice-Chair of Northern Ireland Youth Forum

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Northern Ireland (NI), survivors of violence against women and girls (VAWG) face significant challenges. These obstacles stem from post-conflict trauma, societal attitudes, and gaps in policy implementation, making VAWG a serious ongoing issue. Efforts to combat gender-based violence are hindered by enforcement issues, underfunded support services, and insufficient prevention strategies, even amidst legal advancements such as the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act. (2021).¹ To improve the response to VAWG, this policy paper assesses NI's current legislative and support frameworks, identifies gaps, and suggests strategic reforms.

KEY FINDINGS

Current Policy Landscape and Effectiveness

- According to Ulster University (2023), 98% of women in NI have been victims of violence or abuse, with 50% having gone through it before the age of eleven.²
- Since 2020, 24 women have been killed, and 41 femicides were confirmed in 2017.³
- In 2019, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) reported 32,763 cases of domestic violence, which amounts to one incident every 16 minutes on average.⁴
- In 2023–2024, Women's Aid NI received 10,955 referrals, provided shelter for 527 women and 291 children in refuges, and offered community support to 7,637 individual women.⁵
- Bystander intervention programs need more funding, and services for migrant, rural, and LGBTQ+ survivors still receive inadequate funding.

¹ Northern Ireland Assembly, Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021.

² Sarah Lagdon et al., "Every Voice Matters! Violence Against Women in Northern Ireland," (Belfast: Ulster University), 7 Sep 2023.

³ Lisa O'Carroll, "Domestic Abuse Commissioner Needed to Tackle Femicide in Northern Ireland, Charity Says," *The Guardian*, 10 Nov 2024.

⁴ Women's Aid ABCLN, "Facts and Figures," 2024.

⁵ Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland, "Women's Aid Reveals Thousands of Women Seeking Their Support across Northern Ireland in 2023/24," Nov 25, 2025.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A government-led strategy that prioritizes long-term prevention over crisis response, ensures multi-agency coordination, and incorporates early intervention into policy to prevent domestic violence and coercive control before escalating.
2. Adopt a multi-agency approach to identify and assist at-risk individuals early and ensure a coordinated response before abuse increases. Schools, healthcare providers, social agencies, and law enforcement should establish a structured collaboration.
3. Enhance coercive control laws by improving police training, expanding victim assistance, and establishing clear definitions of coercive control.
4. Ensure inclusive and culturally sensitive services for migrant women, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ survivors to enhance their access to specialized support.

INTRODUCTION

In NI, where the legacy of the Troubles, systemic injustices, and lapses in legislative enforcement continue to hinder access to justice and support for survivors, violence against women and girls (VAWG) remains widespread. Significant obstacles still exist despite legislative advancements like the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (2021), such as low conviction rates for coercive control, inadequate funding for support services, and low male participation in prevention initiatives.

This policy paper aims to evaluate the effectiveness of current interventions and policies and pinpoint areas for improvement in legal, social, and preventative measures to address VAWG in NI.

CONTEXT

Socio-Political Context

The historical backdrop of NI's conflict, known as the Troubles, has shaped societal attitudes and institutional structures in dealing with abuse. The violence and trauma of the Troubles have led to high levels of societal mistrust towards authorities, particularly with law enforcement, affecting how women seek help for abuse.

Northern Ireland's conflict spanned from 1968 to 1998 and was rooted in a violent debate of unresolved animosities on nationality, religion, power, and territory, as well as the constitutional status of Northern Ireland.⁶ Inter-community violence decreased after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 and the disarmament; however, the violence did not end. Ethnic identities and gender norms associated with the conflict continue to shape society, even after the violence has ended.

⁶ David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: A History of the Northern Ireland Conflict*, (London: Viking, 2012).

The glorification of male physical force intensified after the conflict through communication and celebration, seen in parades, murals, martyrs, songs, poetry, anniversaries, and the belief that ex-prisoners are heroes. This reinforces a culture of the strong, violent male.

Women played various roles during the conflict; many were combat-trained or acted as weapons smugglers. If married, the woman would take on the role of the breadwinner if their husband were involved with paramilitary organizations or in prison. After the Good Friday Agreement ended most of the violence of the Troubles, many women were expected to return to their 'traditional' roles. Many women did not conform to this, which unsettled men and women in both communities, as it did not align with 'traditional male-dominated gender concepts,' which contributed to a rise in domestic violence post-conflict.⁷ The socio-economic background and ideology influenced women's experiences of violence. Ethnicity, ideology, socio-economic class, and gender all interrelate and influence an individual's experience of violence.⁸ For example, a working-class Republican paramilitary woman experiences violence differently than a wealthy Republican woman. Both experience abuse differently than the wife of a Loyalist paramilitary member from a working-class background.

Social Learning Theory

The Troubles-shaped post-conflict environment in NI has had a significant impact on public perceptions of violence, particularly violence against women and girls (VAWG). Social Learning Theory (SLT) explains how gender-based violence has been perpetuated and sustained in NI due to historical violence, militarized masculinity, and inadequate institutional responses. Violence was a daily occurrence during the Troubles, and paramilitary organizations used physical force, threats, and coercion to maintain their hold on power. According to SLT, individuals who witness such violence, particularly men in militarized environments, internalize aggressive behavior and exhibit it in social interactions.⁹ Men conditioned to use violence during conflict often find it difficult to disengage from learned aggression; research suggests that post-conflict societies frequently experience higher levels of domestic violence.¹⁰

SLT suggests that individuals learn from others' errors; when offenders go unpunished, it reinforces the perception that VAWG is acceptable. The Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (2021) was passed decades after similar laws were enacted in the rest of the UK, indicating that NI has historically provided inadequate legal protections for women. In NI, only 1.6% of reported rapes lead to a conviction, indicating a persistently low rate for sexual abuse convictions.¹¹

⁷ Melanie Hoewer, "Women, Violence, and Social Change in Northern Ireland and Chiapas: Societies between Tradition and Transition," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 7, no. 2 (2013), 216–231.

⁸ Haizana Reyat et al., "Association between Individual-Level Socioeconomic Factors and Intimate Partner Violence Victimization in Women: A Systematic Review Protocol," *BMJ Open* 14, no. 3 (2024).

⁹ Albert Bandura, *Social Learning Theory*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1974).

¹⁰ Samantha Bradley, "Domestic and Family Violence in Post-Conflict Communities: International Human Rights Law and the State's Obligation to Protect Women and Children" *Health and Human Rights* 20, no.2 (2018), 123.

¹¹ The Public Prosecution Service. 2024. "PPS Publishes Annual Statistical Bulletin for 2023-24." Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland.

Given the history of collusion, surveillance, and failures to protect civilians during the Troubles, many women, especially those in marginalized communities, have a mistrust of the police and the justice system. Women and victims may have been afraid of institutional bias or inaction; victims are less likely to report abuse. According to studies, because of past trauma and mistrust, survivors in post-conflict societies frequently refrain from asking for assistance from authorities. After a dispute, high levels of intergenerational trauma in NI result in the inheritance of views on gender roles, violence, and masculinity.¹⁴ Boys may internalize aggressive behavior and gender dominance as normal if they are raised in male-dominated, paramilitary-influenced communities.¹⁵

EXISTING LEGISLATION

Background and Overview

The laws on Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) in NI have changed dramatically in recent years. Several historic pieces of legislation have been passed to give victims more thorough protection and address the rising concerns about gender-based violence and domestic abuse. The Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 is among the most critical of recent pieces of legislation. This law specifically addresses the multifaceted nature of domestic abuse, which encompasses financial, psychological, and emotional abuse in addition to physical violence. By aligning NI with the progressive changes already implemented across the UK, the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act 2021 represents significant progress in how domestic violence is perceived and prosecuted in the region.

Coercive control is defined by the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (2021) as a pattern of behavior that is violent, degrading, threatening, or controlling and makes the victim fear for their safety or well-being. The goal of this behavior is to make the victim feel submissive and to instill fear. Examples include restricting the victim's mobility, excluding them from social interactions, and tampering with their access to resources. Coercive control is a crime in Section 1 of the Act and carries a maximum 14-year prison term. When the victim is believed to have endured serious emotional or psychological harm due to the offender's actions, the law is invoked. The Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (2021) defines domestic abuse as abusive behavior that takes place within a relationship. It encompasses financial, psychological, and emotional abuse in addition to physical violence. The law recognizes that psychological abuse can lead to long-term damage that is as detrimental as physical violence and that the repercussions of domestic abuse are often more far-reaching than physical injuries.

¹⁴ Siobhán McAlister, Deena Haydon, and Phil Scraton, "Violence in the Lives of Children and Youth in 'Post-Conflict' Northern Ireland," *Children, Youth and Environments* 23, no. 1 (2013): 1.

¹⁵ McAlister et al., "Violence in the Lives of Children."

The Act acknowledges that children exposed to domestic violence are victims, too, ensuring they receive necessary protections and support while considering their welfare in domestic abuse cases. Additionally, the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (2021) improves victims' protection in family court proceedings. The law, for instance, forbids offenders from directly cross-examining their victims in court. This clause is essential because it shields victims from subsequent trauma and makes sure that offenders are prevented from using the legal system to coerce or threaten their victims. The Act covers several crimes associated with domestic violence, such as physical assault, sexual violence, threats of violence, and stalking, in addition to coercive control and domestic abuse.

The passage of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) also made coercive control and other forms of non-physical abuse illegal. Despite these developments, several obstacles remain in enforcing laws that punish coercive control in NI. Psychological, emotional, or financial abuse is a common manifestation of coercive control and often goes unnoticed. Offenses that occur over long periods without obvious physical signs may be challenging for the trial process to address, as it was initially designed to manage discrete case incidents.¹⁶ Prosecutors must establish a “course of conduct” that intentionally instilled fear of violence in the victim or caused extreme alarm or distress, significantly affecting their daily life. This requires proving the victim's experience and the offender's intent, which can be challenging to prove in court. Law enforcement may be under-trained to recognize and manage non-physical abuse. Policies that criminalize coercive control must recognize that such control encompasses patterns of behavior over time, whereas traditional trial procedures focus on individual factual disputes. Incidents of coercive control may be misclassified as other crimes, potentially leading to flawed investigative strategies.

The first Strategic Framework and Delivery Plan (2024-2026) to End Violence Against Women and Girls was introduced by the NI Executive in September 2024. This initiative aims to address the underlying causes of VAWG, such as societal attitudes and structural inequalities, by taking a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. The goal is to establish “a changed society where women and girls are free from all forms of gender-based violence, abuse, and harm.”¹⁷ The Executive Office created the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG) Change Fund to aid in executing the Strategic Framework. Eight organizations were given a portion of £1.2 million from this fund in January 2025 to create and implement programs prioritizing prevention and significant social change. Michelle O'Neill, the First Minister of NI, stressed the importance of prevention in the fight against the “scourge of violence against women and girls.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Vanessa Bettinson and Ronagh McQuigg, eds., *Criminalising Coercive Control* (Abingdon, UK: Taylor & Francis, 2023).

¹⁷ Northern Ireland Executive, “Ending Violence against Women and Girls,” 2024.

¹⁸ Northern Ireland Executive, “Ministers Announce £1.2m Regional Change Fund for Ending Violence against Women and Girls,” 21 Jan 2025.

A human security approach has been incorporated into the policy landscape. The Northern Ireland Office has contributed to the UK's Women, Peace, and Security National Action Plan (2023–2027), highlighting the significance of addressing VAWG within domestic policy. This strategy employs a comprehensive framework to prevent violence and advance gender equality. Despite these advancements, challenges persist. Thirty women and girls were murdered by men in Northern Ireland between 2019 and 2024, highlighting the need for ongoing policy attention and action. To effectively combat VAWG, public awareness and societal engagement must continue to evolve and strengthen.¹⁹

ARGUMENT

An Analysis of Current Measures Addressing VAWG in Northern Ireland

The Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 criminalizes coercive control, aligning legal frameworks with those of other jurisdictions. The Stalking Protection Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 provides safeguards for stalking victims. A 'whole-society approach' is central to NI's VAWG Strategic Framework. In addition to legislative advancements, support services such as Women's Aid NI, Nexus NI, and Victim Support NI offer crisis accommodation, advocacy, and counseling. The Police Service of Northern Ireland's Domestic Abuse Champions Scheme enhances police responses, with local policing teams prioritizing victim feedback.²⁰

While progress has been made, challenges persist, such as a lack of funding, disparities in service, enforcement gaps, and institutional stigma. Marginalized communities face systemic barriers to justice, including victim-blaming, re-traumatization fears, and distrust of legal authorities.²¹ Coercive control and aggressive male behavior remain prevalent in areas with a history of paramilitary violence, complicating prevention efforts.²² Media representation and underfunded services reinforce stigma, which deters survivors from seeking help.

NI could adopt transformative strategies that have proven effective elsewhere to create a more impactful response to VAWG. For example, Scotland's Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) program has successfully reduced gender-based violence in schools by addressing harmful attitudes early.²³ Expanding Domestic Abuse Protection Orders (DAPOs), as implemented in England, could enhance legal safeguards for survivors. Programs like White Ribbon NI and "Don't Be That Guy"²⁴ work to challenge toxic masculinity and shift societal norms. Similarly, Ireland's "No Excuses" campaign has been effective in raising awareness and combating victim-blaming narratives.²⁵ In addition, technological solutions, including anonymous reporting tools, offer further support for survivors while helping to shift public perceptions and promote accountability.

¹⁹ Paula Devine, "Feeling Safe? Violence against Women and Girls," Queen's Policy Engagement, 2025.

²⁰ Department of Justice, "Ministers Publish Progress on Domestic and Sexual Abuse Action Plan," Department of Justice, July 18, 2022.

²¹ McPhee et al., "Criminal Justice Responses to Domestic Violence," 1–18.

²² McAlister et al., "Violence in the Lives of Children."

²³ Education Scotland, "Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP)," *Education Scotland*, November 25, 2024.

²⁴ Police Scotland, "Don't Be That Guy," 2024.

²⁵ Department of Justice and Department of the Taoiseach, "No Excuses," 2019.Gov.ie. 2019. "No Excuses."

Progress remains vulnerable to funding cuts, political instability, and societal resistance. Budget constraints, in particular, endanger vital support services, potentially leaving victims without the resources they need for safety and recovery.²⁶ The cost-of-living crisis has further intensified women's financial dependence on abusive partners, making it even more difficult to leave dangerous situations. Political deadlock, most notably the absence of a functioning Executive at Stormont, has delayed the implementation of crucial measures, such as DAPOs. Deep-rooted issues like male dominance and coercive control, reinforced by traditional gender roles and the legacy of post-conflict trauma, continue to fuel societal stigma.²⁷ Meanwhile, growing online backlash against feminist initiatives presents additional barriers to progress, undermining public discourse and advocacy efforts.

Northern Ireland's VAWG response remains in high demand, with 10,955 referrals and 7,637 women supported by Women's Aid NI in 2023–24. However, resource shortages mean many refugee applications go unanswered.²⁸ Specialized services for migrant women and LGBTQ+ survivors remain underfunded, while coercive control cases are underreported due to evidentiary challenges and insufficient police training.²⁹ Prevention efforts are also lacking, with limited bystander intervention programs and inadequate funding for male engagement initiatives. Increased funding, improved law enforcement training, and strong prevention strategies are necessary to address these gaps.

Scotland's Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 has led to high conviction rates for coercive control, with 212 convictions in 2019–20, rising to 689 in 2021–22.³⁰ Scotland's "Don't Be That Guy" campaign effectively combats gendered violence and toxic masculinity. Ireland's "No Excuses" campaign has raised public awareness, challenging victim-blaming. Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs) in England and Wales have proven effective in coordinating responses to high-risk cases. By integrating these approaches, Northern Ireland can strengthen its efforts to prevent domestic abuse and support survivors.

In order to identify and assist at-risk individuals early and ensure a coordinated response before abuse increases, schools, healthcare providers, social agencies, and law enforcement should establish a structured collaboration. Additionally, existing support systems continue to underserve marginalized populations, such as migrant women, LGBTQ+ people, and people with disabilities, which makes it more difficult for them to report abuse and seek justice.

To tackle ingrained gender norms and post-conflict trauma that perpetuate coercive control and victim-blaming narratives, a cultural revolution is necessary alongside legislative reforms. Taking inspiration from effective global models, Northern Ireland should prioritize community-driven preventative programs, enhanced funding for survivor services, and early intervention.

²⁷ Niall Gilmartin, "Gendering the 'Post-Conflict' Narrative in Northern Ireland's Peace Process," *Capital & Class* 43, no. 1 (2018): 89–104.

²⁸ Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland, "Women's Aid Reveals Thousands of Women Seeking Their Support across Northern Ireland in 2023/24," 25 Nov 2024.

²⁹ Susan Lagdon et al., "Public Understanding of Coercive Control in Northern Ireland," *Journal of Family Violence* 38, no. 1 (2022): 39–50.

³⁰ Scottish Government. 2024. "Domestic Abuse in Context." March 26, 2024.

Incorporating public education campaigns, bystander intervention initiatives, and specialized police training would strengthen the people's reaction to coercive control. Existing policies risk being reactive rather than preventative, leaving survivors without long-term solutions, political commitment, sustained funding, and cross-sector coordination. Scotland's successful coercive control laws and prevention tactics demonstrate that change can occur when governments take a thorough, evidence-based approach. To make considerable progress, Northern Ireland needs a unified, multi-agency approach that prioritizes enforcement, prevention, and survivor-centred policy. Domestic violence and coercive control will continue to be widespread in the absence of a strong response, further solidifying cycles of suffering and social injustice.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Create a National Early Intervention and Prevention Strategy

- Create a thorough, government-led plan that emphasizes early intervention to prevent coercive control and domestic violence before it escalates.
- Incorporate multi-agency cooperation between law enforcement, social agencies, healthcare professionals, and schools to find at-risk people early.
- In healthcare settings, put in place early screening procedures for domestic abuse to make sure victims are found and assisted before the abuse gets out of hand.
- Instead of focusing on reactive crisis management, secure long-term financing for research and policy development on preventing domestic abuse.

2. Strengthen Laws on Coercive Control with Clear Definitions and Victim Support

- Laws should be amended to include clear definitions and examples of coercive control, helping law enforcement and the judiciary more effectively identify, investigate, and prosecute such behaviors.
- Funding should be increased for support services that assist victims of coercive control, including legal advocacy, emotional support, and guidance through the judicial system.
- Law enforcement officers should receive frequent, specialized training on how to recognize, look into, and assist victims of coercive control, making sure that it is treated as a serious form of abuse.

3. Expand Access to Specialized Support for Marginalized Groups

- Create trauma-informed, culturally sensitive, and easily accessible services that are tailored to the unique needs of women with disabilities, migrant women, and LGBTQ+ individuals.
- Improve outreach to marginalized communities by providing information in multiple languages and accessible formats, and ensuring details about available programs and services are easy to find and understand.
- Offer tailored training to individuals working in domestic abuse services, enabling them to understand the unique challenges faced by marginalized groups and ensuring they are equipped to provide appropriate support.

4. Increase Survivors' Access to Safe Housing and Emergency Assistance

- Expand access to emergency housing for victims of domestic violence and coercive control, ensuring that cost and transport barriers do not prevent escape.
- Allocate funds for services supporting people with disabilities and individuals from underserved communities, including specialized shelters for women with children.
- After leaving an abusive situation, provide victims with financial support and housing assistance so they can start over on their own.

NORTHERN IRELAND EMERGING LEADERS

CARLA HANNAN**Vice-Chair, Northern Ireland Youth Forum**

Carla is a Graduate Support Consultant with a passion for social policy and social justice in Northern Ireland. She works in the Business Case and Appraisal Division at S3 Solutions, where she supports consulting contracts through research, policy support, and strategic analysis, including data collection, consultations, and report contributions. Carla holds a Second-Class Honours Upper Division in Social Policy with Sociology from Ulster University and is a member of the Department of Education's Young Persons Policy Reference Group. Previously, she was the Events and Communications Officer for the Social Studies Society, an EA Youth Council member, and a Boys Brigade Leader. Carla is also a Trustee and Policy and Governance Officer with the Northern Ireland Youth Forum.

A Wake-Up Call for Peace: Migrant Women, Racism, and the Future of Northern Ireland

Rachel Kenny-Cardoso

Advice and Outreach worker for Migrant Centre NI

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland's social landscape has undergone a profound transformation, marked by an increasing influx of migrants and the growing presence of diverse minority communities.¹ Despite two decades of relative peace, the reconciliation process remains primarily focused on Protestant-Catholic reconciliation, leaving migrant communities, especially migrant women, without adequate institutional support.² In the summer of 2024, anti-immigrant riots highlighted how fragile this peace can be when racism and xenophobia go unchecked.

This paper argues that migrant women, though essential to the fabric of society, remain under-recognized as key contributors to peacebuilding and social cohesion.

Using the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) framework and insights from United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, this paper highlights migrant women's grassroots leadership in bridging cultural divides, organizing community events, and advocating for marginalized families. Despite this activism, migrant women continue to face barriers such as inadequate funding, limited political representation, and insufficient protections against racist violence. To rectify these gaps, the policy recommendations call for creating dedicated funding streams, formally including migrant women in decision-making, and enacting stronger anti-hate legislation. These measures would integrate migrant women's contributions into Northern Ireland's evolving peace process and help safeguard a more inclusive, enduring stability.

¹ Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (NIAC), *The experiences of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland: Second report of session (2022)*, 3-4.

² NIAC 2022, *The experiences of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland*, 10.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Establish Dedicated Funding for Migrant-Women-Led Peacebuilding Programs

- Create and ring-fence multi-year grants for initiatives led by migrant/refugee women to promote social cohesion.
- Expand the Minority Ethnic Development Fund and invite international partners (e.g., EU PEACE Plus, US donors) to co-fund community integration work.

2. Inclusion of Migrant Women in Decision-Making

- Integrate migrant women into advisory councils and consultative bodies (e.g., Good Relations strategy boards, Peace Plus committees).
- Encourage political parties to recruit and mentor migrant women candidates; require local councils and government agencies to co-opt minority women in public roles.

3. Strengthen Protections Against Racism

- Enact comprehensive hate crime legislation aligned with expert recommendations, address legal gaps on race- and gender-based violence, and fully implement racial equality strategies.
- Enhance law enforcement and social services to ensure migrants experiencing hate or gender-based abuse can report safely and access redress.

Difference is of the essence of humanity. Difference is an accident of birth, and it should, therefore, never be the source of hatred or conflict. The answer to difference is to respect it. Therein lies a most fundamental principle of peace - respect for diversity.

John Hume, 1998³



³ John Hume, *Nobel Lecture* (NobelPrize.org: Nobel Prize Outreach, 2025), <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1998/hume/lecture/>

INTRODUCTION

Northern Ireland's peace process has long been studied through the lens of its two main communities—unionists (mostly Protestant) and nationalists (mostly Catholic)—whose historic compromise formed the bedrock of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Over two decades into peace, however, Northern Ireland's (NI) social landscape is increasingly diverse, and new actors have entered the peacebuilding arena. Among these are migrant women, a group that includes recent immigrants, refugees, and those born in NI. This policy paper addresses two related questions: What role do migrant women play in peacebuilding in post-conflict NI, and how can policy and funding structures better support their contributions?

Existing peace and community relations frameworks focus heavily on unionist-nationalist dynamics, marginalizing new communities. Migrant women face a dual burden: navigating lingering sectarian tensions while also confronting racism, economic hurdles, and a lack of policy recognition. In August 2024, a series of racially charged riots underscored the vulnerability of these communities and spotlighted a crucial shortfall in NI's post-conflict settlement.

This paper examines how migrant women act as “everyday” peacebuilders and the barriers they face. It employs both the ABCD model, advocating for harnessing the strengths within marginalized communities,⁴ and guidance from UNSCR 1325, which highlights women's indispensable role in conflict resolution. This paper emphasizes the critical role of migrant women's grassroots efforts in driving sustained progress since 1998, ultimately concluding with three strategic policy reforms aimed at maximizing their potential contributions to society.

CONTEXT

Demographic Shifts

Historically, NI was one of the UK's least diverse regions; only 1.8% of its population was from minority-ethnic backgrounds in 2011.⁵ By 2021, that figure roughly doubled, reflecting arrivals from Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia, and beyond.⁶ Critics have pointed out that the government failed to adjust its policies in response to the demographic shift. A 2022 inquiry indicated a lack of “obvious policy preparedness” to address this issue.⁷ Existing community relations structures, such as those under *Together: Building a United Community*, still prioritize bridging the Protestant-Catholic gap. This focus overlooks racist hostility, which official statistics show has become a pressing concern.⁸

⁴ John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out* (Evanston, IL: Institute for Policy Research, 1993).

⁵ NIAC, *The Experiences of Minority Ethnic and Migrant People*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

The 2024 Anti-Immigrant Riots

Tensions reached a breaking point in August 2024 when a wave of anti-immigrant riots erupted in Belfast and surrounding areas.⁹ Masked rioters attacked minority-owned businesses, vandalized mosques, and targeted refugees' homes.¹⁰ These incidents were part of what observers described as a "groundswell of hate"¹¹ with police statements indicating that paramilitary elements may have exploited far-right demonstrations, turning them into full-scale street violence. Many migrant women and children fled their neighborhoods, illustrating the precarious nature of peace for those outside the "traditional" communities. While sectarian conflict has declined, these riots showcased that the post-conflict environment remains fragile for newcomers, requiring updated strategies to combat racial extremism.

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)

In ABCD, community members are regarded as key resources, each with unique skills and capacities.¹² Migrant women exemplify ABCD in action: they draw on their lived experiences, skills, and social networks to address community needs, offering cultural mediation and creating informal welfare support networks throughout NI.¹³ Instead of framing these women as passive recipients, ABCD encourages policymakers to see them as strategic partners in peacebuilding. This approach has proven successful in other contexts, including local conflict resolution in cities like Glasgow or Manchester, where grassroots ethnic associations reduced community tensions.¹⁴

UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security

Adopted in 2000, UNSCR 1325 emphasizes the necessity of women's participation in conflict prevention and resolution.¹⁵ It urges member states to protect women from violence and ensure their leadership in peace processes. Although the UK had a National Action Plan in 1325, NI had not fully integrated it domestically.¹⁶ Migrant women, in particular, remain invisible, as local authorities primarily focus on bridging no unionist-nationalist divides. Implementing UNSCR 1325 at the local level would require ensuring that women, including those from minority backgrounds, are represented in policymaking and benefit from strong protections against hate crimes.

NI's peace must address the reality of growing diversity and increasing racist incidents. Migrant women are at the forefront of bridging new social divides; however, they are hindered by underfunded programs, political exclusion, and limited legal protections. Grounding policy in the ABCD and UNSCR 1325 principles can create a framework for more inclusive and effective peacebuilding.

⁹ Amnesty International, *Northern Ireland: Latest Police Figures Show Race Hate Crimes Hit "All-Time High" During Summer 2024* (press release, February 27, 2025).

¹⁰ NIAC, *The Experiences of Minority Ethnic and Migrant People*

¹¹ National Health Service (NHS) England. *NHS Response to 2024 Riots*. 2024. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/nhs-response-to-2024-riots/>

¹² John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out* (Evanston, IL: Institute for Policy Research, 1993).

¹³ Bomoko NI – Northern Ireland Refugees and Asylum Seekers Women Association. *Our Mission*. 2021. <https://bomokoni.org>.

¹⁴ Catherine O'Rourke and Katy McMinn, *Baseline Study for a Toolkit on Women and Peacebuilding (Northern Ireland/Ireland) in the Context of UNSCR 1325* (Belfast: WRDA, 2013).

¹⁵ Zohra Moosa, Maryam Rahmani, and Laura Webster, "From the Private to the Public Sphere: New Research on Women's Participation in Peacebuilding," *Gender & Development* 21, no. 3 (2013): 453–72.

¹⁶ Women's Platform, *A Women's Vision: UNSCR 1325 – Women, Peace and Security: 20 Years On* (Belfast: NI Women's European Platform, 2021).

ARGUMENT

Migrant Women as Grassroots Peacebuilders

While migrant women are frequently portrayed only in terms of vulnerability, they are influential leaders in community building. Bomoko NI, led by and for refugee and asylum-seeking women, offers advice, advocacy, education, mental health support, and cultural events that tackle poverty, promote integration, and advance women's rights—while actively countering stereotypes and building trust across communities.¹⁷

Other women-led groups, such as the Anaka Collective, have demonstrated how cooking clubs and cultural workshops can open dialogue across sectarian, racial, and religious lines.¹⁸ Many more contributions go unseen.

As Migrant Centre NI workers often observe, migrant mothers throughout Northern Ireland regularly form informal support circles to share childcare duties and offer mutual emotional support. One powerful example comes from East Belfast, where an Eritrean refugee—fluent in Amharic, Tigrinya, Greek, and Arabic—has quietly supported neighbors from Syria, Sudan, and beyond. She has accompanied families to medical appointments, interpreted at parent-teacher meetings, and helped others navigate complex paperwork. Her work is unrecognized by formal institutions, yet it embodies the principles of grassroots peacebuilding: care, trust, and mutual aid across differences.

These women carry an “incredible wealth” of skills, compassion, and lived wisdom into their host communities, yet far too often, these assets are overlooked or undervalued.¹⁹ Such “everyday peace” efforts align closely with the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) framework, which sees migrant women's languages, cultural backgrounds, and relationships not as barriers but as key drivers of grassroots peacebuilding.²⁰

BARRIERS

Underfunding

Stormont's historic emphasis on two main communities means that few resources are directed toward minority integration or anti-racism. For instance, “good relations” funding under *Together: Building a United Community* primarily supports cross-community (Protestant-Catholic) youth or interface projects.²¹ Migrant women's concerns, hate crimes, language services, and childcare are often absent from top-level agendas.

¹⁷ Bomoko NI - Northern Ireland Refugees.

¹⁸ Diane Kirby, “The Revolution Is Not Over: Sudanese Female Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Belfast,” *Journal of Social Encounters* 8, no. 2 (2024): 183–201.

¹⁹ W. McIntyre Miller and R. Atwi, “Migrant and Refugee Women: A Case for Community Leadership,” *Journal of Leadership Studies* 17 (2023): 47–52, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jls.21858>.

²⁰ Bomoko NI - Northern Ireland Refugees.

Migrant women's initiatives usually rely on short-term project grants. NIAC highlights that small grants around £10,000 a year cannot sustain staff salaries or rent. Without dedicated funding, migrant women often pay expenses out-of-pocket or cannot sustain projects beyond initial enthusiasm. This undercuts peacebuilding: programs that could grow and stabilize, like cross-cultural youth clubs or women's leadership training, either remain one-off events or fold after a year or two. Underfunding also leads to burnout, with demands on time (often juggling jobs and family with volunteer activism) becoming unsustainable. In some cases, initiatives led by migrant women have fizzled out because the founders simply could not afford to continue the unpaid work. This is a loss for the whole society's peace infrastructure. By contrast, well-resourced peacebuilding initiatives (like some interfaith or cross-border programs in NI's past, often backed by EU PEACE funds or international donors) have shown that sustained funding allows for a more profound impact. Therefore, securing consistent funding for migrant-led peacebuilding initiatives is essential to address this significant gap.

Vulnerability to Racist Hate Crimes

Perhaps the most immediate barrier for many migrant women is the threat and trauma of violence and harassment. Racist incidents, from slurs shouted on the street to physical assaults, instill fear and can constrain women's movements and activities. The racist riots of 2024 starkly showed how quickly extremist elements can pivot to targeting new minorities. Many migrant women, especially those wearing hijabs or distinct attire, reported a fear of leaving home. Under NI's outdated hate crime laws, aggravated offenses are not clearly codified,²³ leaving victims with limited redress. Social cohesion crumbles when any group lives in fear.

Economic Marginalization

Many migrant women are underemployed or blocked from the labor market, particularly asylum seekers who cannot legally work.²⁴ Economic insecurity limits their ability to volunteer in peace initiatives. Meanwhile, non-recognition of overseas qualifications and insufficient language provisions trap them in lower-wage sectors.

THE 2024 RIOTS - A WAKE-UP CALL

The August 2024 riots in Belfast and other towns forced the evacuation of entire families, devastating minority-run businesses and neighborhoods.²⁵ Migrant women-led groups scrambled to provide emergency shelter and document abuses, but the scale of violence was a sobering reminder that peace in NI remains tenuous if new communities are neglected.²⁶

²³ NIAC, *The Experiences of Minority Ethnic and Migrant People*, 13.

²⁴ Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, *Equality in Northern Ireland: Racial Equality – Policy Priorities and Recommendations* (Belfast: ECNI, 2018).

²⁵ Amnesty International, "Northern Ireland: Latest Police Figures Show Race Hate Crimes Hit 'All-Time High' During Summer 2024," press release, February 27, 2025.

²⁶ NIAC, *The Experiences of Minority Ethnic and Migrant People*.

The riots provide a stark reminder of why a more inclusive approach to peacebuilding, one that supports migrant women and their communities, is urgently needed. The riots revealed that racial and xenophobic animosities could undermine NI's post-conflict stability. In the wake of the riots, analysts noted that bigoted actors exploited a vacuum: government strategies had not fully anticipated or countered racial hatred, and community relations structures were largely focused elsewhere. A lasting peace for the two traditional communities remains impossible while a third set of communities is marginalized and under attack. As one commentary put it, "Minority communities have often been overlooked in Northern Ireland."²⁷ This oversight has consequences. For many observers, the events of 2024 served as a "wake-up call" about the urgent need for expanded and updated peacebuilding.

Without reforms, the cycle of underfunding, racism, and marginalization will persist. In contrast, a strategic investment in migrant women's leadership can help create stability between Catholic and Protestant groups and among NI's growing diversity.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

7. Establish Dedicated Funding for Migrant-Women-Led Peacebuilding Programs

Rationale:

Migrant-led projects rarely compete successfully for mainstream "good relations" funding geared to sectarian issues.²⁸ Meanwhile, community advocates report that existing Minority Ethnic Development Fund grants are too limited and short-term.

Action:

- Create a Migrant Women's Peacebuilding Fund managed by the Executive Office. Issue multi-year core grants (e.g., three to five years) to ensure that organizations like Bomoko NI can scale their vital activities.
- Simplify application processes and provide multiple language capacity-building workshops on grant writing and financial management.

Impact:

- Fosters stability and growth, letting migrant women expand successful peacebuilding interventions.
- Encourages synergy with existing cross-community programs, broadening the scope of integrated peace work.

²³ NIAC, *The Experiences of Minority Ethnic and Migrant People*, 13.

²⁴ Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, *Equality in Northern Ireland: Racial Equality – Policy Priorities and Recommendations* (Belfast: ECNI, 2018).

²⁵ Amnesty International, "Northern Ireland: Latest Police Figures Show Race Hate Crimes Hit 'All-Time High' During Summer 2024," press release, February 27, 2025.

²⁶ NIAC, *The Experiences of Minority Ethnic and Migrant People*.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid,31.

2. Improve Inclusion of Migrant Women in Decision-Making Rationale:

Migrant women remain virtually absent from formal governance, leaving policymaking blind to new demographic realities.²⁹

Action:

- Appoint migrant women to advisory boards such as the Racial Equality Subgroup and Peace Plus committees.
- Mentor minority women candidates in local politics and require parties to set diversity goals. Provide leadership training programs in collaboration with universities, civil society, or the NI Assembly's Women's Caucus.
- Consult regularly with migrant women's groups when drafting equality or community relations legislation.

Impact:

- Ensures policy frameworks reflect the breadth of NI's communities.
- Builds trust among minority women, encouraging them to engage in public life and potentially stand for elected office.

3. Strengthen Protections Against Racism and Intersectional Discrimination Rationale:

The 2024 race riots showed that NI's hate crime laws lag behind those in England and Wales while law enforcement struggles to provide adequate protection.³⁰

Action:

- Pass Comprehensive Hate Crime Legislation by treating hate offenses as distinct crimes with aggravated sentences for racial or intersectional motivations.
- Fully implement the Racial Equality Strategy and expedite a Refugee Integration Strategy with robust anti-racism measures in schools, public services, and policing.
- Facilitate Safe Reporting Mechanisms: Expand third-party reporting centers in migrant women's associations. Enhance PSNI's cultural competency via mandatory training on responding to race hate crime.

Impact:

- Deters extremist violence, and reassures migrant women their communities are defended under law.
- Fulfills the Good Friday Agreement principle of equality for all, bridging old and new divides under a single inclusive peace agenda.

²⁹ NIAC. The Experiences of Minority Ethnic and Migrant People in Northern Ireland, 7.

³⁰ NIAC. The Experiences of Minority Ethnic and Migrant People in Northern Ireland, 13-14.

CONCLUSION

Northern Ireland stands at a critical juncture. As the region becomes more multicultural, the structures that once focused on Catholic-Protestant reconciliation have not adapted swiftly enough to encompass new communities. The anti-immigrant riots of 2024 displayed how swiftly divisions can ignite if newcomers feel unprotected. Yet, amid these stresses, migrant women have emerged as essential agents of everyday peace, forging interethnic connections, supporting neighbors in crisis, and mitigating tensions from local vantage points. Far from being mere service beneficiaries, they are leaders whose capacity remains undervalued and underutilized.

This paper has argued that investing in migrant women's peacebuilding is key to consolidating a genuinely inclusive peace. By dedicating multi-year funds to migrant-led programs, integrating minority women in political forums, and strengthening anti-racist protections, Stormont and its international partners can harness the energy, insight, and resilience of these communities. Their grassroots leadership represents an asset-based approach, echoing global best practices under frameworks like UNSCR 1325.

The practical measures proposed here, establishing a Migrant Women's Peacebuilding Fund, appointing minority women to advisory councils, and reforming hate crime laws, are within reach and address clear gaps. For decades, NI's peace was measured by the decline of sectarian violence. To sustain and deepen that peace, it must broaden its focus to include migrant voices. Migrant women, who have shown themselves as cultural mediators and community anchors, offer a transformative resource for bridging the region's evolving divides. Empowering them is a moral imperative, aligned with equality commitments, and a pragmatic strategy to ensure no return to conflict occurs under a different guise.

In short, the best long-term guarantee of peace is an inclusive one that regards all communities, old and new, as co-builders of NI's future.

NORTHERN IRELAND EMERGING LEADERS BIO

RACHEL KENNY-CARDOSO

Advice and Outreach worker,
Migrant Centre Northern Ireland

Rachel is an Advice and Outreach Worker with Migrant Centre NI, where she supports the rights and well-being of migrant communities across Northern Ireland. Fluent in Spanish and Portuguese, she works across language and cultural barriers to provide practical, person-centered support. With nearly a decade of experience supporting migrants and refugees in Glasgow and Belfast, Rachel's background includes advocacy for young refugees and forensic mental health work. Her time living in Spain further enriched her cultural perspective. She is currently completing a Community Development qualification at Ulster University and is preparing to transition into a policy-focused role as Policy and Engagement Officer with the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman.

An Appeal For A Single Equality Legislation For Northern Ireland

Justin kouame

Advocacy Officer, Migrant Centre NI

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy proposal is an urgent appeal to The Executive Office and local politicians to implement the much overdue Single Equality Act (SEA), addressing the inequalities faced by groups and individuals living in Northern Ireland (NI). This appeal highlights the need for a comprehensive legal framework to address fragmented equality laws. NI currently operates under a complex patchwork of equality and anti-discrimination laws, addressing issues such as race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, age, religious belief, and political opinion. However, these scattered laws create challenges regarding consistency, enforcement, and accessibility. The urgent need for a SEA is in response to growing inequality and discrimination in NI over the last decade.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES OF SEA IMPLEMENTATION

- **Legal Clarity and accessibility:** Simplifying legislation would enhance public understanding and compliance.
- **Social Cohesion:** Unified laws demonstrate a strong commitment to equality, fostering trust, and reducing societal tensions
- **Economic Growth:** A fair and inclusive society attracts diverse talent and investment, driving long-term financial benefits.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

NI must adopt a SEA based on the UK's and the Republic of Ireland's Equality Acts while considering region-specific religious and community diversity concerns. Such legislation would align NI with international human rights standards, providing stronger protections against discrimination while promoting inclusion. ¹

¹ Council of Europe. *Equality and Non-Discrimination: "A Human Rights Perspective,"* Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2022.

This legislation should:

- Harmonize equality protections across all grounds, including gender, race, sexual orientation, and disability.
- Strengthen enforcement mechanisms by empowering the ECNI with broader oversight.
- Incorporate community consultation to address local sensitivities and prevent politicization of equality measures.
- Mandate public bodies to advance equality proactively, ensuring better representation and inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Northern Ireland (NI) stands at a crossroads of equality and human rights despite the progress made since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998. NI has long been celebrated for its cultural diversity and the resilience of its communities. However, in recent years, there has been a concerning rise in discrimination and racism, with 1,787 hate incidents reported from October 2023 to September 2024 by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI),² disproportionately affecting vulnerable communities, including ethnic minorities, migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. The absence of a comprehensive SEA leaves gaps in legal safeguards and undermines community cohesion.

Current equality legislation in NI is fragmented. A SEA would consolidate existing protections, simplify legal processes, and offer clearer, stronger safeguards for every individual in society, irrespective of their background, ethnicity, or race. It would enhance legal protection for minority groups and promote social harmony by codifying principles of fairness and respect.

This call to action seeks to galvanize policymakers, community leaders, and citizens to advocate for racial equality reform that reflects the needs of a democratic, modern, and diverse NI. Most importantly, it appeals to local politicians to abandon their “Daltonian View”³ of politics and renew their commitment to embracing societal change.

The principle of “equality before the law” as defined in Article 3 of the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination and the aspiration of ensuring equal protection under the law for everyone living in NI is imperative to building a genuinely inclusive and cohesive society. NI and its enduring peace have been a model to the world. Implementing a SEA will only prove further to the world that NI can be a global role model for peace, equality, and unity in diversity.

² Police Service of Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. *Trends in Hate Motivation Incidents and Crimes Recorded by Police in NI Report*. November 29, 2024.

³ Daltonism is a scientific concept explaining a genetic deficiency in color. John Dalton suffered from a form of red-green colour blindness, meaning that he could not see red or green.

CONTEXT

Despite existing frameworks to protect individuals from inequality, gaps that impact the vulnerable remain.

A. Increasing Discrimination and Racism in NI

Recent studies highlight a trend of rising racism and xenophobia in NI. The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (2022) found that attitudes toward migrants and ethnic minorities have hardened, with a significant proportion of respondents expressing negative views toward these communities.⁴ Hate crime statistics further confirm this reality. The PSNI reported an increase in racially motivated incidents in recent years.⁵ Unlike the rest of the UK, where the Equality Act 2010 provides a harmonized legal framework, NI's equality protections remain fragmented, and it is challenging to combat these issues.⁶

B. Lack of Legal Protection for Minority Groups

Currently, NI relies on a patchwork of anti-discrimination laws, including the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.⁷ However, these laws do not provide the same level of protection as the Equality Act 2010 in Great Britain, the Employment Equality Acts 1998-2021, and the Equality Status Acts 2000-2018 in the Republic of Ireland. This leads to inconsistencies and weaker enforcement mechanisms. Migrants and ethnic minorities face multiple forms of discrimination in employment, housing, and public services, with little recourse to justice. The lack of a comprehensive SEA leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and social exclusion.⁸

⁴ Amanda Haynes, Martin Power, and Louise Devaney. *Attitudes to Minority Communities in Northern Ireland: Trends and Challenges*. Belfast: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 2022.

⁵ Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). *Hate Crime Statistics: Annual Report 2022–23*. Belfast, 2023.

⁶ Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI). *Strengthening Protection Against Racism in Northern Ireland*, Belfast: ECNI, 2021.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Robbie McVeigh and Bill Rolston. *Racism in Northern Ireland: The Persistent Challenge*. Belfast: Institute for Conflict Research, 2020.

C. The Impact on Community Cohesion

The absence of SEA affects individuals and undermines social cohesion. NI has made significant strides in peacebuilding and reconciliation, yet persistent inequalities contribute to social tensions. Research suggests that societies with strong legal protections against discrimination are better equipped to foster inclusive communities and prevent division.⁹ Without a unified legislative approach, NI risks deepening existing inequalities and perpetuating cycles of marginalization.

D. Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act of 1998: An Overview and Analysis

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 remains a key piece of legislation. Public authorities have a statutory duty to promote equality across various groups. This includes religious beliefs, political opinions, gender, race, disability, sex, marital status, and sexual orientation. Whenever a public body makes a decision, it must consider how that decision might affect equality for groups and take steps to mitigate any negative impact.

CHALLENGES IN THE ENFORCEMENT OF SECTION 75 OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND ACT OF 1998

Below are some key challenges in enforcing Section 75 based on case studies.

1. Lack of Direct Legal Sanctions

One of the biggest criticisms of Section 75 is that it lacks direct enforcement powers. Unlike other equality laws (e.g., the Equality Act 2010 in Great Britain), Section 75 does not give individuals the legal right to challenge discriminatory policies in court.¹⁰ For example, public bodies are required to assess the impact of equality. Still, there are no automatic penalties for failing to do so — only the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) can investigate complaints. Even if a breach is found, the ECNI has no power to impose fines or legally compel compliance—it can only issue recommendations.

2. Inconsistent Compliance Across Public Bodies

Although all public authorities are legally bound by Section 75, research suggests that compliance varies significantly. For instance, Government departments such as the Department for Communities have proactively applied Section 75, carrying out Equality Impact Assessments (EQIAs) before making policy decisions. Health and policing bodies have been slow in implementing reforms. For example, the PSNI was found to have failed to fully consider the impacts of equality in recruitment and community engagement policies.¹¹

⁹ Geraldine Healy and Mary Mulholland. *Equality, Social Justice, and Peacebuilding in Post-Conflict Societies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

¹⁰ Colm O'Connell. "The United Kingdom's Equality Framework: A Model for the European Union?" *International Journal of Discrimination and the Law* 12, no. 2 (2012): 105–125.

¹¹ Colin Harvey and Anne Schwartz. "Equality Law and the Implementation Gap in Northern Ireland." *European Human Rights Law Review* (2021): 32–50.

3. The ‘Tick-Box’ Problem: Procedural Compliance without Meaningful Change

Public bodies have faced criticism for treating Section 75 as a bureaucratic exercise instead of a genuine tool for policy change. This phenomenon is frequently called a “tick-box” culture, where Equality Impact Assessments (EQIAs) are hurried or superficial, often conducted after decisions have already been made. Often, there is minimal consultation with affected groups. For example, disability rights organizations have reported that public consultations fail to consider their input meaningfully.¹² Decisions remain unaltered despite equality screenings, as there exists no legal obligation to amend policies in accordance with Section 75 findings.

4. Political Resistance to Strengthening Section 75

Many Unionist parties have opposed strengthening Section 75, fearing it could be used to push through British-style equality laws that they see as incompatible with NI’s unique political and religious landscape. This resistance to reform has meant that attempts to introduce a SEA (which would give Section 75 real enforcement power) have repeatedly failed in the NI Assembly.¹³

5. No Individual Right to Legal Redress

Unlike equality laws in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland, individuals in NI cannot bring a discrimination case under Section 75—they must rely on the Equality Commission to investigate complaints. As noted in the comparative analysis chart below, even if the ECNI finds non-compliance, the discriminating body faces no legal consequences or penalties for failing to comply.

¹² Gillian Mitchell. “Public Transport, Disability, and Equality Law in Northern Ireland.” *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (2018): 33–57.

¹³ Christopher McCrudden. “Equality and Discrimination Law in Northern Ireland: A Critique of the Status Quo.” *Modern Law Review* 70, no. 4 (2007): 633–667.

FIGURE 1: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS - SECTION 75 VS. EQUALITY FRAMEWORKS IN GREAT BRITAIN AND THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

ASPECT	SECTION 75 (NI)	EQUALITY ACT 2010 (GREAT BRITAIN)	EQUALITY LEGISLATION (IRELAND)
SCOPE	Covers public bodies only.	Covers both public and private sectors.	Primarily focuses on employment and service provision.
PROTECTED CHARACTERISTICS	Nine grounds: religious belief, political opinion, race, age, marital status, sexual orientation, gender, disability, and dependents.	Nine characteristics are included: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.	Nine grounds are similar to those of NI and GB, but with a stronger focus on employment discrimination.
ENFORCEMENT MECHANISM	No direct legal redress for individuals. ECNI investigates but lacks the power to enforce it.	Individuals can take legal action. Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) can enforce compliance.	Individuals can pursue claims through the Workplace Relations Commission.
EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENTS	Mandatory, but often seen as procedural rather than substantive.	It is not mandatory, but many public bodies conduct them voluntarily.	It is not a formal requirement, but some public bodies carry out assessments.
LEGAL OBLIGATIONS	It requires public bodies to consider the impact of equality on decision-making.	Imposes a duty on all sectors to eliminate discrimination.	Obligations under the Employment Equality Act and Equal Status Acts.
COMPLIANCE MONITORING	Managed by the ECNI, but often criticized for weak oversight.	EHRC has stronger monitoring and enforcement powers.	Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) oversees, with limited enforcement power.
PENALTIES FOR NON-COMPLIANCE	None are directly under Section 75.	Financial penalties, reputational damage, and legal consequences.	Compensation awards through tribunals or courts.
CULTURAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT	Highly influenced by sectarian divisions and political sensitivity.	More integrated across the UK and less politically divisive.	Framed around EU standards and social partnership models.

BARRIERS TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A SEA IN NORTHERN IRELAND: SECTION 75 VS. EQUALITY FRAMEWORKS IN GREAT BRITAIN AND THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

Empirical institutional barriers to a SEA in Northern Ireland and Observed Barriers to SEA violate the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement 1998 and perpetuate inequality.

NI lacks a comprehensive SEA, unlike the rest of the UK, which has the Equality Act 2010, and the Republic of Ireland, which has the Employment Equality Acts 1998 and the Equal Status Acts 2000-2018. Calls for a SEA have been ongoing for decades, yet political, institutional, and legal barriers obstruct progress.^{14 15}

1. Political and Institutional Gridlock

A. The Consociational Power-Sharing System

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998 established a power-sharing system between unionist and nationalist parties to maintain peace but not necessarily promote social reform.¹⁶ Equality laws often become sectarian bargaining chips, leading to delays in legal consolidation.¹⁷ For example, the DUP has historically resisted progressive equality measures, such as LGBTQ+ protections, which would be part of a SEA.¹⁸

B. The Petition of Concern (PoC) as a Blocking Mechanism

The PoC, designed to protect minority rights, has often been used by political parties to block social reforms. For example, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) repeatedly vetoed same-sex marriage legislation until the UK government intervened in 2019.¹⁹ Therefore, instead of allowing equality reforms to be passed through standard legislative procedures, sectarian politics create institutional roadblocks at The Executive Office level that prevent the establishment of comprehensive legal frameworks.

C. Political Deadlock and Stormont Instability

One of the biggest obstacles to equality legislation in NI is the repeated collapse of the devolved government. For example, from 2022 to 2024, the NI Executive collapsed and policy work stalled due to the DUP's protest against the NI Protocol. Different parties have conflicting views on equality issues (e.g., LGBT+ rights, women's rights, and the role of religion in law). The repeated collapse of the Executive and political divisions has challenged the introduction of reforms like the SEA.

¹⁴ McCrudden, "Mainstreaming Equality in the Governance of Northern Ireland," *Fordham International Law Journal* 22, no. 4 (1999), 1696–1713.

¹⁵ Equality Law and Political Division in Northern Ireland: Addressing Fragmentation and Inconsistencies." *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (2021): 115–138.

¹⁶ John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary. *Consociational Theory and Northern Ireland's Good Friday Agreement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

¹⁷ Rick Wilford. "Equality and Human Rights in Northern Ireland: Between Law and Politics." *Parliamentary Affairs* 71, no. 2 (2018): 303–322.

¹⁸ Mary C. Murphy. "The Role of the UK Parliament in Northern Ireland's Equality Law Reform." *Parliamentary Affairs* 73, no. 4 (2020): 711–730.

¹⁹ Jonathan Tonge. *The Democratic Unionist Party: From Protest to Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

2. Legal Challenges

Despite multiple commitments to introduce a SEA, NI has not consolidated its equality laws.

A. Fragmented Legal Framework and Complexity

NI's current equality laws are spread across multiple pieces of legislation, and legal reform proves complex. Some laws dating back to the 1970s would require significant rewriting. Some groups fear harmonizing laws might weaken existing protections (e.g., fair employment laws designed to prevent discrimination against Catholics and Protestants).

B. Human Rights Issues Post-Brexit

The Windsor Framework and Rights Protection: As part of the Brexit deals, NI must uphold specific human rights protections consistent with the EU. Nevertheless, there are apprehensions that NI might lag behind the changing EU standards without a SEA.

Divergence from Great Britain and Ireland: NI now faces the risk of becoming less aligned with Great Britain due to the absence of an Equality Act and with the Republic of Ireland, which enforces more robust protections under its Equal Status framework Acts.

3. Fragmentation of Existing Equality Legislation

A. Multiple Overlapping Laws Create Legal Complexity

NI's equality framework comprises nine significant pieces of legislation, creating inconsistencies and enforcement challenges.²⁰ This contrasts with the UK's Equality Act 2010, which harmonizes all anti-discrimination laws into one framework.

B. Political Reluctance to Reform Employment Laws

The Fair Employment and Treatment Order 1998 focuses on sectarian discrimination but does not adequately address other forms of discrimination.²² Business groups and some unionist parties oppose increased employment regulations, fearing that they would impose legal burdens on employers.²³ Thus, integrating existing laws into a SEA is difficult, especially when political elites use SEA reforms to maintain influence over different voting blocs.

²⁰ McKeever, "Equality Law and Political Division in Northern Ireland: Addressing Fragmentation and Inconsistencies," 115–138.

²¹ *Equality: The Legal Framework*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2011.

²² McCrudden, "Mainstreaming Equality in the Governance of Northern Ireland," 1696–1713.

²³ Paul Dixon. *Northern Ireland: The Politics of War and Peace*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

4. Resistance from Key Stakeholders

A. Religious Opposition to Expanding Equality Protections

Some religious groups oppose expanding equality protections for LGBTQ+ rights and reproductive rights, which would be included in a SEA.²⁴ For example, Religious lobbyists influenced the DUP's opposition to same-sex marriage and gender recognition policies.²⁵

B. Business Concerns about Regulatory Overload

Some businesses oppose a SEA, arguing that it would introduce new compliance burdens and increase employment disputes and litigation.²⁶ In contrast, large multinational firms operating in NI (such as those in the finance and tech sectors) generally support harmonizing laws to align with UK and EU standards.²⁷ The influence of conservative religious groups and business opposition to additional regulation creates further barriers to passing a SEA.

5. Lack of Political Will and Policy Prioritization

Equality legislation has consistently been a low political priority, particularly compared to constitutional issues, economic concerns, and Brexit. Political parties in NI focus more on sectarian disputes rather than social justice issues, leaving equality reform neglected.

A. Unionist vs. Nationalist Focus: Traditional party competition revolves around Irish unity vs. British identity, not progressive social policy.

B. Reactive vs. Proactive Governance: Stormont often reacts to crises rather than proactively developing social policy issues, such as the, unfortunately, growing racial inequality and hate incidents experienced by the migrant community.

ARGUMENTS

Observed Barriers to SEA Violate the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement 1998 and Perpetuate Inequality

1. A lack of enthusiasm from the general populace, community groups, and political circles is an epidemic in the movement towards achieving true equality in NI

In NI, the lack of a SEA is largely due to the deeply entrenched sectarian political structures prioritizing ethno-national concerns over broader social equality issues.

²⁴ Wilford, "Equality and Human Rights in Northern Ireland: Between Law and Politics," 303–322.

²⁵ Cathy Gormley-Heenan, "Elite Resistance to LGBT Rights in Northern Ireland," *Irish Political Studies* 35, no. 2, 2020, 241–259.

²⁶ Dixon, *Northern Ireland: The Politics of War and Peace*, 2018.

²⁷ McCrudden, "Mainstreaming Equality in the Governance of Northern Ireland," 1696–1713.

Political resistance from parties that fear a SEA could undermine religious protections or reshape traditional power balances and the reliance on mandatory coalition governance, often leading to policy gridlock. While NI's power-sharing system often blocks legislative progress, civic groups have increasingly used litigation, public pressure, and media campaigns to force change on equality issues and policy innovations. For example, the Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement (NIWRM), formed in 1975, successfully extended the 1975 British Sexual Discrimination Act to NI. The Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association (NIGRA) was established in 1975, pursued law reform, and was successful in having the 1967 Sexual Offences Act extended to NI in 1982, making it consistent with the legal situation in the rest of the United Kingdom. In 2019, grassroots organizations like the Alliance for Choice and Women's Aid, after years of high-profile campaigns, were successful via Westminster Legislation (2019) for abortion to be decriminalized in NI when Stormont was suspended. Although several social justice issues have been realized by continuous cross-community civic engagements and activists over the years, it is true to say that when it comes to racial equality, these persistent and concerted actions and campaigns that yielded positive results are spectacularly lacking.

When institutional barriers prevent democratic responsiveness, citizens will resort to alternative forms of participation—including protests, legal action, and lobbying Westminster.²⁸ Indeed, civic engagement organisations should unite to form a type of Racial Equality Movement with the ECNI (if in its remit), develop a long-term strategy, and call for the implementation of a SEA as agreed in the first programme for government in 2000. The Racial Equality Movement should give a strong voice to young people, as the majority tend to vote on social justice issues rather than following sectarian lines, as they have no direct experience of 'the troubles.'

2. The “Daltonian” View of NI Politics and Its Impact on Achieving True Equality in NI

A Daltonian view of politics in Northern Ireland refers to political color blindness, drawing from the term Daltonism, which describes red-green color blindness. Applied metaphorically to NI politics, I am suggesting an approach to social justice and progressive policies free of a sectarian lens for the greater good and by NI historical and cultural norms rather than analyzing anything in 'Orange and Green' source of the Blindness.

Our politicians, civil servants, and policymakers are so consumed by the 'Orange vs Green' approach that they rarely perceive any issue without relating it to the 'Orange vs Green' perspective, whether explicitly or implicitly. Consequently, any social justice issue that does not meet this standard is dismissed, regardless of its potential benefits to society.

²⁸ Russell J. Dalton. *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation is Reshaping American Politics*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2008.

Any policy that fails to pass the so-called “Orange and Green” test (meaning it lacks cross-community support) risks being blocked through mechanisms like the Petition of Concern (PoC) or could even result in the collapse of the Executive. For instance, the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) scandal in 2017 led to the breakdown of power-sharing and triggered a three-year political stalemate. Similarly, in 2012, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) used the PoC to block the proposed Irish Language Act. As a result, the legislation was eventually introduced through Westminster, bypassing the devolved institutions.

Initially, the PoC was meant to prevent discrimination by ensuring that significant legislation had cross-community support. However, over time, due to ‘Political Daltonism,’ it has become a political tool to block progress. This blindness puts migrants and other communities not belonging to ‘Orange vs. Green’ in a vulnerable position.

NI’s history of sectarian conflict has led to a cautious, often divided approach to governance. Some groups prioritize religious or political identity over broader equality measures, creating a form of “institutional Daltonism” where certain inequalities are acknowledged while others remain overlooked. For example, since 2016, hate incidents have been consistently greater than sectarian incidents. However, the funding for the Minority Ethnic Development Fund is still forty times lower than the amount allocated to address sectarianism and paramilitarism.

The Programme for Government (March 2025) does not contain a single paragraph acknowledging racism or hate crimes, despite a worrying constant increase in hate incidents.

While drafting this paper, The Executive Office (TEO) initiated a “Race Equality Call for Views” survey to develop “a new strategic approach to race equality post-2025.” When ethnic minority communities, including organizations working in the Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) sector, together with the ECNI and NHRC, are asking for the next Race Equality Strategy to be strengthened and improved. For this to happen, the input of the Race Equality Subgroup and the independent reviewer’s recommendations need to be included. This new strategic approach could see either the end of the Race Equality Unit or its being diluted in another TEO programme.

In NI, the DUP and the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) strongly oppose the SEA. The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) supports equality but prefers a balanced approach with religious protections. Sinn Fein, the Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP), the Alliance, the Green Party, and People Before Profit strongly support the implementation of aSEA.

Among the political parties supporting a SEA, the SDLP is the only party in the North West with a Black female councillor and Mayor. People Before Profit, a relatively small party without a BAME councillor, has consistently selected a Black party member in the council and Assembly elections.

The Alliance Party was the first party in NI to have a Chinese member, Ms. Anna Lo, elected as a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) from 2007 to 2016 in South Belfast under the former leader, David Ford. Following Ms Anna Lo's retirement in 2016, the Alliance Party, under the current leader, did not pursue this policy and made the South Belfast seat available for BAME members of their party.

Both Sinn Fein and Alliance consider themselves strong supporters of racial equality and diversity, but such a position is not reflected in the party structure, even though both parties have considerable BAME members and sympathisers. Based on the composition of elected members (councillors and MLAs) of both parties, it is fair to conclude that Section 75 characteristics are more or less met, except for race.

CONCLUSION

For a Single Equality Act to be implemented, we must prioritize three key actions:

- First, fostering a consistent Racial Equality Movement that advocates for racial equality issues within the community,
- second, shifting the mindsets of politicians and civil servants to acknowledge that NI society has changed. and,
- finally, leveraging external pressure, particularly from the USA, can play an important role in urging the NI Government to take decisive action.

Embracing these recommendations and course of actions can pave the way for a more equitable and just society where every individual is valued and respected, ensuring that NI truly reflects the principles of dignity and human rights for all.

NORTHERN IRELAND EMERGING LEADERS BIO

JUSTIN KOUAME

Advocacy Officer, Migrant Centre Northern Ireland

Justin is a Commissioner for the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, a Trustee for the Community Foundation for NI (CFNI), and a member of the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO). Justin was formerly Chair of Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS). Justin is a dedicated advocate and champion for Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) in NI. With over a decade of experience working with refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants, Justin has been at the forefront of promoting racial equality, inclusion, and unity in diversity. He holds the belief that BME voices, lived experience, and rights need to be heard and valued, and upheld at every level of NI society. As a committed champion for better living conditions and the well-being of refugees and asylum seekers (RAS). Justin has actively pushed for systematic change, challenging policies that leave vulnerable individuals in precarious situations. Justin's advocacy extends to achieving free and accessible English language classes and better living conditions for refugees and asylum seekers in NI, recognizing the fundamental role language and housing play in integration, empowerment, and opportunity. Justin has produced research papers on housing and destitution affecting RAS, and an Essential Guide to help RAS understand the social, historical, and economic context of life in NI. Committed to racial equality and social justice, Justin continues to fight for inclusive and progressive policies and improved services to reflect societal change, the recognition of lived experience, and meaningful opportunities for BME communities living in NI.

Digital Masculinity and Misogyny: Educating Boys and Young Men About Online Gender-Based Violence

Stephen McCrystall

Equality & Human Rights Officer, Education Authority Northern Ireland

“My eyes were first opened to online risk when I was 12. Before that, the online world was a place of fun, games and a method to connect with friends. Which is how it should be. Online safety was an ill-defined concept to me, and I didn’t truly understand what it meant and what risks there are. ...my school contacted my parents while a teacher explained to me that my image. ...had been hacked and was stolen from the school website. ...The school contacted the police who carried out an investigation.”
- Elodie, 14 years old.¹



¹ Elodie, "Experience as a Young Person" (presentation, *Predators, Porn & Prevention: Protecting Young People Online*, Victim Support Northern Ireland – Annual Conference, La Mon Hotel, Belfast, February 20, 2025).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The prevalence of violence against women and girls in an online setting recognizes that women are disproportionately more likely to experience online abuse, and men and boys are most likely to carry out abuse. For young people in particular, this is a significant challenge to address. Recent shows such as Netflix's *Adolescence* have reignited the discourse of fears held by many supporters involved in a child's development. The online 'manosphere' has a profound impact on forming the beliefs and worldview of boys and young men while underlining the harm inflicted upon girls and young women.

The Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls in Northern Ireland (NI) commits to a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach, emphasizing the lower tiers of the Gender-Based Violence (GBV) pyramid, such as 'Prevention.' However, systemic problems persist. Against already endemic levels of misogyny in NI, a key priority must include keeping girls and young women safe online and concentrating on critically supporting the healthy development of masculinity and positive role modeling for boys and young men.

The primary recommendations of this paper observe that although online safety is not a devolved matter, a pro-feminist response is required, and digital education is key. The Children Services Cooperation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 should be utilized to create interconnected and intergovernmental solutions based on international best practices. While current education programs are excellent, they require adequate resourcing and consistent rollout. Moreover, they, too, may need to modernize to account for a rapidly evolving and increasingly dangerous context.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Use the Children Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 and international frameworks to develop a pro-feminist, intersectional, and intergovernmental response to Ending Violence Against Women and Girls in an online setting in NI.
2. Ensure digital and rights-based literacy and education is fully implemented and mainstreamed for children, young people, teachers, school staff, youth workers, parents, and carers in line with UNCRC and CEDAW.

3. Enhance the existing Active Bystander, White Ribbon NI, and Coaching Boys Into Men programs to ensure they are sustainable and well-resourced educational initiatives that emphasize growing up safely in the online world.
4. Depoliticize the debate on making the NI Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Curriculum compliant with CEDAW and international best practices, with a specific focus on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls and the role of boys and men.
5. Use strand two and three mechanisms of the Good Friday Agreement to establish a group tasked with developing innovative solutions across these islands on online safety for young people. This should include visible political leadership, evidence of collaboration between the public and private sectors, protection of citizens, and a focus on those with lived experience and systemic inequalities.

INTRODUCTION

It has been well documented for some time now that NI is one of the most dangerous places in Western Europe to be a woman.² The Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG) in NI³ has achieved relatively strong political consensus, augmented by the first two-year Delivery Plan. The Framework commits to a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach, emphasizing the lower tiers of the Gender-Based Violence (GBV) pyramid, such as 'Prevention.' On a positive level, the Framework is robust, widely researched, clearly identifies the underlying causes, and has followed an inclusive co-design process.

However, in terms of challenges, there appears to be a reduced amount of funding per capita compared to other jurisdictions; the Framework has been reported to miss key root causes of GBV, such as spiking,⁴ and despite the current and anticipated future demand on policing response, does not appear to currently have sufficient crime prevention or specialist investigation resources required, particularly for technology or cyber-based abuse.⁵ This furthers the already high levels of concern from women of not being believed or perpetuating the worry that reporting would not make any difference.⁶

² Lisa O'Carroll, "Domestic Abuse Commissioner Needed to Tackle Femicide in Northern Ireland, Charity Says," *The Guardian*, November 10, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/nov/10/domestic-abuse-commissioner-needed-to-tackle-femicide-in-northern-ireland-charity-says>

³ Northern Ireland Executive, *Strategic Framework to Tackle Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)* (Belfast: Executive Office, 2016), <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/execoffice/strategic-framework-evawg.pdf>

⁴ "Spiking Not in NI Strategy a 'Missed Opportunity,'" *BBC News*, September 26, 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cq8x5zw7dy2o>

⁵ "Not Enough Officers to Tackle Violence Against Women," *BBC News*, December 5, 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cre7ljq774o>

⁶ Siobhán McAlister et al., *It's Just What Happens: Girls' and Young Women's Views and Experiences of Violence in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Executive Office, 2023), 50, <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/execoffice/its-just-what-happens.pdf>

With the UK Online Safety Act 2023 set to take effect in March 2025, this paper examines NI's state of readiness to achieve Outcome 3 of the Framework for children and young people. It outlines guidelines to ensure that school-age girls and young women feel safe online while exploring the essential role of boys and young men in this context.⁷

Even though online safety is not a devolved matter, education is. This paper will argue that not enough emphasis is placed on the scale of the challenge in a rapidly evolving and increasingly dangerous context.

The online world has been selected as the focus area due to its prevalence and complexity for young people. The Northern Ireland Young Life and Times Survey identified online as the most common area to experience violence (Figure 1). Variances between official statistics and estimates of prevalence emphasize the underreporting and the need for further research in this area.

FIGURE 1: WHERE DID THE GBV TAKE PLACE (%)?

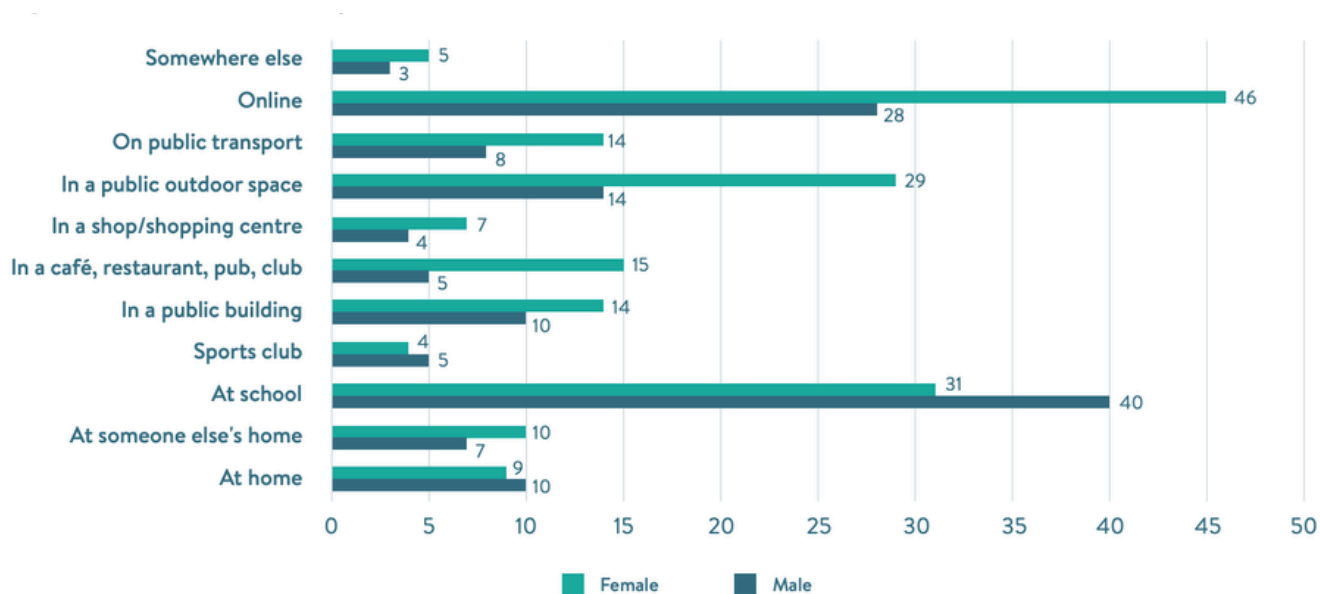


Figure 1: Young Life and Times Survey Research Update on Gender-Based Violence, Dec 2024.⁸

The Strategic Framework presents a clear vision and articulates important points, but is NI truly prepared to tackle this issue effectively, or is it at risk of lagging behind due to insufficient interconnected solutions? Instead of relying on a single solution, NI will require a combination of approaches.

⁷ Outcome 3 states: "Women and girls are safe and feel safe everywhere – Organisations and institutions across government and society embed the prevention of violence against women and girls in all that they do, so that women and girls are safe and feel safe everywhere." Northern Ireland Executive, *Strategic Framework to Tackle Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)* (2024), 7, <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/execoffice/strategic-framework-evawg.pdf>.

⁸ Martina McKnight and Dirk Schubotz, "Feeling Safe? Gender-Based Violence Experiences of 16-Year-Olds," *ARK Research Update*, no. 158 (December 2024): 2, fig. 1, <https://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/sites/default/files/2024-12/RU158.pdf>.

The Strategic Risk Assessment on Violence Against Women and Girls carried out by the National Police Chiefs' Council “notes that while, on average, 10% of VAWG offenses are recorded as occurring online, this is likely to be an underestimate, as most VAWG offenses are likely to have a digital component.”⁹ Whereas, the domestic abuse charity Refuge found that “1 in 3 women have experienced online abuse in their lives.”¹⁰ The difference in figures is unsurprising; research conducted in preparation for the development of the NI Strategic Framework showed it was the second most prevalent form of violence.¹¹ However, it was believed to be a ‘normal’ part of online life,¹² not considered ‘serious enough,’¹³ and the violence could be viewed as being more ‘subtle.’¹⁴

A global perspective on attitudes toward women—and their influence on boys and young men—reveals the scale of the challenge. Before offering recommendations, this paper outlines three key obstacles concerning boys and young men.

ISSUE 1:

The Dangers of Sexist Attitudes, Beliefs, and the Risk of Social Conformity within Boys and Young Men..

The rapidly expanding online world raises ongoing and evolving challenges in the types of content to which boys and girls are exposed, for example, through ‘sexting’ or pornography. Research by Martellozzo et al. suggests that boys are proportionally more likely to search for and view pornography than girls.¹⁵ Of those who had viewed pornography, whether intentionally or accidentally, 94% had been exposed by age 14.¹⁶ This study also found that some boys regarded pornography as realistic, seeing it as something to emulate, which raises questions about their expectations for the girls and other boys with whom they later interact.¹⁷

The NI Strategic Framework also recognizes this: “Our young people are exposed to messages online which undervalue, demean and humiliate women and girls, as well as increased access to pornography from a young age.”¹⁸ The primary worries of a noninterventionist approach to online pornography include the impact this has on a young person’s understanding of what constitutes a healthy relationship and the potential for a distorted view of reality provided by pornography. In other words, it can entrench existing harmful gender stereotypes, objectification, misunderstanding of consent, and unequal power dynamics.

⁹ National Police Chiefs' Council, *Violence Against Women and Girls – Strategic Threat & Risk Assessment 2023* (London: NPCC, 2023), 18, <https://www.npcc.police.uk/SysSiteAssets/media/downloads/our-work/vawg/violence-against-women-and-girls---strategic-threat-risk-assessment-2023.pdf>.

¹⁰ Refuge, *Unsocial Spaces?* (London: Refuge, 2022), 7, <https://refuge.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/unsocial-spaces-.pdf>.

¹¹ McAlister et al., *It's Just What Happens*, 6.

¹² McAlister et al., 33.

¹³ McAlister et al., 50.

¹⁴ McAlister et al., 6.

¹⁵ Elena Martellozzo et al., “I Wasn't Sure It Was Normal to Watch It...”: *A Quantitative and Qualitative Examination of the Impact of Online Pornography on the Values, Attitudes, Beliefs, and Behaviours of Children and Young People* (London: Middlesex University, NSPCC, and Office of the Children's Commissioner, June 2016), 24, https://www.research.herts.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/18925019/MDX_NSPPC_OCC_Online_Pornography_16.5.17a.pdf.

¹⁶ Martellozzo et al., “I Wasn't Sure,” 31.

¹⁷ Martellozzo et al., 66.

¹⁸ Northern Ireland Executive, *Strategic Framework*, 28.

At a societal level, there is even greater reason for concern; domestic violence in NI has reached endemic levels. The Police Service of NI receives a call every 16 minutes for domestic violence. In 2024, Women's Aid supported 8,000 women; of these, 274 women were pregnant, and 6,290 children and young people were supported.¹⁹ These are profoundly harrowing statistics. NI has over 1,200 schools, EOTAS centers (Education Otherwise Than at School), and statutory youth clubs. While only the tip of the iceberg,²⁰ the above context reinforces the powerful reminder that exposure to Violence Against Women and Girls has a significant ripple effect where our children and young people attend schools and educational settings daily, forced to carry a dark and burdensome family secret at a time when educationalists are supporting them to thrive.²¹ Children who experience Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) often struggle to identify positive role models, highlighting the need for a sensitive and informed approach to addressing these challenges. This issue reflects broader complexities, including transgenerational trauma and deeply rooted systemic sexism in Northern Ireland.

One possible intervention for such a challenge is to improve education via the preventive curriculum²² and enhanced Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE). However, in NI, this has led to significant politicization and division, prompting Stormont's Committee for Education to launch a Mini-Inquiry into RSE.²³ The UN Committee on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women recommended that NI should make "age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights a compulsory component of the curriculum for adolescents, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion."²⁴ It is difficult to achieve political consensus on this issue; those who are not in favor believe it will impact Christian ethos and promotion of abortion, and does not align with traditional identity topics.²⁵ Despite this, the NI Human Rights Commission recommends making Violence Against Women and Girls a mandatory aspect of the RSE curriculum, in line with international standards.²⁶ The purpose of this paper, however, is to underscore the need for programs to maintain a clear and sustained focus on online environments. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, parents, carers, and educators face challenges in fully understanding the experiences and risks young people encounter. Elodie's account, referenced at the outset of this paper, reinforces the importance of ensuring that young people are meaningfully engaged in shaping the solutions and systems intended to support them.

²⁰ Northern Ireland Executive, 8.

²¹ McAlister et al., sec. 4.4.3, "Keeping the Family Secret."

²² See, for example, Department for Education, *Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE), and Health Education* (London: HM Government, 2019), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education>.

²³ Northern Ireland Assembly, *Inquiry into Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Schools*.

²⁴ United Nations CEDAW Committee, *UN CEDAW Committee Inquiry Concerning the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland under Article 8 of the Optional Protocol to the UN CEDAW*, CEDAW/C/OP.8/GBR/1, March 6, 2018, para. 86(d).

²⁵ See, for example, Democratic Unionist Party, *Dodds: Christian Ethos of Schools Must Be Protected, DUP Consultation Response to the Department of Education's Consultation on the Subject of Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE)*.

²⁶ Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, *NIHRC Submission to the Committee for Education Mini Inquiry into Relationships and Sexuality Education*, section 10.0, accessed March 4, 2025, <https://nihrc.org/publication/detail/nihrc-submission-to-the-committee-for-education-mini-inquiry-into-relationships-and-sexuality-education>.

ISSUE 2:***The Exponential Global Rise in the Toxicifying ‘Manosphere,’ Algorithms, and the Misogyny That Pervades a Dangerous and Anti-Feminist Online Environment.***

The ongoing challenges posed by the rise in anti-feminist rhetoric and the relentless manosphere should be cause for concern.²⁷ The global geopolitical landscape represents a widespread attack on women’s rights and efforts to restrict the ability to feel safe and free from harassment as digital citizens. This has a substantial impact on young people of all genders. This is undeniably a movement of hate, and there is growing evidence to suggest that boys are being radicalized toward a viewpoint of male supremacy on platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Truth Social.

Right-wing campaigns have increasingly permeated various aspects of society around the world. On the island of Ireland, we see this through anti-immigrant rhetoric such as #Irelandisfull, the outworkings of Dublin and Belfast race riots, the Conor McGregor and Nikita Hand trial, and the utterly heinous abuse of 70 children by 26-year-old Alexander McCartney of County Down. This is the pyramid of gender-based Violence in full force—not a new phenomenon, but rather a digital manifestation of a persistent societal *maladie* with far-reaching, pandemic-like impact. A key body of evidence for the “Ulster Rugby rape trial” – dating back to June 2016 – focused on the despicable language in group WhatsApp messages.

Social media platforms have lost their sole focus on ‘social’ engagement. In many ways, today’s leading platforms are closer to those of broadcast channels and advertising and should be regulated as such. The Westminster Online Safety Act 2023, which will come into force in March 2025, aims to establish a regulatory framework that holds technology companies accountable and proactively reduces content perpetuating violence against women. Although the Act initially did not address gender-based violence, Ofcom will be the body responsible for monitoring this issue.²⁸ While its effectiveness remains uncertain, a continued focus on education, prevention, and proactive interventions is essential. Reactive measures, such as reporting and deleting violent content, will not undo the harm inflicted on the women and girls affected.

Research carried out by the Australian E-Safety Commissioner²⁹ demonstrates the tensions and complexity of the issue. While young people are often more adept at navigating digital technologies than their older peers, they are still developing their worldviews during a vulnerable and challenging period. Feminist theory has long recognized how the patriarchy harms boys and young men in different ways than women: this paper argues that the manosphere has a similar effect.

²⁷ Debbie Ging, "Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere," *Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 4 (2019): 638–657, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X17706401>.

²⁸ "The UK's New Online Safety Law Must Protect Women & Girls from Online Abuse," Change.org, accessed March 2, 2025, <https://www.change.org/p/michelledonelan-the-uk-s-new-online-safety-law-must-protect-women-girls-from-online-abuse>.

²⁹ eSafety Commissioner, *Being a Young Man Online* (Sydney: eSafety Commissioner, June 2024), <https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-06/Being-a-young-man-online-June-2024.pdf?v=1743427078507>.

The Australian report recognizes how harmful online content, creators, and communities can appeal to young men by meeting their needs for validation, guidance, edginess, and belonging.³⁰ Seemingly harmless algorithms purport to focus on the ‘user’s preferences,’ but the rise in popularity of figures such as the Tate Brothers suggests more sinister undercurrents. Rather than sweeping labels of toxicity at an individual level, this may cause young men to feel defensive, disenfranchised, uncertain, rebellious, and lonely.³¹ In contrast, however, the correct education program could instead promote learning how to become good, kind men, how to be empathetic, and how to think critically.³²

Elodie, the young person referenced at the outset of this paper about their encounter with online risks, described the approach to school-based education as 'unregulated, ad hoc, and piecemeal.'³³ While there have been several examples of emerging education programs in NI, such as White Ribbon NI, Active Bystander, and Coaching Boys Into Men, Ringrose et al. (2025) argue, “postdigital dynamics have not yet been adequately considered in bystanding interventions.”³⁴ There is a need to ensure that programs modernize and incorporate content about applying knowledge in a digital context.

ISSUE 3:

The Challenges Posed By Artificial Intelligence, Emerging Technologies, and a Lack of Digital and Rights-Based Literacy, Particularly for Children and Young People.

The opportunities and dangers of Artificial Intelligence (AI) have been an increasingly expanding area of concern for society. The NSPCC’s Voice of Online Youth Manifesto for Change,³⁵ including representation from NI, identified the following five priorities:

- Better education for all;
- Regulate AI;
- Reduce the harmful impact of online ads;
- Improve reporting;
- Improve privacy and maintain safety.

Sweeping suggestions for banning social media channels are unlikely to be effective; parental safeguards are limited. The reality is that young people have consistently identified ways to utilize loopholes. Meanwhile, the ongoing laissez-faire stance of social media companies remains discouraging.

³⁰ eSafety Commissioner, *Supporting Young Men Online: Understanding Young Men’s Needs, the Pull of Harmful Content and the Way Forward* (February 2025), 66, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-02/Supporting-young-men-online-report-2.pdf>.

³¹ eSafety Commissioner, *Supporting Young Men Online*, 66.

³² eSafety Commissioner, 66.

³³ Elodie, "Experience as a Young Person" (presentation, *Predators, Porn & Prevention: Protecting Young People Online, Victim Support Northern Ireland – Annual Conference*, La Mon Hotel, Belfast, February 20, 2025).

³⁴ Jessica Ringrose, Debbie Ging, Faye Mishna, Betsy Milne, Tanya Horeck, and Kaitlynn Mendes, "Postdigital Bystanding: Youth Experiences of Sexual Violence Workshops in Schools in England, Ireland, and Canada," *Behavioral Sciences* 15, no. 1 (2025): 81, <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-328X/15/1/81>.

³⁵ National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, "Voice of Online Youth: Manifesto for Change," accessed March 6, 2025, https://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/about-us/what-we-do/voices-of-online-youth/voice-of-online-youth_manifesto_eng_aw.pdf.

While it is easy to assume that robust reactive reporting measures on social media platforms would resolve the situation by removing the harmful content, this is not the case. As one of the participants stated, “Usually, by the time something is reported or deleted, the damage is done.”³⁶

There are more questions than answers when it comes to AI. Young people often worry about trusting online content, which can lead to the exploitation of vulnerable children in risky situations. Teenagers may unintentionally or intentionally share intimate images, and the subsequent distribution of these images can cause significant harm, particularly to the victims. Apps like TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat continue to attract teenagers despite their concerns about inappropriate content, cyberbullying, and insufficient parental safeguards.

Moreover, the use of ‘deepfake’ technology has increased in recent years, and the popularity of ‘nudify’ apps is growing. However, there has been limited success in curbing their use so far. These are just some of the priority areas the NI Department of Health may need to consider within the successor strategy for “Keeping Children and Young People Safe: An Online Safety Strategy for NI 2020-2025.”³⁷

One potential jurisdiction that could be further explored includes Finland, which has ranked highest in the New Media Literacy Index.³⁸ Digital literacy is seen as a civic skill that is fundamental to the development of society’s well-being. It is also interesting to note that Finnish education does not stop simply within the classroom of young people: all generations are encouraged to access education and awareness-raising. This is particularly important for the other supporters in a young person’s development, including parents, teachers, youth workers, and other role models. Their worries, fears, and apprehensions are entirely valid; they also require solutions catering to their experiences.

Given the ongoing review of NI’s Curriculum, there is significant potential to adopt a similar approach. An essential component would be developing curricula integrating critical thinking, digital rights awareness, and understanding of how emerging technologies impact personal safety and societal well-being. By prioritizing digital and rights-based literacy, Northern Ireland could better equip young people to navigate online spaces and foster a broader understanding of healthy relationships, identity, and respect for women. Furthermore, a holistic approach involving families, educators, and communities can ensure that digital literacy becomes a shared responsibility, contributing to a safer and more informed generation overall.

³⁶ National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, “Voice of Online Youth,” 14.

³⁷ Department of Health Northern Ireland, *Keeping Children and Young People Safe: An Online Safety Strategy for Northern Ireland 2020-2025* (2020), accessed March 6, 2025, <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/online-safety-strategy.pdf>.

³⁸ EAVI - Media Literacy for Citizenship, “Finnish National Curriculum on Media Literacy: A Global Model for Education” (2024), accessed November 26, 2024, <https://eavi.eu/ml-in-finland/>.

CONCLUSION

The above three issues would suggest that it is easy to become despondent about the scale of online gender-based violence. Online harms appear to be increasingly malicious and challenging to keep pace with. As such, this issue requires long-term thinking, given its potential to affect current and future generations of children. Focusing on education and supporting our boys and young men to develop healthy identities about what it means to be a man and how to respect others will be fundamental to protecting and keeping girls and young women safe online. Combined with positive role-modeling examples, this can shape and transform societal well-being to eradicate in-person and digital misogyny.

Digital education should be age-appropriate and empowering, teaching young people skills that emphasize the importance of critical insight, rigor, challenging assumptions, and discovering accessible and creative ways to explore nuanced and complex issues.

Given the dangers faced by women in NI, politicians and policymakers owe it to current and future generations of girls and boys to confront this serious challenge head-on and develop innovative, interconnected, and intersectional solutions.

For boys and young men in particular, this should include healthy opportunities to engage in topics surrounding masculinity, identity, and respect for women, rather than arriving at seemingly straightforward – yet deeply sinister – conclusions. The alternative is to allow online harms to persist, perpetuated by those who aim to entrench a deeply troubling and distorted view of women's equality, fueled by digital masculinity and misogyny.

NORTHERN IRELAND EMERGING LEADERS BIO

STEPHEN MCCRYSTALL

Equality and Human Rights Officer, Education Authority
Northern Ireland

Stephen McCrystall is an Equality and Human Rights Officer at the Education Authority Northern Ireland, where he leads the Disability Employment Support Service and provides strategic guidance on equality and human rights across schools, youth services, and corporate settings. A first-generation law graduate from Queen's University, Stephen has worked in various roles, including Policy & Engagement Officer for the Law Society of Northern Ireland and Student Experience Policy Coordinator at Queen's. He has a strong track record in student advocacy, having been elected Vice-President and President of Queen's Students' Union, winning awards such as Equality Activist of the Year. He is also a Belfast Legacy Ambassador for One Young World, a PEACE Ambassador for SEUPB, and a Non-Executive Director of Arts and Business Northern Ireland. In April 2024, he attended the United Nations ECOSOC Youth Forum and spoke at recent conferences in Belfast and Canada on topics relating to accessible education and cultural governance.

Can We Find a Way Forward? The Political Impasse and Challenges to Integrated Education in Northern Ireland

Dr. Matthew O'Neill

Chair of Integrated AlumNI and Climate Project Lead at the Institute for International and European Affairs

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The history of Northern Ireland is characterized by its political, religious, cultural, and economic divisions, which have led to sectarian violence among communities and strife.¹ The education system in Northern Ireland (NI) remains deeply divided, with the majority of children attending schools separated along religious lines. Controlled schools, which are state-owned and predominantly attended by Protestant pupils, operate under a Christian ethos influenced by transferor churches such as the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church, and the Methodist Church. These schools represent pupils who identify as Protestant and a smaller proportion as Catholic or from other backgrounds. On the other hand, Catholic maintained schools are managed by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). They teach the same curriculum as other schools, but through the lens of Catholic values. Integrated schools aim to bridge sectarian divides by educating Protestant, Catholic, and other children in a joint environment that promotes diversity, respect, and mutual understanding. The approach of Integrated Education derives from an ethos that strives to connect students from different communities to foster understanding and empathy.

The Education Reform Order of 1989 placed a responsibility on NI's Department of Education to 'encourage and facilitate' the development of Integrated Education and included statutory funding for integrated schools.² The Integrated Education approach, having received widespread support, saw its endorsement in the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement in 1998.³ Presently, the Integrated Education Act (2022) has strengthened the legal obligation of the Department of Education to promote and expand integrated education. However, its progress has been hindered by political instability, financial inefficiencies, and institutional resistance. Despite broad public support, the growth of integrated education remains slow and inconsistent.⁴

¹ Integrated Education Fund, "History of Integrated Education," IEF: Integrated Education Fund, November 21, 2024, <https://www.ief.org.uk/integrated-education/the-history-of-integrated-education/>.

² Ulf Hansson, Una O'Connor Bones, and John McCord, "Integrated Education: A Review of Policy and Research Evidence 1999-2012," January 2013: 3, https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/education/docs/ief_2013_report_unesco.pdf.

³ Hansson et al., "Integrated Education," 3.

⁴ "Integrated Education Act Comes Into Force," Council for Integrated Education, November 21, 2022, <https://nicie.org/integrated-education-act-comes-into-force/>.

The challenges hindering the transformation of NI's separate school system include political gridlock, inadequate enforcement, financial constraints, systemic inefficiencies, institutional and cultural barriers, and long-term social and economic impacts. These obstacles suggest that the educational system may be fundamentally flawed and deeply embedded in its structure.

This paper asserts the government's statutory responsibility to encourage and facilitate Integrated Education and urges the government to keep seeking opportunities to increase the number of integrated schools in NI. It identifies the key barriers hindering effective implementation, evaluates the role of various stakeholders, and proposes strategic solutions to address these challenges. Furthermore, this paper advocates for a stronger commitment to the Integrated Education ethos, emphasizing the need for structural change and reform of the separate school system.

BACKGROUND

Integrated Education is a direct response to an education system that largely separates children according to their religions and cultural affiliations⁵ It can be characterised by its grassroots, community-led approach, which stems from parental guidance and advocacy. By bringing children from different religious, cultural, and economic backgrounds together in a joint learning environment, Integrated Education in NI aims to foster reconciliation.⁶

The NI Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) has refined the definition of Integrated Education, emphasising its four main enshrined principles, including the value in equality, which promotes joint learning among all diverse groups within the school community.⁷ Maintaining faith and values by following a Christian-based approach, Integrated Education strives to create an environment where people of all faiths and none are respected, acknowledged, and valued.⁸ Parental involvement, by centering the parents' role in integrated education, their support and commitment remain fundamental to the establishment and success of integrated schools.⁹ Lastly, on social responsibility, integrated schools deliver an inclusive, all-ability curriculum, recognising the unique potential of every pupil and fostering personal, social, intellectual, and spiritual development.¹⁰

⁵ Integrated Education Fund, "History of Integrated Education."

⁶ Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, "The Integrated Ethos," <https://nicie.org/what-is-integrated-education/integrated-ethos/>.

⁷ Dolores Loughrey, Sonia Kidd, and Jacqueline Carlin, "Integrated Primary Schools and Community Relations in Northern Ireland," *The Irish Journal of Education / Iris Eireannach an Oideachais* 34 (2003): 30–46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30077485>.

⁸ Integrated Education Fund.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Data across NI consistently show that public support for integrated schools remains very high in terms of its contributions to peace and reconciliation.¹¹ Despite strong public support and a legal framework requiring the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate its development, the growth of integrated education has been slow and inconsistent, heavily reliant on parental demand.¹² As of 2024, there are 73 integrated schools across NI, educating around 28,000 pupils.¹³ Despite the Department of Education's duty to encourage and facilitate integrated education, integrated schools still serve only about 8% of the total school population. This highlights the challenges of integration and its deep entrenchment within the educational system.

Since the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement (1998),¹⁴ NI has witnessed political divisions, financial constraints, and institutional resistance, which has created a policy and strategic deadlock that limits the expansion of integrated schools and sustains the inefficiencies of a separate education system.¹⁵ The Integrated Education Act (2022) strengthens the legal obligation of the Department of Education in NI to promote and actively expand integrated education, moving beyond its previous role of merely facilitating it upon parental demand.¹⁶ The Act mandates long-term strategic planning, regular assessments of parental demand,¹⁷ and prioritization of funding for integrated schools to foster greater cross-community learning.¹⁸ While supporters view this as a crucial step toward a more inclusive education system, opponents argue that it unfairly prioritises integrated education¹⁹ over other models, such as shared education, which encourages collaboration between schools without structural integration.²⁰ Some political parties and educational bodies have also raised concerns about potential funding imbalances and the feasibility of rapid expansion in a still-divided society.²¹

ACTORS AND INTERESTS

Integrated education in NI involves a complex network of stakeholders, each with varying levels of interest, influence, and impact on policy implementation and the school transformation process. Government bodies and political institutions hold significant power in shaping educational policy and allocating funding. However, religious institutions, parents, teachers, and advocacy groups still play a critical role in either advancing or obstructing change within the education system itself.²³

¹¹ Department of Education Northern Ireland, "Integration Works: Transforming your School," DENI, December 6, 2017, <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Integration%20Works%20-%20Transforming%20your%20School%20December%202017.pdf>.

¹² *There Were No Desks: A Collection of Oral Histories about Integrated Education in Northern Ireland* (Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, 2018), <https://nicie.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/There-Were-No-Desks.pdf>.

¹³ Integrated Education Fund.

¹⁴ Northern Ireland Office, "The Belfast Agreement," UK Government, April 10, 1998, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-belfast-agreement>.

¹⁵ *There Were No Desks*.

¹⁶ Erin Early et al., "Report on Research Methods for Assessing Demand for Integrated Education in Northern Ireland" (Access Research Knowledge (ARK), May 3, 2023), <https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/files/456933668/ARKIEFAssessingDemand.pdf>.

¹⁷ Early et al., "Report on Research Methods."

¹⁸ Loughrey, Kidd, and Carlin, "Integrated Primary Schools."

¹⁹ John Mc Carron, "Shared Education Within Northern Ireland: A Grounded Theory Study of Integrated Education" (PhD, Nottingham Trent University, 2012), https://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/78/1/217105_John.McCarron-2013.pdf.

²⁰ Alison Montgomery et al., "Integrated education in Northern Ireland: participation, profile and performance" (UNESCO Centre, Ulster University, January 1, 2003), [https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/ws/files/11263448/Integrated_Education_in_NI_\(2003\)_Integration_in_Practice.pdf](https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/ws/files/11263448/Integrated_Education_in_NI_(2003)_Integration_in_Practice.pdf).

²¹ Jude Collins, "Democratic Unionist Party/Sinn Fein Attitudes to Integrated Education in the North of Ireland," *British Journal of Religious Education* 14, no. 2 (March 1, 1992): 107–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0141620920140207>.

²² Department of Education Northern Ireland, "Integration Works."

²³ Ulf Hansson, Una O'Connor-Bones, and John McCord, "Whatever Happened to Integrated Education?," by Integrated Education Fund, The Children and Youth Programme, and University of Ulster, Shared Space: A Research Journal on Peace, Conflict and Community Relations in Northern Ireland, 2011, <https://www.community-relations.org.uk/files/communityrelations/media-files/Whatever%20happened%20to%20Integrated%20Education.pdf>.

This stakeholder analysis categorizes key actors based on their level of interest in integrated education, their ability to influence policy decisions, and the degree to which integration initiatives impact them. The Interest-Influence-Impact (3i) framework helps identify who should be prioritized for engagement, ensuring that limited time and resources are directed toward the most strategic actors.²⁴

The table below outlines the key stakeholders in integrated education, analyzing their interests, influences, and impacts. It illustrates each actor’s support level or opposition regarding integrated education in NI. By understanding these dynamics, policymakers, educators, and advocates can develop targeted engagement strategies to overcome barriers, foster collective dialogue, and accelerate progress toward a more integrated education system.

FIGURE 1: STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

STAKEHOLDER GROUP	INTEREST	INFLUENCE	IMPACT	ANALYSIS & STRATEGIC APPROACH
GOVERNMENT BODIES (DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, EDUCATION AUTHORITY, UK AND IRISH GOVERNMENTS)	(High) Integrated education is a statutory responsibility.	(High) They set education policy, allocate funding, and regulate school structures.	(High) Can drive systemic change or limit expansion through policy decisions.	Priority group – Engage directly to advocate for proactive policy implementation and funding for integrated schools.
POLITICAL PARTIES (NI ASSEMBLY MEMBERS, WESTMINSTER MPS, LOCAL COUNCILS)	(Mixed) Some support integration, while others prioritise shared education.	(High) Can legislate and block or enable education reforms.	(High) Decisions affect school structures, funding, and governance.	Targeted engagement needed – Work with supportive parties to drive legislative change while countering opposition narratives.
RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS (CATHOLIC CHURCH, PROTESTANT DENOMINATIONS, FAITH-BASED ORGANISATIONS)	(Mixed) Some resistance due to concerns over ethos and governance.	(High) Control a large portion of NI’s schools.	(High) Their stance affects school transformation and public perceptions of integration.	Sensitive engagement required – Dialogue should focus on ethical, governance, and faith-based concerns to find common ground.

**continued on next page.*

PARENTS & COMMUNITIES	(High) Polls indicate strong support for integrated schools.	(Medium) Influence through school transformation ballots and advocacy.	(High) Affects school choices and societal integration.	Grassroots mobilization – Strengthen parental advocacy and streamline school transformation processes.
TEACHERS & SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS	(Mixed) Many support integration, but job security and school culture shifts are concerns	(Medium) Influence through school leadership, union negotiations, and curriculum implementation	(High) Directly impact classroom integration and student experiences	Training & support – Invest in teacher development and policy reforms that ease transition concerns.
INTEGRATED SCHOOLS & NICIE (NORTHERN IRELAND COUNCIL FOR INTEGRATED EDUCATION)	(Very High) Mission-driven commitment to integrated education.	(Medium) Advisory role but lacks direct policy control.	(High) Provides evidence and best practices for successful integration.	Capacity building – Support NICIE’s role in policy advocacy and school transformation initiatives.
SHARED EDUCATION ADVOCATES	(High) Support cross-community engagement but not full integration.	(Medium) Promote alternative models that compete with integrated education.	(High) Influence school partnerships and public discourse.	Strategic alignment where possible – Collaborate where objectives overlap but clarify the differences between shared and integrated education.
OPPOSITION GROUPS (CERTAIN POLITICAL FACTIONS, TRADITIONALIST EDUCATION STAKEHOLDERS)	(Low) Prefer maintaining separate school structures.	(High) Can obstruct policy changes through political influence.	(High) Can delay or block integration efforts through political and legal means.	Counter-messaging strategy – Address misconceptions and demonstrate integration’s long-term benefits.
STUDENTS & YOUTH ORGANISATIONS	(High) Integrated education directly affects their experiences and future prospects.	(Low) Limited direct influence but can be strong advocates.	(High) Represents the future societal impact of integration.	Empowerment & visibility – Engage students in policy discussions and media advocacy to showcase the real-life benefits of integration.

Source: Original Compilation

²⁴ Ulf Hansson, Una O’Connor-Bones, and John McCord, “Whatever Happened to Integrated Education?,” by Integrated Education Fund, The Children and Youth Programme, and University of Ulster, *Shared Space: A Research Journal on Peace, Conflict and Community Relations in Northern Ireland*, 2011, <https://www.community-relations.org.uk/files/communityrelations/media-files/Whatever%20happened%20to%20Integrated%20Education.pdf>.

IDENTIFYING STRUCTURAL AND POLITICAL CONSTRAINTS

Legal Ambiguity and Weak Government Commitment

While the 1989 Education Reform Order obliges the government to ‘encourage and facilitate’ integrated education, this represents an ‘unenforceable mandate’ Rather than being planned for and constructed as part of government policy, integrated schools develop where parents take responsibility; policy implementation is rather reactive as opposed to proactive.²⁵ Yet, the absence of clear enforcement mechanisms has created substantial legal and policy ambiguities. Although political action since the Integrated Education Act 2022 has extended government responsibility to “support” integrated education, progress has been minimal in the face of weak political commitment and mixed decision-making by the Department of Education.²⁶

For example, recent refusals of schools that sought transformation demonstrate how a subjective reading of legal necessity can outweigh parental wishes, corroding public faith. While Vision 2030.²⁷ and other plans may attempt to correct these deficiencies by evaluating demand and investing in infrastructure, the critics would state that little progress has been made, and we are still left with cities whose residents continue to lack access to integrated schools.²⁸ This paradigm of reaction simply ensures that the cycle will continue, undermining the potential of integrated education to serve as a meaningful mechanism for reconciliation within and between the broader society and an inclusive education system within NI.²⁹

Financial Inefficiencies and Competing Priorities

NI’s separate-based education system still has major financial inefficiencies. The existence of separate schooling sectors, all of which are publicly funded, leads to significant duplication of resources and over-capacity.³⁰ Estimates suggest that maintaining this divided system costs NI between £16.5 million and £95 million a year, while some studies have put the cost as high as £226 million. Meanwhile, if thousands of empty school places were integrated into combined institutions, resources could be redistributed to add further value to our education system.

Despite broad public support for integrated education, polls show around two-thirds of the population supports schools where students from different religious faiths learn together.

²⁵ Caroline Perry and Barbara Love, “Young People’s View on Sharing and Integration in Education” (Northern Ireland Assembly, January 28, 2015), <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2015/education/8615.pdf>.

²⁶ “Scoping Study on Education Policy and Practice in Northern Ireland” (UNESCO Centre Ulster University, September 2015), https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/225070/Integrated-Education-Scoping-Paper.pdf.

²⁷ Department of Education Northern Ireland, “Vision 2030: A Strategy for Integrated Education 2025 - 2030” (DENI, 2025), <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-03/Vision%202030%20%28A%20Strategy%20for%20IE%29.pdf>.

²⁸ Independent Review of Education, “Investing in a Better Future: The Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland,” DENI (Department of Education Northern Ireland, November 2023), <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Investing%20in%20a%20Better%20Future%20-%20Volume%201.pdf>.

²⁹ Neil Kenny, Selina McCoy, and James O’Higgins Norman, “A Whole Education Approach to Inclusive Education: An Integrated Model to Guide Planning, Policy, and Provision,” *Education Sciences* 13, no. 9 (September 19, 2023): 959, <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13090959>.

³⁰ Robbie Meredith, “Divided Education and Schools Cost £226m Extra a Year - Report,” BBC News, April 4, 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-65167256>.

³¹ Luke O’Shaughnessy, “Integrated and Equality-based School Movements Call for New Approaches to Accelerate Change to Make Choice a Reality for All,” *Educate Together*, December 16, 2021, <https://www.educatetogether.ie/news/integrated-and-equality-based-education/>.

Existing faith-based sectors hinder access to a restructured system; as a general rule, therefore, less than 8% of children attend integrated schools. In addition, integrated schools are financially discriminated against when it comes to capital development resources, meaning they cannot afford to build or upgrade facilities or increase enrolments. Such challenges highlight the system-wide need for reform to address inefficiencies and unify the country through a cohesive education system. Nonetheless, political pushback and financial limitations provide strong obstacles to realizing these aims, exposing the challenge of overcoming persistent division in NI's education system.

Political Gridlock and Policy Shifts

The contemporary political landscape in NI exhibits a nuanced spectrum of positions regarding integrated education. Several nationalist and unionist parties have undergone ideological transitions, shifting from historical opposition to measured support for educational integration. Meanwhile, established centrist and progressive parties maintain long-standing commitments to integrated schooling as foundational to their educational policy platforms. Simultaneously, some political entities actively champion the expansion of the integrated sector, while others demonstrate internal ideological fragmentation on the issue. The power-sharing structure of the NI Assembly also makes education reform challenging, as policies must gain cross-party support. Given the differing priorities of nationalist and unionist parties, significant reforms, such as a large-scale shift toward integrated education, struggle to gain political momentum.

Further complexity emerges with parties advocating “shared education” as an alternative paradigm, promoting inter-school collaboration while maintaining separate institutional identities.³² This heterogeneity of political perspectives creates both significant obstacles and strategic opportunities for coalition-building in Northern Ireland's power-sharing governance structure, particularly as education remains a contentious policy domain intrinsically linked to questions of cultural identity and community relations.³³ While the model of ‘Shared Education’ serves to increase cross-community contact, it does not fundamentally change the separated nature of the education system, further maintaining the status quo.³⁴

SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL CONSEQUENCES

The ongoing failure to expand Integrated Education possibilities has grave consequences for NI's social cohesion, economic efficiency, and educational attainment. The underdevelopment of Integrated Education in NI presents major threats to social cohesion and educational equity, including the reinforcement of sectarian divisions and lost educational opportunities.³⁵

³² Roger Austin and Rhiannon Turner, *New Evidence and New Approaches for Shared Education* (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2017), https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/knowledge_exchange/briefing_papers/series7/austin200618.pdf

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Loughrey, Kidd, and Carlin.

³⁵ “Report on the Review of Post-primary Education in Northern Ireland Volume Four,” (Northern Ireland Assembly October 9, 2001), <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/1998-2003/education/reports/report-on-the-review-of-post-primary-education-in-northern-ireland-volume-four/>

Studies by the Ulster University have demonstrated that by age 6, many Northern Irish children have already developed negative attitudes toward the other community, even without direct negative experiences.³⁶ These early prejudices become increasingly difficult to challenge as children progress through separated education systems that reinforce in-group solidarity and out-group suspicion. Meanwhile, Integrated Education fosters environments where students practice tolerance and adapt to social differences.³⁷ However, integrated schooling remains inaccessible for most children, even when parents desire it, due to political and structural barriers. The outcome is an education system that does not fully live up to its potential to develop critical thought, awareness of diversity, and skills for positive conflict resolution. Integrated education, the practice of educating students of different religious and cultural backgrounds together, is therefore viewed as an essential tool for reconciliation in a post-conflict society. It encourages collective experiences through collaborative learning, which helps diminish sectarianism and cultivates empathy for one another, ultimately fostering sustainable peacebuilding. Nonetheless, the persistence of separated educational frameworks exacerbates societal divisions and hampers efficient resource utilization.³⁸

The absence of structural reform hampers attempts to achieve equitable educational outcomes, with levels of funding and political agency remaining low in integrated schools.³⁹ Policymakers can play an essential role in overcoming these challenges by enacting policies to expand integrated education, including legislative support, additional funding, and community engagement efforts.⁴⁰ Beyond meeting the guidelines for best approaches to international conflict resolution, it cements NI's social and economic progress, enabling future generations in the area to grow up in a more diverse society. Integrated education in NI offers a transformative experience for students that promotes tolerance, respect for diversity, and social adaptability, aiming to transcend the limitations of a society shaped by generations of sectarian violence.⁴¹ Integrated education seeks to build settings where kids from different religious and cultural backgrounds attend classes together, combating prejudice and promoting reconciliation.⁴² Integrated schools, by focusing on shared values and critical thinking, seek to provide students with the tools needed to deal constructively with differences and build a more inclusive society.⁴³

36 Paul Connolly, Alan Smith, and Bernadette Kelly, "Too Young to Notice: The Cultural and Political Awareness of 3-6 Year Olds in Northern Ireland," *Ulster University* (Community Relations Council, January 1, 2002), [http://pure.qub.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/too-young-to-notice-the-cultural-and-political-awareness-of-36-year-olds-in-northern-ireland\(ce5ee8cc-649f-4868-a831-580216001d89\)/export.html](http://pure.qub.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/too-young-to-notice-the-cultural-and-political-awareness-of-36-year-olds-in-northern-ireland(ce5ee8cc-649f-4868-a831-580216001d89)/export.html).

37 Roland Tormey, "Intercultural Education in the Post-Primary School," NCCA (The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2005), https://ncca.ie/media/1976/intercultural_education_in_the_post-primary_school.pdf.

38 Alan Smith, Simone Datzberger, and Alan McCully, "Synthesis Report on Findings From Myanmar, Pakistan, South Africa and Uganda: The Integration of Education and Peacebuilding" (Ulster University, 2016), https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/224242/policy-synthesis-report-final-16.pdf.

39 Smith, Datzberger, & McCully.

40 Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education. "Response to the Integrated Education Bill," September 2021.

<https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/committees/2017-2022/education/primary-legislation/integrated-education-bill/written-submissions/20211010-northern-ireland-council-for-integrated-education.pdf>.

41 Lesley Abbott and Samuel McGuinness, "Northern Ireland Pupils Transcend Cultural Difference Through Transformed Integrated Schools: We Don't Think About Religion When We're Passing the Ball, We Just Do It," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 28, no. 10 (April 18, 2022): 2072–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2022.2052194>.

42 Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, "The Integrated Ethos."

43 Ibid.

ARGUMENTS FOR THEORIES OF CHANGE

1. Political Structures in Northern Ireland Hinder the Implementation of an Integrated Education Strategy

Despite widespread public support for integrated education, NI's consociational political system creates significant barriers to its implementation. The Integrated Education Act (2022) was a landmark effort to promote integrated schooling, but political instability, including repeated suspensions of the NI Assembly, has delayed meaningful policy execution.⁴⁴ Additionally, some political parties prioritise shared education over full integration, maintaining a status quo that prevents systematic progress.

The devolved education system is controlled by a single ministerial department that has historically alternated between unionist and nationalist leadership. This rotating control has resulted in policy discontinuity, with each minister potentially prioritizing different educational approaches aligned with their community's perspectives. This creates implementation gaps that undermine long-term strategic planning for integration.

The NI Executive and Department of Education should collaborate across political divides to implement the current Integrated Education Strategy, which is long-term and reviewed annually. This should include clear timelines and accountability measures.⁴⁵ The Minister for Education, departmental officials, and cross-departmental heads should review all public consultation comments to ensure comprehensive stakeholder input. This approach aligns with Section 3 of the Act, which requires the Department for Education to consult with relevant bodies when exercising functions relating to Integrated Education ⁴⁶

Furthermore, the ongoing strategy should reflect the expanded definition of integrated education established in Section 1 of the Act, which extends beyond Protestant and Catholic representation to include "those of different cultures and religious beliefs and none...those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not; and those of different abilities."⁴⁷ Finally, there should be a recognition that while the Integrated Education Act (2022) sets ambitious targets, it operates alongside other legislation rather than superseding it, requiring careful coordination across the education system, and all available policy levers should be used when appropriate.⁴⁸ Finally, specialized training programs should be developed for governance boards and leadership teams to build capacity for implementing integrated practices within existing legal constraints.

⁴⁴ Northern Ireland Assembly, "Integrated Education Act" (UK Government, 2022), <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2022/15/contents/enacted>.

⁴⁵ Independent Review of Education, "Annex to Oral Statement: Response by the Department of Education to the Independent Review of Education," 2024, <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Annex%20to%20Oral%20statement%20on%20Independent%20Review%20of%20Education.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Claire McGlynn, "Negotiating Difference in Post-conflict Northern Ireland: An Analysis of Approaches to Integrated Education," *Multicultural Perspectives* 13, no. 1 (February 9, 2011): 16–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2011.548179>.

2. Integrated Education Requires Institutional and Cultural Shifts Beyond Schools

While integrated schools are designed to bring together children from different religious, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds, broader societal divisions can significantly hinder these efforts. These schools often face criticism regarding their transformation process, with debates frequently reduced to mere statistics about student numbers from traditional communities. Furthermore, a new phenomenon is emerging: schools are described as “naturally integrated” in response to NI’s changing demographics, yet these institutions do not offer an official ethos of integration.⁴⁹ **The established integrated education ethos could be adapted into a support framework for these schools that are already doing integration work but require structured guidance to effectively engage with the conflict resolution dimension of education.**⁵⁰

Several policy approaches could be implemented to achieve meaningful progress in this area. NI’s two teaching colleges could formally incorporate the integrated curriculum into their teacher training programs. This would ensure that all educators, regardless of the educational sector in which they ultimately work, gain valuable insight into the integrated education framework and its underlying principles. Core components of this training could focus on practical conflict resolution techniques and teaching strategies specifically designed to bridge divides between communities.⁵¹ The expertise of established organizations such as the NI Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) and the Integrated Education Fund (IEF) would be valuable in designing these specialized programs, drawing on decades of practical experience in navigating sectarian divides within educational settings.⁵²

Additionally, all educational stakeholders must work collaboratively toward building meaningful partnerships between integrated and non-integrated schools, collectively normalizing cross-community engagement throughout the educational landscape.⁵³ The Department of Education could play a pivotal role by facilitating these collaborations through dedicated funding streams or resources for joint initiatives between different school types.⁵⁴ However, this approach should not be misused as a means to undermine or replace the formal integrated education sector, but rather as a complementary strategy to build broader community cohesion.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ “The Integrated Ethos.”

⁵⁰ “The NICIE Statement of Principles,” NI Council for Integrated Education, n.d., <https://nicie.org/what-is-integrated-education/integrated-ethos/sop/>.

⁵¹ Hansson, O’Connor-Bones, and McCord.

⁵² “The NICIE Statement of Principles.”

⁵³ Gavin Duffy and Tony Gallagher, “Sustaining School Partnerships: The Context of Cross-sectoral Collaboration Between Schools in a Separate Education System in Northern Ireland,” *Review of Education* 2, no. 2 (June 1, 2014): 189–210, <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3034>.

⁵⁴ Niens & Cairns.

⁵⁵ Department of Education, “A Strategy for Integrated Education in Northern Ireland,” March 26, 2023, https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/A%20Strategy%20for%20Integrated%20Education%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%20-%20April%202023_0.pdf.

3. Integrated Education is Key to Long-Term Social Cohesion in Northern Ireland

Decades after the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement (1998), NI continues to be divided along religious and cultural lines. Many children grow up in communities with little interaction across sectarian divides. Integrated education represents one of the most effective pathways to dismantling these barriers, fostering early cross-community relationships that can lead to a more cohesive society. Integrating the insight that integrated education is crucial for long-term social cohesion in NI, several policy enhancements can fortify its function.

This could be done by promoting integrated housing to reduce residential separation and supporting teacher training in diversity and inclusion, which are vital, echoing the need for specialized training and intercultural understanding mentioned in the meeting.⁵⁶ Furthermore, **launching public awareness campaigns to highlight the benefits of integrated education can further encourage parental consideration of these schools.** These campaigns should feature authentic stories from integrated school communities rather than abstract principles, showcasing the practical benefits of integration for academic achievement, social skill development, and future employment opportunities.⁵⁷ Furthermore, establishing regional integration coordinators could offer localized support for families interested in integrated education. This would help them navigate application processes and transition concerns while building networks of integration advocates within communities where separated education has been the norm.

CONCLUSION

The recommendations within this position paper address the challenges of integrated education by implementing institutional and cultural shifts beyond schools, aligning with broader goals of fostering inclusivity and societal cohesion. The inability to expand integrated education betrays this intent, as political opposition and systemic barriers to inclusion prevent many children from accessing these enriched learning environments. Even when parents clearly express their desire for integrated schooling, the reactive nature of policy, where schools develop only through grassroots initiatives rather than government planning, has limited reach and impact. This negligence leaves countless students without access to curricula built around diversity awareness and conflict resolution skills, derailing progress toward the indispensable societal pursuit of unity and reconciliation.

⁵⁶ Margaret Nugent et al., "Literature Review on Inclusive Education Ireland" (TUTOR, October 19, 2022), <https://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/id/eprint/18543/1/TUTOR%20Literature%20Review%20on%20Inclusive%20Education%20Ireland%20.pdf>.

⁵⁷ Robbie Meredith, "NI Education: Parents' Views on Integrated Education Sought," BBC News, March 28, 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn4yekg1ln8e>.

The successful implementation of Vision 2030's strategy for integrated education represents a critical turning point. It offers a comprehensive framework that moves beyond piecemeal approaches to establish integration as a central pillar of NI's educational landscape. Without this strategic vision becoming an operational reality, efforts will remain fragmented and insufficient. Prioritizing overcoming these barriers is essential for integrated education and broader social cohesion, fulfilling its vital role in NI's peace process and providing peace dividends to those most affected by the legacy of conflict.

NORTHERN IRELAND EMERGING LEADERS BIO

DR. MATTHEW O'NEILL**Chair, Integrated AlumNI and Climate project lead at the Institute for International and European Affairs**

Matthew is a dedicated researcher and policy expert with a background that combines academia, policy analysis, and community activism. Currently a researcher at the Institute for International and European Affairs (IIEA), Matthew specializes in climate, digital, and defense policy. He is also committed to integrated education in Northern Ireland and serves as chair of Integrated AlumNI, where he advocates for sustainable growth and outreach to promote and demystify integrated education. Matthew has presented to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on issues affecting integrated education, sharing personal experiences to inform policy discussions. Living in Belfast and working in Dublin, he offers unique insights into North-South relations and policy development in both regions. Matthew holds a PhD in Politics from the Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Security, Peace, and Justice at Queen's University Belfast, and an MPS in Public Service from the Clinton School of Public Service at the University of Arkansas.

Senior Health Hubs in Northern Ireland: Investing in Better Outcomes, Delivering Better Value

Austin Orr

UK Civil Service Policy Advisor

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The establishment of Community Health Hubs for those over 65 in Northern Ireland presents a transformative solution to the challenges posed by an aging population. These hubs will deliver integrated, preventive, and multidisciplinary care, focusing on early detection of frailty, chronic disease management, and rehabilitation. This approach aims to reduce hospital reliance, prevent unnecessary admissions, and improve the overall quality of life for older adults. Financially, the projected net savings are substantial, with anticipated annual net savings of £6 million in year 5, rising to £327 million annually by year 15, which will help alleviate pressure on the healthcare system while enhancing efficiency.

Northern Ireland's current hospital-centric model is inefficient, leading to fragmented care, delayed discharges, and unnecessary hospital admissions. Older adults face multiple barriers to accessing timely care, often resulting in preventable complications and emergency interventions. By shifting care from hospitals to local community hubs, older individuals will receive continuous, coordinated support tailored to their needs, ultimately leading to improved health outcomes and system sustainability.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Phased Rollout of Community Health Hubs:** Launch five pilot hubs, expanding to 15 within a decade, with further scaling based on effectiveness and cost-efficiency.
- **Integration of Health and Social Care Services:** Establish multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) in each hub to provide seamless, coordinated care.
- **Sustainable Funding Model:** Secure initial government investment, leverage public-private partnerships, and reinvest hospital savings into preventative care.
- **Workforce Expansion:** Increase recruitment and training in geriatric and community-based care, offering incentives to attract healthcare professionals.
- **Digital Innovation and Public Engagement:** Implement integrated electronic health records (EHRs), expand telemedicine, and promote digital literacy among older adults.

INTRODUCTION

Northern Ireland faces a pressing healthcare challenge: an aging population rapidly increasing in size and complexity of needs. By 2047, over 26% of the population will be aged 65 or older, placing significant strain on an already overburdened health and social care system. Despite healthcare spending accounting for over 50% of the Northern Ireland Executive's budget, the system remains hospital-centric, leading to inefficiencies, high costs, and inadequate support for older adults.

The current approach results in fragmented care, delayed discharges, and excessive reliance on emergency departments. Better community-based support could prevent many hospitalizations, reduce unnecessary admissions, and improve patient outcomes. International best practices demonstrate that integrated, locally accessible healthcare models lead to better long-term care solutions.

This paper advocates for establishing Community Health Hubs—multidisciplinary centers designed to deliver preventative, rehabilitative, and coordinated care for older adults. By shifting healthcare delivery from hospitals to the community, these hubs will enhance the quality of life, reduce healthcare costs, and ensure that older adults receive the proper care at the right time in the right place.

This paper examines healthcare spending, the failures of the current system, and the benefits of a community-led approach to make a compelling case for urgent reform. It outlines a structured plan for implementing Community Health Hubs in Northern Ireland, highlighting financial sustainability, improved patient outcomes, and long-term system resilience.

The paper first examines the growing pressures on Northern Ireland's healthcare system, emphasizing the challenges of an aging population and the shortcomings of the hospital-centric model. It then explores international best practices, illustrating how community-based care models have successfully improved outcomes elsewhere.

Next, the paper introduces the proposed Community Health Hub model, detailing its structure, key functions, and financial sustainability. The final section presents policy recommendations for implementing these hubs, outlining a phased rollout strategy, workforce expansion, and digital health integration. The conclusion reinforces the need for urgent reform and the potential long-term benefits of shifting to a community-led healthcare system.

CONTEXT

Healthcare spending in Northern Ireland consistently ranks at the top of the spending list for Executive departments. The Department of Health (DoHNI) budget for 2024/25 has been set at £7.76 billion, constituting 51.2% of the total NI Executive budget. Despite this allocation, the department has indicated that maintaining current service levels would require an additional £1 billion in funding¹

¹ Department of Health, 2024/25 Health Budget Assessment

Health and social care spending on residents over 65 represents the single largest spending commitment of any demographic in the UK, commanding roughly 50% of the total gross expenditure on adult long-term health in 2022-23.² This figure has increased from 40% of the total spending in 2016.³

Studies indicate that the spending challenge is likely to intensify. Analysing Census 2021, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) found that Northern Ireland has the fastest-aging population in the UK, at 18% over 65,⁴ and will continue to age in the coming decades. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) population models predict the share of older residents in Northern Ireland to rise to 26% in 2047 and 31% by 2072. By this time, there will be a declining total population trend.⁵

Assessing the near and medium-term funding needs of health and social care in Northern Ireland, many courses of action need to be taken, not only to serve older populations but to ensure that younger populations have a health service that can deliver efficient healthcare at the point of need, not the often much-delayed point of use. As funding continues to be provided to the NI Executive departments through HM Treasury block grants, which are tied to the national government's spending, Northern Ireland's relatively faster-aging population will surpass the increased health funding in England and Wales.

Among significant political disagreements over the past 15 years, Northern Ireland has witnessed a rare consensus regarding broader health and social care transformation. In 2011, *Transforming Your Care* (TYC) assessed the structural and strategic reforms needed to ensure a sustainable health service, advocating a shift from hospital-centric care to a focus on a preventive community-based model of care based upon the need to deliver value for money for the broader benefit of healthcare. TYC also recommended a greater focus on long-term conditions using personalized care plans and an increase in telemedicine to reduce the reliance on costly acute care settings unnecessarily.⁶

Soon after, Dr. Rafael Bengoa led a panel that delivered the report *Systems, Not Structures* (SNS), which was a direct response to *Transforming Your Care*; whilst TYC suggested a gradual roll-out of change, SNS proposed a more muscular and intensive attitude to delivering the reforms, proposing urgent structural reforms to integrating care across all levels of healthcare in Northern Ireland. SNS was considered a wake-up call for healthcare in Northern Ireland and became and remains the policy reference point for changing the healthcare system. It was accompanied by support from all executive parties in Northern Ireland and remains.⁷ SNS was further supplemented by 'Health and Wellbeing 2026 - Delivering Together,' a strategic document from the Department of Health that set out high-level priorities for healthcare transformation in Northern Ireland over 10 years, including a more significant proportion of care for the elderly population taking place in the community, away from acute settings.⁸

² NHS England, *Adult Social Care Report*

³ *The Guardian*, "Ageing Britain"

⁴ Office for National Statistics, *Living Longer*

⁵ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, *2022 Population Projections*

⁶ John Compton et al., *Transforming Your Care*.

⁷ Rafael Bengoa et al., *Systems, Not Structures*.

⁸ Department of Health, *Delivering Together*

LESSONS LEARNED

Addressing the challenges of an aging population requires innovative healthcare and social support approaches. Examining successful models can provide valuable insights.

Japan's Long-Term Care Insurance (LTCI) System

In 2000, Japan implemented the LTCI system to meet the needs of its rapidly aging society. This user-oriented social insurance program emphasizes supporting independence among older adults. Eligible individuals receive services tailored to their physical and cognitive conditions, including facility-based care, in-home assistance, and community-based services. The LTCI system is funded through premiums and taxes, ensuring a sustainable model that balances individual contributions with societal support.⁹

Mid & East Antrim Agewell Partnership (MEAAP) – Impact Agewell®

In Northern Ireland, the Mid & East Antrim Agewell Partnership has developed the Impact Agewell program to enhance the lives of older individuals. This initiative focuses on improving physical health, emotional well-being, and social connectivity. Services include community navigator support, educational workshops, social clubs, and practical assistance through a handyperson service. By fostering partnerships among healthcare providers, community organizations, and volunteers, MEAAP creates a comprehensive support network that addresses the diverse needs of the elderly population.¹⁰

These models underscore the importance of integrated, community-based approaches in supporting aging populations. By combining healthcare services with social support and emphasizing preventive care, they offer frameworks that can be adapted to meet the specific needs of older adults in various contexts.

ARGUMENT

The Shortcomings of the Current Hospital-Centric Model

Northern Ireland's healthcare system is overly reliant on hospital-based care, requiring older adults to make multiple trips for assessments (often to acute care settings), chronic disease management, and rehabilitation. This fragmented approach is inefficient, costly, and detrimental to patient outcomes, often straining the healthcare system and failing those who rely on it.

⁹ Department of Health, *Delivering Together*

¹⁰ M. Yamada and H. Arai, "Long-Term Care System," 176.

¹¹ IMPACT, *IMPACTAgewell Demonstrator*.

This model exacerbates hospital inefficiencies; bed-blocking due to delayed discharge prevents new patient admissions, creating bottlenecks that affect the entire system. Hospitals cannot discharge patients safely due to a lack of rehabilitation, social care, and community support, forcing prolonged hospital stays that reduce overall capacity.¹¹

Emergency departments bear the brunt of this failure. Overwhelmed Accident and Emergency (A&E) Services struggle with high patient volumes, with many older adults waiting hours or days for ward admission due to the lack of available beds. These delays increase complications, infections, and poor outcomes, particularly for frail individuals.

Crucially, the hospital-based model does not improve long-term health outcomes. Frequent hospital visits lead to deterioration in functional ability, poor medication adherence, and higher readmission rates.

In contrast, Community Health Hubs offer a local, integrated alternative, providing preventative care, chronic disease monitoring, physiotherapy, and social support in one setting. This reduces hospital dependency, improves patient outcomes, and relieves pressure on emergency and primary care services. A shift from hospital-based to community-led care is essential to create a sustainable, patient-centered healthcare system in Northern Ireland.

Establishing Community Health Hubs: A Multi-Disciplinary, Prevention-Focused Model

To support Northern Ireland's aging population, Community Health Hubs should prioritize early intervention, frailty prevention, and coordinated multi-disciplinary care, reducing reliance on overstretched GP services and acute hospitals. Each hub will be led by an NHS-contracted GP overseeing clinical management and a senior nurse responsible for day-to-day patient care and coordination. Together, they will lead a multi-disciplinary team (MDT) delivering integrated, proactive healthcare.

A core function of the hubs will be early frailty assessment, using tools including the Electronic Frailty Index (eFI) and Comprehensive Geriatric Assessments (CGA) to identify at-risk individuals before significant health decline occurs. GPs and nurses will provide regular health screenings for chronic conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, and osteoporosis, ensuring timely intervention. Physiotherapists and occupational therapists (OTs) will play a crucial role in fall prevention programs, post-hospital rehabilitation, and mobility support, enabling older adults to maintain independence for as long as possible. OTs will also assess home environments, recommend assistive devices, and implement interventions that promote safe and independent living, particularly for those with disabilities or cognitive decline.

¹² Department of Health, *Urgent & Emergency Care Statistics*

¹³ Jones et al., "Delays to Patient Admission," 168-173

¹⁴ Ibid.

Hubs will integrate nursing, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, mental health, and social care support into a coordinated service. District nurses and dementia care specialists will provide long-term condition management, wound care, and memory assessments. At the same time, social workers and community link workers will assist with housing adaptations, financial support, and social inclusion programs. Mental health practitioners will offer counseling and cognitive therapy for older adults at risk of isolation and depression, working closely with OTs to ensure interventions support both mental and physical well-being.

A key feature of the hubs will be weekly MDT meetings, where GPs, nurses, physiotherapists, OTs, and social workers collaborate on complex cases to ensure coordinated, personalized care plans. Integrated digital health records will facilitate real-time information sharing between NHS, social care, and voluntary organizations, improving efficiency and continuity of care.

To maximize accessibility, hubs will operate a combination of walk-in services, scheduled appointments, mobile healthcare units, and telemedicine, ensuring that older adults in rural areas receive the same level of support as those in urban centers. By shifting care from hospitals to local communities, these hubs will provide a sustainable, patient-centered model, improving quality of life while reducing the strain on emergency and primary care services.

Financial Costs and Benefits of Community Health Hubs

The Community Health Hubs will exclusively serve over-65s, shifting care from hospitals to local settings. A phased rollout will start with five pilot hubs, expand to 15 hubs, and eventually reach 25 hubs. A key focus will be fall prevention physiotherapy, reducing hospital admissions and long-term care costs.

FIGURE 1: FINANCIAL COSTS (PHASED ROLLOUT)

Phase	Number of Hubs	Estimated Setup Cost	Annual Operating Costs
Pilot Phase (Years 1-4)	5 hubs	£25M - £40M	£10M - £15M
Expansion Phase (Years 4-15)	25 hubs	£125M - £200M	£50M - £75M

Key costs include infrastructure (£5M per hub), digital systems (£2M per hub), and staffing (GPs, nurses, physiotherapists, OTs, and social workers).

FIGURE 2: FINANCIAL BENEFITS & COST SAVINGS

Savings Area	Annual Savings (5 Hubs)	Annual Savings (25 Hubs)
Reduced A&E Visits & Admissions	£20M - £30M	£100M - £150M
Shorter Hospital Stays & Faster Discharge	£10M - £15M	£50M - £75M
Reduced Long-Term Social Care Costs	£8M - £12M	£40M - £60M
Primary Care Efficiency (Less GP Pressure)	£5M - £7M	£25M - £35M
Falls Prevention Savings	£10M - £15M	£50M - £75M

With £735M initial investment over 15 years, annual savings of tens of millions in each of those years (increasing by scale to £327M net annual savings from year 16) ensure the hubs' financial sustainability. By year 16, a gross project total saving of £2127M can be expected. These hubs provide long-term benefits for patients and the NHS by reducing hospital dependency and improving health outcomes.

Improved Health Outcomes for Patients in Community Health Hubs

The introduction of Community Health Hubs for over-65s will significantly improve patient health outcomes, ensuring better prevention, early intervention, and continuity of care. By shifting healthcare from reactive hospital treatment to proactive community-led services, these hubs will enhance quality of life, reduce hospital dependency, and promote healthy aging.

One key benefit is early frailty identification and prevention. Through physiotherapy-led fall prevention programs and chronic disease monitoring, hubs will detect health risks before they escalate. Patients will receive individualized care plans, reducing the likelihood of emergency hospital visits due to falls, infections, or poorly managed conditions.

A major driver of improved outcomes is the Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) approach, which ensures seamless coordination between GPs, nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists (OTs), social workers, and mental health practitioners. This team-based model enables personalized, holistic care, addressing not just medical needs but also mobility, mental well-being, and social support. Conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and long-term respiratory issues can be managed more effectively through regular screenings, medication reviews, and rehabilitation programs.

Integrating rehabilitation and physiotherapy services within hubs will reduce long-term disability following illnesses or injuries. Patients recovering from strokes, fractures, or surgeries will receive tailored rehabilitation support, allowing faster recovery and improved functional independence. This reduces hospital readmissions and long-term reliance on social care.

Mental health outcomes will also improve. Dementia-friendly services, counseling, and social inclusion programs will help combat loneliness, depression, and cognitive decline, which are common issues among older adults. Hubs will connect patients to community groups, befriending services, and peer support, fostering greater emotional resilience and well-being.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Five Core Policy Recommendations for Community Health Hubs

1. Phased Rollout of Community Health Hubs

Implement five pilot hubs in urban and rural areas, expanding to 25 hubs within 15 years. Regular evaluations will assess cost savings, patient outcomes, and system efficiencies.

2. Integration of Health and Social Care Services

Establish Multi-Disciplinary Teams (MDTs) in each hub, bringing together GPs, nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists (OTs), social workers, and mental health specialists. Hubs will coordinate frailty prevention, rehabilitation, and chronic disease management, reducing hospital reliance.

3. Sustainable Funding Model

Secure initial government investment, leverage public-private partnerships (PPPs), and reinvest savings from hospital reductions into preventative care. Seek domestic and international health innovation grants to support long-term sustainability.

4. Workforce Expansion

Increase recruitment and training for key roles, particularly in frailty care and rehabilitation. Offer incentives to attract and retain community-based healthcare professionals.

5. Digital Innovation and Public Engagement

Implement integrated electronic health records (EHRs), expand telemedicine services, and provide digital literacy training for older adults. Launch public awareness campaigns to encourage engagement and adoption of hub services.

Ultimately, the Community Health Hub model ensures that patients receive care at the right time, in the right place, reducing preventable hospitalizations and promoting longer, healthier lives. By empowering older adults to manage their health proactively, these hubs will increase life expectancy, improve independence, and enhance overall well-being, transforming healthcare delivery in Northern Ireland.

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AUSTIN ORR**UK Civil Service Policy Advisor**

Austin Orr currently works as a policy advisor on consumer policy at UK Civil Service, with a focus on corporate law, governance and legislation. Before this role, Austin worked as Policy and Public Affairs Manager at Marie Curie, working with NI Executive Ministers to secure the inclusion of 'death, dying and bereavement' in the recent Programme for Government and contributing to the palliative care policy landscape, including having a paper published in BMJ Supportive and Palliative Care. Previously Austin worked Policy and Public Affairs Officer for Asthma + Lung UK and has also held a senior roles assisting politicians in House of Commons and NI Assembly, with a focus on disability care, health, international trade and immigration policy. Austin holds an MPhil in Reconciliation Studies from Trinity College Dublin and an MA in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics from the University of York. He is passionate about driving policy change to improve the lives of marginalized communities, with a particular focus on older adults and caregivers.

ABOUT NCAFP AND EMERGING LEADERS

The National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP), founded in 1974, advances U.S. foreign policy interests from a nonpartisan perspective rooted in political realism. In recent years, the organization has expanded its efforts to engage the next generation of policy practitioners and scholars through Emerging Leaders programs, including those focused on the Korean Peninsula, cross-Taiwan Strait relations, and, most recently, Northern Ireland.

The Northern Ireland Emerging Leaders Program is a multi-year initiative that brings together community leaders from Northern Ireland. Through mentorship, collaborative workshops, and policy development, participants tackle not only the region's journey toward peace and stability but also broader global challenges such as climate change, economic resilience, transatlantic relations, and the role of women in peace and security. By building transatlantic networks and enhancing leadership and communication skills, the program encourages partnerships and fosters innovative thinking.

The NCAFP leadership believes engaging emerging leaders from around the world and connecting them to counterparts in the U.S. is an important component of the future of U.S. foreign policy.

NCAFP extends its sincere thanks to the 2025 cohort and the program director for sharing their insights, ideas, and commitment to shaping a more peaceful future for Northern Ireland and beyond.



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ncafp National
Committee on
American Foreign Policy

400 Madison Ave, Suite 16B
New York, USA 10017

tel:(516)403-4512
email:contact@ncafp.or

<https://ncafp.org/>

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