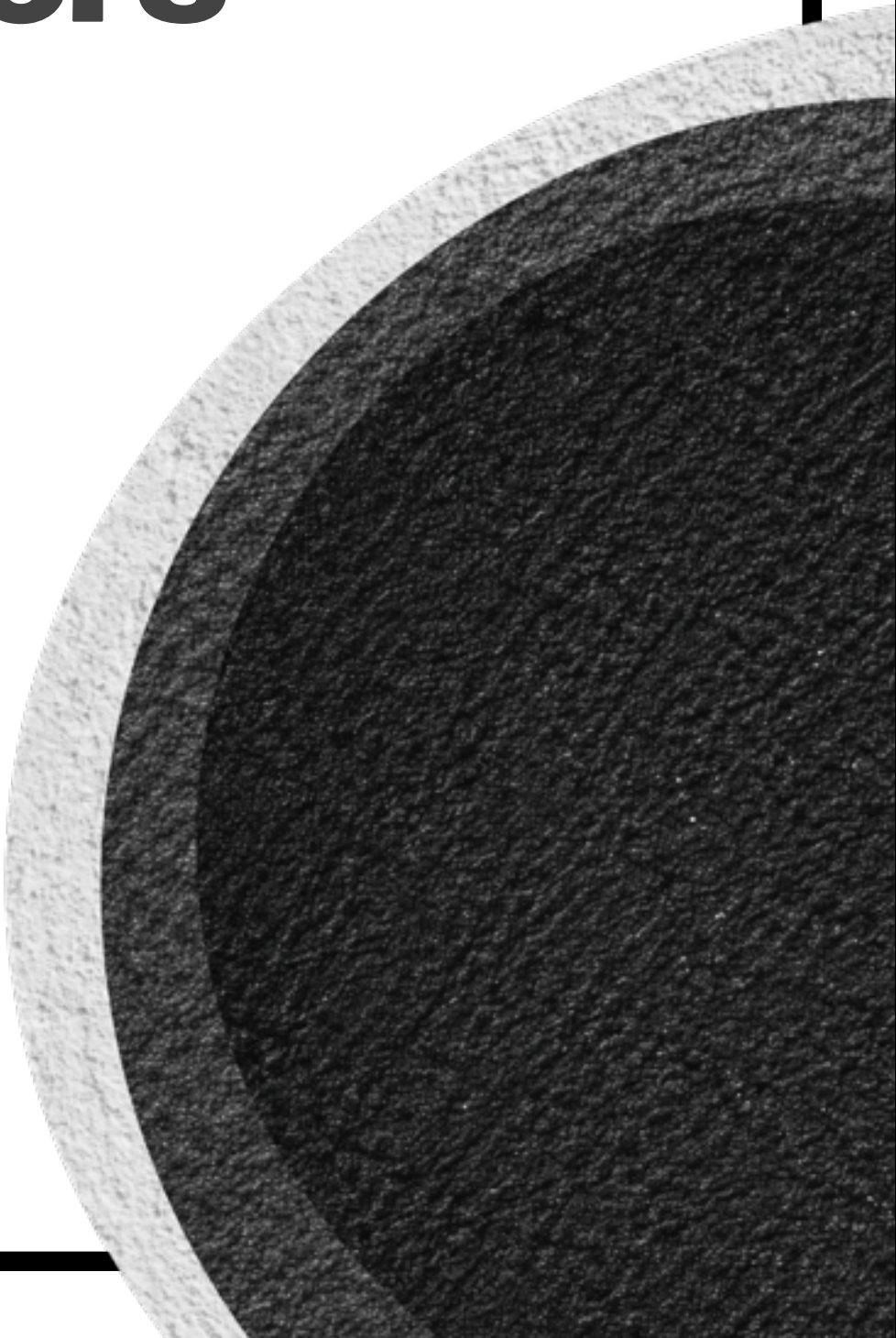


Northern Ireland Emerging Leaders

April
2026



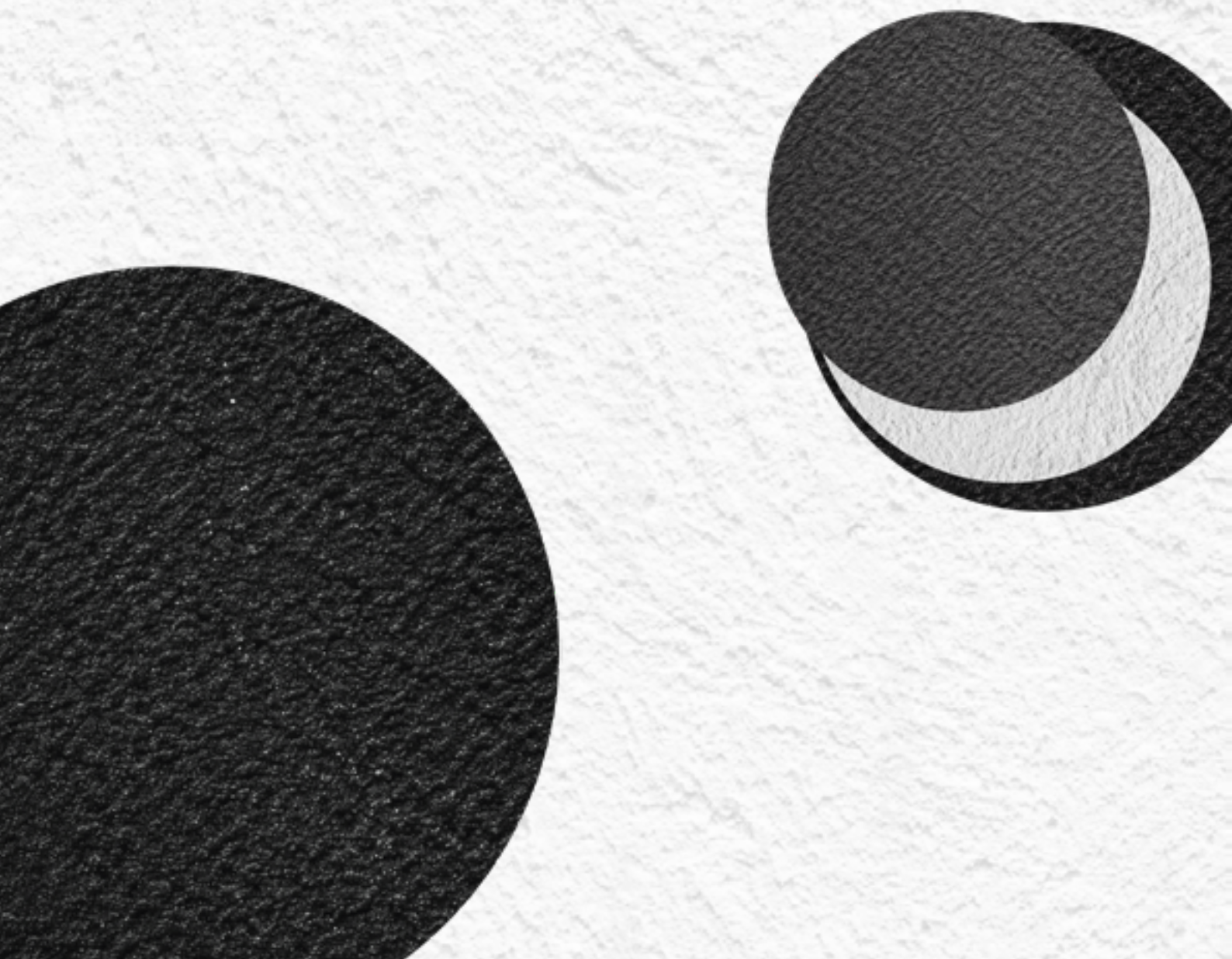
Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Emma DeSouza

Director, Northern Ireland Emerging Leaders

The current year marks the 28th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. There is cause for measured optimism: the devolved political institutions have maintained operational continuity, and the commitment to non-violence remains the cornerstone of civil society.

However, the transition from a “negative peace”—defined merely by the absence of armed conflict—to a “positive peace” remains an ongoing challenge. While the cessation of violence is secure, the structural remnants of conflict, including socioeconomic inequality and systemic segregation, persist. To achieve a truly resilient peace, our ambitions must extend beyond the maintenance of stability toward the proactive cultivation of social cohesion and the eradication of the underlying drivers of division.

The regional landscape is currently defined by a recalibration of the relationship between the United Kingdom and Ireland, as both nations navigate the complexities of the post-Windsor Framework environment. Simultaneously, the global outlook is increasingly characterized by geopolitical fragmentation and the erosion of democratic norms. In this volatile context, the importance of the transatlantic relationship is paramount. It is essential to recognize that the transmission of learning is a bilateral process; while Northern Ireland benefits from international engagement, its unique expertise in conflict transformation offers invaluable insights to global partners facing their own challenges of polarization.

Now in its third year, the Northern Ireland Emerging Leaders Program continues to provide a rigorous platform for the next generation of policy architects and community leaders. The 2026 cohort has concentrated its efforts on critical pillars essential for institutional and societal longevity: economic development, climate and biodiversity, and the strengthening of democratic resilience. Their work is specifically designed to break the historical cycle of political deadlock, replacing reactive crisis management with evidence-based policies that prioritize long-term social and economic stability.

The research and policy frameworks produced by this year’s participants serve as a blueprint for addressing socioeconomic challenges that resonate not only in Northern Ireland but across the international community. Their focus on human capital and the acceptance of diversity mirrors the requirements for a sustainable global order.

Building the foundations of a positive peace—predicated on political stability, sustainable prosperity, and robust social integration—remains our collective imperative. We must continue to interrogate our understanding of reconciliation, ensuring that the peace achieved is deep, equitable, and capable of withstanding the pressures of an uncertain global future.

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Owning the Energy Transition:

Northern Ireland's Economic and Environmental Renewal

by Euan Carroll

Executive Summary

Northern Ireland's energy landscape is characterized by structural dependence on imported fossil fuels and insufficient infrastructure to support both decarbonization targets and sustained economic growth. Despite an ideal environment for renewable energy, the economic benefits of energy generation are largely exported, while rural communities face increasing financial pressure due to a lack of development, environmental crises, and declining productivity. Community-owned energy presents a strategic opportunity to address these challenges by strengthening energy security, retaining economic value locally, and enabling broader participation in the energy transition.

This paper argues that community energy must be reframed as a core economic development tool rather than solely an environmental measure. By embedding ownership within communities, supporting agricultural participation, and aligning planning and funding mechanisms, Northern Ireland can accelerate renewable deployment while improving regional economic resilience and infrastructure independence.

Key Policy Recommendations:

1. Establish a specific task force to support communities' engagement with the £1 billion Local Power Plan Funding from DESNZ
2. Incentivize embedded community renewables in large development projects through planning priority and reduction of costs
3. Support agricultural participation and prevent biodiversity decline through agriculture revenue diversification
4. Produce and publish a Northern Ireland Energy Independence Strategy to enhance economic opportunity through energy

Introduction

Northern Ireland's economy reported a £14.5 billion deficit in the 2022 to 2023 financial year, with public spending exceeding locally raised revenue by 67.5%¹. These structural imbalances are particularly evident within Northern Ireland's energy landscape, where inefficiencies continue to constrain economic performance.

Despite heavy reliance on non-renewable energy, Northern Ireland has no indigenous non-renewable energy sector. The region does not extract commercial quantities of oil, gas or solid fuel and consequently relies entirely on imported fossil fuels and imported electricity to meet non-renewable energy demands. This dependence exposes energy prices to the volatility of external markets, influenced by geopolitical factors and potential supply disruptions. Crucially, Northern Ireland collects no tax revenue and creates no employment (aside from distribution), from a non-renewable industry; instead, it spends substantial capital outside of the region on energy that is harmful to the environment and with the economic benefits being collected by an exterior entity.

The only viable indigenous energy generation in Northern Ireland is from renewable sources, predominantly wind energy. Despite favorable circumstances for renewable development, Northern Ireland's Low Carbon and Renewable Energy Economy is the poorest performing across the United Kingdom and Ireland,² representing weaknesses in policy, market design, planning frameworks and ownership structures.

Despite Northern Ireland achieving a 44.2% renewable energy split in 2025³, the economic benefit and opportunity provided to local communities are very limited. Large renewable energy projects are predominantly owned by major developers that funnel profits outside of the region with little obligation to provide any benefit to the local community. This continues to reinforce dependence rather than moving toward security or resilience. 'NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard)' objections to large renewable projects are further increased through the isolation of local communities and the barriers to local ownership.

Strikingly, significant degradation of natural resources and the environment continue without the compensatory benefits of wealth generated by non-renewable industry. Northern Ireland ranks 12th globally for biodiversity decline,⁴ representing disproportionate damage exerted on the natural environment relative to economic activity. A recent culmination of this decline was first seen in the summer of 2023, with the Lough Neagh Blue-Green Algae crisis. Large toxic algal blooms were observed across the UK and Ireland's largest body of freshwater, which supplies Northern Ireland with 41.7%⁵ of its drinking water. The algal blooms were caused by excess nutrient pollution from agriculture and through the mismanagement of wastewater from industry and households.

Land use currently plays a central role in this challenge. Northern Ireland's use of land is overwhelmingly dominated by agriculture. In the absence of economic support and viable alternative revenue generating opportunities, increases in agricultural productivity have largely been pursued through more intensive land usage, including excess fertilizer application, contributing to environmental degradation. While policy interventions to address biodiversity loss and environmental decline are necessary, restrictions on agriculture through environmental initiatives such as the suggested proposals for the DAERA Nutrient Action Program⁶, risk placing additional economic pressure on the farming sector if they are not accompanied by alternative sources of income and land-use opportunities.

1 Office for National Statistics, *Country and Regional Public Sector Finances, UK*.

2 Environmental Surveys Team, Office for National Statistics, *Low Carbon and Renewable Energy Economy, UK*.

3 *Electricity Consumption and Renewable Generation in Northern Ireland*.

4 Woodland Trust Northern Ireland, *Trees and Woods: At the Heart of Nature Recovery in Northern Ireland*.

5 Andrew Muir, *Oral Statement by Minister Andrew Muir MLA Lough Neagh Report and Action Plan | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs*.

6 Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, *Public Consultation on the Nutrients Action Programme 2026 - 2029*.

The recommendations in this paper set out to transform Northern Ireland's energy landscape through a transition to community-owned energy. They seek to shift the region from energy dependence to energy security while protecting the natural resources in Northern Ireland and generating lasting economic value for its citizens. The strategy also addresses pressures on rural communities and stagnant economic output by enhancing support for local populations, particularly agricultural communities, and by creating opportunities to diversify land use to stimulate economic growth.

Research Context

What is Community-owned Energy?

The concept of community-owned energy is energy infrastructure that is partly or fully owned by the community in which it is located. Rather than depending on energy that is generated far from the town or city, energy becomes a local resource, allowing for close management and the potential to benefit from the financial and employment opportunities that the infrastructure provides.

Benefits of Community-Owned Energy in Northern Ireland:

- **Financial and decision-making involvement often leads to increased acceptance: The Climate Change Act of Northern Ireland (2022) requires that at least 80% of electricity consumption must be generated from renewable sources by 2030.⁷**

The current figure is roughly 44.2%,⁸ meaning that Northern Ireland now has less than five years to double the share of renewable energy. Renewable energy projects in Northern Ireland, particularly onshore wind developments, are frequently met with public objections rooted in perceived negative local impacts and concerns of energy injustice. In a study of Northern Ireland consumers, 78% expressed support for renewable energy. However, resistance emerges in the form of “Not in My Back Yard” attitudes, with only 58% of people supporting the construction of new renewable energy infrastructure in their own communities.⁹ These concerns typically include visual and physical intrusion on rural landscapes, pressure on local infrastructure such as roads, perceived negative effects on health, and a perception that large businesses will profit from local land without delivering meaningful community benefit. Conversely, when communities are given the opportunity to invest, hold ownership shares, and participate meaningfully in the development process, acceptance levels of renewable energy projects increase substantially, with procedural justice and local participation explaining up to 89% of the variance in community acceptance.¹⁰ Financial and planning participation shifts the narrative from external imposition to local opportunity, fostering an attitude that infrastructure can be built locally “Only If I Own It.” Giving communities a direct stake in renewable projects increases social license and strengthens the potential for long-term success in Northern Ireland's energy transition.

- **Dispersion of revenue across regions and rural communities: Since the 1950s, Northern Ireland has experienced a persistent imbalance of regional investment and opportunity, with the GVA per capita in Belfast now almost 80% higher than the Northern Ireland average¹¹.** Community-owned energy with equitable organizational structures can disperse energy revenue across regions and communities rather than concentrating profits within dominant development regions

7 Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly, *Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022*.

8 *Electricity Consumption and Renewable Generation in Northern Ireland*.

9 Consumer Council UK, “Attitudes to the Energy Transition.”

10 Hogan, “Why Does Community Ownership Foster Greater Acceptance of Renewable Projects?”

11 Magennis et al., *Delivering Balanced Regional Growth in Northern Ireland*.

such as Belfast City. This directly supports one of the Northern Ireland Minister for the Economy's main priorities of promoting regional balance¹² by rooting economic benefits locally and strengthening rural areas that are struggling to benefit from current investment. A lack of modern energy infrastructure in these rural regions has also been a contributing factor for constrained local investment. This includes poor access to the grid with up to 26% of renewable electricity lost in Northern Ireland in 2024 through curtailment due to insufficient grid capacity¹³, highlighting the scale of infrastructure limitations.

- **Stabilization and diversification of agricultural income:**

The Northern Ireland agricultural industry is globally recognized for its quality of produce, highly skilled workforce and strong export markets. Geographically, Northern Ireland is dominated by agriculture, covering over 2.47 million acres, approximately 75% of the region's area. Despite its dominance of land, agriculture accounts for just 2% of Northern Ireland's GDP and 2.5% of the total employment. Around 69% of farms in Northern Ireland are located in "Less Favored Areas" (LFAs), meaning land where geographical or climatic conditions disadvantage agricultural production¹⁴. This may therefore force farmers to overuse measures to artificially stimulate improved yield, such as excess fertilizer use. Farmers also face increasing financial pressures from environmental restrictions, market volatility, and rising input costs.

Community-owned energy provides a route to diversify land use for farmers and agricultural communities through several streams, including land leasing and electricity generation for on-site consumption and grid export.¹⁵ Farmers must remain the primary environmental stewards of Northern Ireland, and their active participation and inclusion are therefore essential to deliver renewable energy infrastructure at scale while protecting biodiversity, landscape integrity, and rural economic stability.

- **The stimulation of the Northern Ireland economy through energy:**

To address the large annual fiscal deficit of £14.5 billion¹⁶ that Northern Ireland carries, new sources of economic revenue must be developed. The trajectories of modern-day economies, together with the ambitions previously outlined by the Northern Ireland Executive, identify target growth areas in energy-intensive industries such as software, artificial intelligence, data storage and zero carbon technology.¹⁷ Current established industry includes a strong manufacturing and engineering sector, accounting for 11% of employment,¹⁸ activities that similarly require large amounts of energy. Renewable energy and energy owned by the people of Northern Ireland has the potential to be reframed as the key opportunity and enabler for the region to fully control its energy landscape and create a vibrant economy that can support public infrastructure and expand opportunity.

Argument & Analysis

Northern Ireland policymakers must act to stimulate the growth of community-owned energy across the region. This paper identifies several policy levers and interventions that can be used to achieve this objective.

12 Department for the Economy Business Plan - 2025-26.

13 Stephen Robb, "Nearly 26% of Renewable Electricity Lost in Northern Ireland in 2024."

14 House of Commons, *Brexit and Agriculture in Northern Ireland - Northern Ireland Affairs Committee*.

15 Caslin, *Branching Out, a Guide to Farm Diversification in Ireland*.

16 Office for National Statistics, *Country and Regional Public Sector Finances, UK*.

17 Northern Ireland Department of the Economy, *A 10x Economy: Northern Ireland's Decade of Innovation*.

18 Invest North. Irel., "Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering."

Financial Kickstart

With significant constraints on public infrastructure funding such as water, healthcare, roads, and education, the resources available for public energy development in Northern Ireland have been extremely limited. However, in February 2026, the United Kingdom Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and Great British Energy published the Local Power Plan. The plan commits up to £1 billion of public investment in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland for the creation of projects that “enable communities to own, co-own or benefit directly from renewable energy projects”.¹⁹ This presents the ideal pathway for communities in Northern Ireland to benefit from direct funding, support, routes to market and assistance with current policy barriers. The fund could unlock several flagship projects to kickstart a community energy transition within the region. However, it should not be assumed that communities will automatically mobilize to pursue these opportunities. Many rural communities in Northern Ireland are already overextended, facing financial pressure, limited administrative capacity, and competing priorities. As a result, the availability of funding alone may not be sufficient to generate strong participation. Policymakers must therefore actively stimulate applications through outreach, technical support, and clear communication of the financial benefits available to communities that engage with the Local Power Plan.

Projects funded through the Local Power Plan have the potential to act as early demonstrations of the economic opportunities associated with community-owned energy. Successful projects would illustrate the financial viability of local ownership models and encourage wider adoption of alternative financing mechanisms in the future. These may include partial land-leasing agreements with farmers, community share ownership schemes, low-interest loans, and cooperative investment models that allow residents to purchase equity in local energy infrastructure. By establishing several flagship projects, the Local Power Plan can therefore act not only as a source of initial funding but also as a catalyst for the development of a broader, self-sustaining community energy market in Northern Ireland.

Improvements to Planning Delays and Grid Connection Costs

Northern Ireland faces large delays in planning and project approval across all sectors, including constraints when grid access is required. The average planning processing time for major applications in Northern Ireland is roughly 39.6 weeks,²⁰ compared with just 23 weeks²¹ in England. Unlike Great Britain, where planning and grid applications can proceed in parallel, Northern Ireland requires planning permission to be secured before submitting a grid application. This sequential process has caused excess delays and costs for many investors, including increased grid connection costs.

The streamlining of processes would provide opportunities for large housing and commercial projects to be rewarded with reduced approval times and lower grid connection costs when they propose an embedded renewable energy supply. This initiative would create incentives for developers and private investors to create on-site, embedded electricity generation such as community wind, solar and district heating projects.

“Energy is not merely a utility; it is a foundation for economic agency. By shifting from a model of passive consumption to one of active ownership, Northern Ireland can transform its environmental obligations into a mechanism for rural regeneration and wealth retention.”

19 Great British Energy, *Local Power Plan*.

20 Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, “9,716 Planning Applications Received in Northern Ireland during 2024/25.”

21 Gov.UK, “Live Tables on Planning Application Statistics UK.”

As these costs are initially pushed onto developers, a stricter implementation of this strategy can be implemented by deploying a policy tool similar to the ‘Merton Rule’, which requires a stated percentage of the new development’s energy consumption to come from local renewables, for example, 10%. Under this model, renewable energy systems are installed and financed during construction, with ownership transferred to residents, building management entities, or community organizations upon completion. The upfront cost is absorbed into the total development cost and recovered through property sales or leases, enabling the creation of locally owned renewable energy assets without requiring communities to bear initial capital or delivery risk. Electricity generated close to demand reduces potential strain on the grid and greatly improves efficiencies which are usually lost through transmission, with up to 7% of energy lost through transmission and distribution in the UK²².

Environmental Improvement Facilitation and Agricultural Support

The Northern Ireland Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Nutrient Action Program (NAP) for 2026-2029²³ threatens to impose further environmental regulations on Northern Ireland agriculture. Current enforcement of the proposals has been delayed through pushbacks from the agri-food industry due to the high expected associated costs, with some stakeholders estimating costs of £1.56bn a year²⁴. To address the issues raised by the Lough Neagh disaster, the plan proposes restrictions such as a 3-meter (10 ft) uncultivated buffers alongside waterways and the reduction of the permitted quantities of fertilizer per area of land. These steps would act to reduce the capacity for farms to generate traditional forms of revenue and without other paths of upskilling and financial support, farmers will become poorer as a result.

The quantification of agriculture’s environmental responsibility in the biodiversity decline in Northern Ireland is debated. While it is estimated that agriculture is the largest contributor to nutrient pollution in Lough Neagh at 62% of phosphorus inputs, other significant sources include wastewater treatment works, food processing industries, and septic tank discharge²⁵. It is important that steps are taken to improve the efficiency of farms in Northern Ireland and reduce their environmental effect, however it is essential that these steps do not act to eradicate agricultural communities. Community energy can act as a support mechanism to facilitate the reforms on agricultural activity by providing new sources of revenue, particularly for farms that will be directly affected by the new regulations.

Future Proofing the Northern Ireland Economy and Energy Security

Policymakers in Northern Ireland must acknowledge that the current trajectory of energy infrastructure, including the state of the electricity grid, does not support the 2030 targets for 80% renewable energy supply. The System Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI) and the Utility Regulator have both identified grid capacity and investment timelines as critical barriers, highlighting the need for both large-scale infrastructure investment and complementary decentralized solutions. The current infrastructure does not support the energy-intensive targeted economic development areas of software, zero-carbon technology, artificial intelligence or data storage, which depend on access to reliable, affordable and low-carbon electricity.

Community-owned renewable energy infrastructure represents a critical enabler of future economic growth in Northern Ireland. As electrification accelerates across transport, heating and industry, renewable generation will inevitably expand. Community energy can therefore not solely be promoted as an environmental measure, but primarily, a strategic economic tool that can support infrastructure development, enable investment in future growth sectors, and position Northern Ireland competitively within an increasingly independent economy that works for the public. Studies suggest that community owned wind farms can deliver an average financial return to local communities that is 34x greater per MW installed

22 Department of Energy Security and Net Zero, *Digest of UK Energy Statistics, Annual Data for UK, 2023*.

23 Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, *Public Consultation on the Nutrients Action Programme 2026 - 2029*.

24 “Nutrient Action Plan to Put ‘Severe Strain’ on NI Farmers.”

25 Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs; Department for Infrastructure, *The Lough Neagh Report: Blue Green Algae and Water Quality in Northern Ireland*.

than commercially owned wind farms. Meeting the 2030 target would require approximately 1.2–1.5 GW of new capacity, and if just 30% were community-owned, this could retain roughly £62–75 million annually within local communities.²⁶

Community energy can also act to decouple the energy landscape from external factors and provide energy security from the rest of the UK, Ireland and other parts of the world. For example, natural gas constitutes 53.5%²⁷ of the electricity generation in Northern Ireland, 100% of which is imported via the Scottish gas interconnectors. This can be debated as a natural relationship within the United Kingdom; however, the UK imports approximately 60% of its natural gas, mainly from Norway (via pipeline, 75% of imports), the United States (via LNG, 17% of imports) and Qatar (via LNG, 1.9% of imports).²⁸ Recent geopolitical situations have demonstrated the vulnerability of Northern Ireland to these external factors. The region is Western Europe's most dependent on the use of oil for home heating with 63% of households, rising to 80% in rural communities. The cost of home heating rose by over 100% following the start of conflict in Iran in February 2026, effectively doubling the cost of home heating for most households in Northern Ireland.²⁹

The benefits of decoupling acts to motivate individuals and stakeholders driven by economic opportunity, energy security, and local ownership. By emphasizing financial returns, infrastructure resilience, and regional economic development, community energy can appeal to a wider range of perspectives, including those focused on market efficiency, private enterprise, and reducing reliance on centralized systems.

While the transition toward renewable energy will create new economic opportunities, policymakers must also acknowledge potential disruption to existing sectors within Northern Ireland's energy system. Employment linked to non-renewable energy generation, and associated supply chains may face structural change as the energy mix evolves. At the same time, the deployment of new energy infrastructure will stimulate activity across a range of industries responsible for project delivery, including project management, engineering consultancies, civil construction, skilled labor, and technology providers involved in renewable energy deployment. Workforce transition strategies should therefore accompany renewable deployment, including retraining programs and skills pathways that allow workers to move into emerging sectors such as renewable energy development, grid management, and complementary skilled roles.

Follow Proven Examples in Comparable Regions

Proven examples of a community energy focus serve as a case study for Northern Ireland to follow. An example is presented in the case of Samsø, a small island of Denmark.³⁰ Like Northern Ireland, the island

26 Energy Learning Network, *The Value of Community Energy: A Digest of Supporting Evidence for the Energy Learning Network*.

27 Power Ni (Energia Group), "Northern Ireland Energy Balance Statistics: What Is 'Fuel Mix'?"

28 Edward John Beazleigh, *Chapter 4: Natural Gas, DUKES 2024*.

29 Carroll and correspondent, "Liquid Gold."

30 Sperling, "How Does a Pioneer Community Energy Project Succeed in Practice?"
 plainCitation": "Sperling, "How Does a Pioneer Community Energy Project Succeed in Practice?"", "noteIndex": 30, "citationItems": [{"id": 18, "uris": [{"http://zotero.org/users/local/IMWBfopG/items/KDHYQQDR"}], "itemData": {"id": 18, "type": "article-journal", "abstract": "Community energy projects have been one of the pillars of Denmark's remarkable renewable energy history. The island of Samsø has received worldwide attention as a model community in this regard, having been able to transform large parts of its energy system in a period of 10 years. Much of this attention is focused on the end-results of this transformation, on what Samsø has achieved to date, including the technical infrastructure and the fact that the local community participated actively. Little attention has so far been paid to how these results were achieved in practice. In this paper, we examine the concrete contextual conditions that made the success of the Samsø Renewable Energy Island project possible. As external contextual conditions, we identify guiding visions and plans, governmental technology support, governmental process support, and expert assistance. Internal contextual conditions include local traditions and history of cooperative projects, sense of locality and responsibility, community spirit, entrepreneurial individuals, networks, as well as guiding visions and plans. The results clearly show that the success

is dominated by agriculture and with a declining population and GDP, Samsø required diversification of revenue to strengthen the regional economy. A model primarily based on cooperatives enabled the island to become self-sufficient in renewable energy and a net exporter of energy, while ensuring financial returns remained within the local community and supported long-term rural economic resilience.

Leading examples of community-owned energy are also found in regions where public acceptance of renewables has traditionally been perceived as lower than acceptance in countries like Denmark. This demonstrates that local control and potential economic benefits can drive successful energy transitions even in more politically and culturally conservative environments. Texas is the largest producer of wind energy among all states in the USA, producing more than the next three largest wind-producing states combined and contributing 30% of the US wind energy total³¹. It is also second only to California in terms of solar power production in the USA. Much of this adoption has been driven by community owned cooperatives. Around 56% of the American landscape is powered by cooperative projects with annual returns of more than \$1 billion to their members³².

Recommendations & Conclusion

The policy recommendations presented in this paper are as follows:

1. Establish A Task Force to Support Community Engagement with the £1 Billion Local Power Plan Funding

Northern Ireland policy makers must provide viable pathways for communities to compete for funding within the £1 billion Local Power Plan and for future funding opportunities. A specific task force with relevant expertise should be established to best prepare Northern Ireland communities for this unprecedented financial opportunity. The taskforce should provide the steppingstone for applications into the Local Power Plan funding.

The task force should include:

- Regional outreach team that acts to identify communities suitable for energy projects, identifying a small list of suitable projects with short-term readiness.
- Legal and financial support for establishing community ownership models such as cooperatives.
- The identification of viable offtakers for excess energy generation, including public infrastructure or potential future projects, such as new data centers.
- Investigating next generation funding opportunities through low interest loans, further grants or collective pooling of public funding

By reducing barriers, the taskforce would accelerate community participation and ensure Northern Ireland secures a proportional share of available funding. This intervention would stimulate local

of the REI project can be attributed to the combination of these varied contextual conditions, which in their entirety made the island's transformation possible. However, in order for these favourable contextual conditions to lead to a successful project, it required alignment through intermediaries between the external and internal context, as well as internally on Samsø. Most importantly this alignment entailed the integration of the Renewable Energy Island project into the structure and needs of the local community through intensive processes of sensing and priming linked to the local population." "container-title": "Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews", "DOI": "10.1016/j.rser.2016.12.116", "ISSN": "1364-0321", "journalAbbreviation": "Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews", "page": "884-897", "source": "ScienceDirect", "title": "How does a pioneer community energy project succeed in practice? The case of the Samsø Renewable Energy Island", "title-short": "How does a pioneer community energy project succeed in practice?", "volume": "71", "author": [{"family": "Sperling", "given": "Karl"}], "issued": {"date-parts": [{"year": 2017, "month": 5, "day": 1}]}], "schema": "https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"}</p>
</div>

31 "United States - U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA)."

32 NRECA, "Electric Co-Op Facts & Figures."

investment and create employment opportunities, kickstarting the community energy transition and providing a catalyst and example for future projects. The taskforce could also support the development of long-term financing mechanisms capable of replicating and expanding upon the funding structures initially made available through initiatives such as the Local Power Plan.

2. Incentivize and Enforce Embedded Community Renewables in Large Development Projects

Planning policy in Northern Ireland should be amended to incentivize embedded renewable energy infrastructure within large residential and commercial developments. This can be implemented through Section 76 agreements under the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which allow planning authorities to impose conditions necessary to support infrastructure and public benefit.

A Northern Ireland adaptation of the 'Merton Rule' should be introduced, requiring that a defined minimum proportion (e.g. 20–30%) of projected energy demand in new major developments be supplied through new on-site or locally embedded renewable generation.

Key mechanisms should include:

- Fast-tracked planning approval for developments incorporating embedded renewable infrastructure.
- Grid applications that can proceed concurrently with planning permission, reducing delays and development risk.
- Reduced grid connection costs for projects that generate electricity locally.
- Mandatory transfer of ownership of embedded renewable assets to community entities, resident cooperatives, or local authorities at the point of purchase.

This approach would create a growing portfolio of community-owned energy assets without requiring upfront public investment and embed energy ownership directly into Northern Ireland's expanding built environment.

3. Support Agricultural Participation and Prevent Biodiversity Decline through Revenue Diversification

Agricultural communities must be highlighted as vital participants in Northern Ireland's energy transition. While environmental regulations such as the Nutrient Action Program impose necessary restrictions to protect water quality and biodiversity in the region, these restrictions cannot act as further financial pressure on rural communities. Policymakers should support affected farmers to ensure environmental protection does not come at the cost of rural economic decline.

Key mechanisms should include:

- Targeted financial support for regulation-compliant farms, particularly those along sensitive waterways, disproportionately affected by the Nutrient Action Program restrictions. This should include access to low-interest loans, grant funding, awarding of energy shares and dedicated transition support.
- Creation of community renewable energy funds, financed in part through a ring-fenced public purse from fines levied on non-compliant agricultural and industrial polluters within sensitive catchment areas.
- Provision of tools for the development of agricultural renewable energy cooperatives, modelled on successful European and international frameworks enabling farmers to collectively develop, own, and manage renewable energy assets.

This strategy aligns environmental restoration with economic opportunity. By replacing lost agricultural productivity with renewable income streams, farmers can maintain financial stability, contribute to environmental recovery, and uphold their role as key environmental stewards in Northern Ireland.

4. Produce and publish a Northern Ireland Energy Independence Strategy

To promote energy independence as a strategic economic priority, renewable energy must be reframed within Northern Ireland as an economic enabler rather than solely an environmental obligation. Policymakers should implement a coordinated public communication strategy emphasizing renewable energy's role in strengthening economic independence, attracting investment, and supporting emerging industries within Northern Ireland.

The key steps of the strategy should include:

- Refocusing public opinion on renewable energy as critical economic infrastructure that supports long-term economic growth and reduces dependence on imported energy, following examples set by regions like Texas.
- Clearly communicating the direct financial benefits of renewable energy to households, including reduced electricity bills, greater price stability, and protection from international energy price volatility.
- Delivering a coordinated public engagement campaign promoting renewable energy as a pathway to economic independence, investment attraction, and long-term regional prosperity.
- Aligning renewable energy development with Northern Ireland's economic strategy, ensuring sufficient locally generated energy to support the growth of high-value sectors such as advanced manufacturing, hydrogen production, and data infrastructure.

By reshaping public and political perception of renewable energy as critical economic infrastructure, this strategy will build public support, strengthen policy alignment, and improve investor confidence in Northern Ireland as a competitive location for energy-intensive industries.

Conclusion

Northern Ireland's current energy system reinforces economic dependence, exposes the region to external price volatility, and limits the ability to capture the full economic value of its natural renewable resources. Community-owned energy provides a practical and proven mechanism to reverse this trajectory by embedding ownership locally, strengthening energy security, and enabling broader participation in economic growth.

By aligning funding, planning policy, and agricultural support with community ownership models, policymakers can accelerate renewable deployment while protecting rural livelihoods and restoring environmental balance. Crucially, this transition reframes energy from a cost and a source of dependency into a strategic economic asset. Supporting community energy will help retain wealth within Northern Ireland, attract investment in emerging industries, and build a more resilient, self-sustaining economy capable of delivering long-term economic and environmental prosperity.

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Preparing Northern Ireland for an AI-Driven Future:

A Statutory GenAI Curriculum for Schools

by Shane Donnolly

Executive Summary

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) is now a routine tool in students' lives. Pupils use AI to learn, communicate, and create in and out of the classroom. However, the Northern Ireland curriculum is yet to catch up. There is no clear guide that sets out what children should know about GenAI, how to evaluate its outputs, or how to use it safely and responsibly. This gap leaves schools to improvise and exposes students to misinformation, privacy risks, and inconsistent academic standards.¹

This paper recommends a practical, government-led response: introduce a statutory GenAI curriculum starting at Key Stage ² and extending through post-primary education. The curriculum should sit within the proposed Digital Technology strand of the reformed Northern Ireland Curriculum.² It should build progressively from early awareness of AI tools and how to use them safely, to more critical evaluation, ethical considerations, and digital literacy.

At the same time, Northern Ireland is already positioning itself as a leader in responsible AI through the Executive's new Office of AI and Digital.³ A statutory curriculum would align education policy with economic strategy, strengthen the talent pipeline for Northern Ireland's growing technology sector, and reduce the risk that AI amplifies disadvantage and widens the attainment gap.

Implementation requires three coordinated actions: (1) a statutory curriculum and assessment guidance, (2) a National AI Teaching Competency Framework with structured professional development and integration into Initial Teacher Education (ITE), and (3) a formal industry-school partnership model that connects every post-primary school to technology employers and practical experiences.

Key Recommendations

- Mandate a statutory GenAI curriculum across KS2–KS4, embedded in the new Digital Technology strand.
- Define clear learning outcomes and assessment rules for responsible AI use and academic integrity.
- Establish a National AI Teaching Competency Framework and provide Continuing Professional Development (CPD).
- Integrate AI literacy and safe classroom practice into ITE so new teachers enter the workforce prepared.
- Match each post-primary school with a tech partner to co-deliver learning and expand work experience pathways.

1 Sammy Taggart and Stephen Roulston, "Trailblazing NI: GenAI in Education—A Proof of Concept Study in Schools in Northern Ireland" (2025).

2 Department of Education Northern Ireland, *Independent Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum: Final Report*. (Belfast: Department of Education, 2023.)

3 Northern Ireland Executive, *Office of AI and Digital: Strategic Framework*, (Belfast: Northern Ireland Executive, 2024)

Introduction

The integration of AI in classrooms is no longer speculative. Unlike traditional AI, which classifies, predicts, or automates tasks, GenAI simulates aspects of human creativity, making it a powerful tool for learning, communication, and problem-solving.⁴ Children are already using tools like ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot for storytelling, homework, and digital creation.⁵ For pupils, this means AI is no longer a specialist technology but a powerful learning tool at their disposal. However, using AI incorrectly can significantly undermine skills development. Therefore, a guided approach to AI is needed.

Northern Ireland's education system has not yet established a statutory baseline for AI literacy. As a result, school-level responses vary significantly. Some schools pilot responsible use and build critical thinking skills. Others prohibit AI tools due to uncertainty about academic integrity, safeguarding, and data protection. Many teachers report that they have limited training, insufficient time due to curriculum demands, and a lack of clear guidance on what "acceptable use" entails in practice.⁶ This inconsistency creates uneven standards and growing confusion.

Northern Ireland's economy is increasingly shaped by digital growth and its technology sectors. Belfast is a recognized cybersecurity cluster and continues to attract investment from global firms. The Executive has reinforced this direction through the creation of the Office of AI and Digital, intended to drive responsible adoption and improve public services.⁷ Economic strategy now emphasizes innovation, automation, and advanced digital capability. Education policy must align with this economic trajectory. If Northern Ireland intends to compete in an AI-driven economy, digital and AI literacy must become universal competencies that are developed early.

This paper sets out a clear plan: introduce a statutory GenAI curriculum beginning at Key Stage 2 and expanding through Key Stage 4, supported by teacher CPD and structured industry partnerships. The objective is straightforward: ensure every student can use GenAI safely and effectively, with equitable access regardless of their background.

Background

What is GenAI and Why it Matters in School?

GenAI systems create new outputs that resemble human-produced work. Unlike earlier AI applications, which mainly classified or predicted, Generative AI systems can generate images, music, and video from simple text prompts.⁸ Most current GenAI tools rely on large language models trained on extensive datasets. They generate outputs based on patterns rather than true understanding.

This is important because GenAI can produce confident but inaccurate outputs. Many models can produce fabricated results or distorted summaries, often described as "hallucinations."⁹ These errors are a predictable feature of GenAI systems. This risk is greater for young people as they are still developing judgment about source credibility and persuasive messaging. If an AI tool presents a polished answer, students may treat it as reliable without checking. Moreover, over-reliance on AI can diminish key critical thinking and writing

4 OECD, *OECD Digital Education Outlook 2023: Towards an Effective Digital Education Ecosystem* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023). <https://doi.org/10.1787/c74f03de-en>.

5 UNESCO, *Guidance for Generative AI in Education and Research* (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2023). Available at: <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/guidance-generative-ai-education-and-research>

6 Sammy Taggart and Stephen Roulston, "Trailblazing NI: GenAI in Education—A Proof of Concept Study in Schools in Northern Ireland" (2025).

7 Northern Ireland Executive, *Office of AI and Digital: Strategic Framework*. (Belfast: Northern Ireland Executive, 2024)

8 Sammy Taggart and Stephen Roulston, "Trailblazing NI: GenAI in Education—A Proof of Concept Study in Schools in Northern Ireland" (2025).

9 UNESCO, *Guidance for Generative AI in Education and Research* (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2023).

skills.

At the same time, GenAI can support learning if used appropriately. It can provide rapid feedback on writing, break down complex concepts into accessible explanations, support language development, and help students with creative ideas.¹⁰ However, much of the current research focuses on how to use AI tools to enhance learning and reduce teacher workload, rather than on educating young people on how to use them properly.

The problem is not the existence of GenAI in education; it is already pervasive. The real question is whether schools will equip pupils to use it responsibly and critically, with the skills to evaluate its outputs and understand its implications.

The UK and Northern Ireland Context

Northern Ireland operates within a split governance framework: education is devolved, while AI regulation remains reserved to the UK Government. This creates a gap, leaving schools to address issues such as assessment and safeguarding without clear guidance.

The UK Government's white paper, *A Pro-Innovation Approach to AI Regulation*, sets out five cross-sector principles: safety, transparency, fairness, accountability, and contestability.¹¹ While it mentions principles such as safety and transparency, it does not translate into curriculum requirements or classroom practice. Schools are therefore left to interpret these principles independently.

Northern Ireland has both the authority and the opportunity to act through curriculum reform. The Independent Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum recommended introducing Digital Technology as a new strand in the curriculum, creating a defined pathway for structured AI literacy.¹² Embedding GenAI within this strand would move it from an optional add-on to a statutory requirement.

Evidence of growing local momentum reinforces this need. The Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service has published an analysis on generative AI in education, identifying both opportunities and governance gaps.¹³ The Education Authority has also piloted proofs of concept and issued guidance on specific AI use cases. While these initiatives demonstrate an awareness of AI as an emerging issue facing schools, they focus primarily on guidance for teacher use rather than on establishing a comprehensive student-learning framework.

International Trends

Internationally, AI literacy is increasingly recognized as a foundational skill. Governments and multilateral institutions now treat generative AI as a mainstream education issue.

A UNESCO report emphasizes the need for child-centered governance, teacher preparedness, transparency, and the protection of human agency in AI guidance for education systems.¹⁴ Moreover, the UNESCO AI

10 Sammy Taggart and Stephen Roulston, "Trailblazing NI: GenAI in Education—A Proof of Concept Study in Schools in Northern Ireland" (2025).

11 Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, *A Pro-Innovation Approach to AI Regulation: Government Response* (London: UK Government, February 6, 2024).

12 Department of Education Northern Ireland. *Independent Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum: Final Report*. (Belfast: Department of Education, 2023.)

13 Northern Ireland Assembly, *Generative Artificial Intelligence in Education: Opportunities and Challenges*, Research and Information Service Research Paper 27/25 (Belfast: Northern Ireland Assembly, 2025). Available at: <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2022-2027/2025/education/2725.pdf>

14 Wayne Holmes and Fengchun Miao, *Guidance for Generative AI in Education and Research* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2023).



Competency Framework for Students outlines a structured progression, from understanding AI systems to applying them responsibly and ultimately engaging in informed co-creation. The framework integrates ethics, technical literacy, and critical thinking rather than treating AI as a purely technical subject.¹⁵

Similarly, OECD analysis highlights that AI will reshape task composition across occupations.¹⁶ As automation increases, demand will grow for problem-solving skills, collaboration, and ethical judgment. They are baseline competencies for participation in modern economies.

National governments are beginning to respond. The United States Department of Education has issued guidance encouraging responsible AI integration in teaching and learning, with an emphasis on educator capacity and assessment integrity¹⁷. Other jurisdictions are embedding AI literacy within broader digital competence frameworks rather than isolating it as a standalone elective. Some international examples of best practice can be seen in the table below:

Country	How AI literacy has been implemented in the curriculum	Source link
Estonia	AI Leap 2025 is a national school initiative to integrate AI tools and skills into education. It launched first with grades 10–11 in September 2025 and is due to expand in 2026 to vocational schools and new 10th-grade cohorts.	AI Leap 2025; Estonian Ministry on ProgeTiger
China	China now has a national policy direction for AI in Education. The Ministry of Education said AI will be integrated into teaching, textbooks and the curriculum across primary, secondary, and higher education. In Beijing, schools began offering at least eight class hours of AI instruction per academic year from the 2025 fall semester, either as standalone lessons or integrated into other subjects.	State Council / Xinhua on Beijing rollout;
Singapore	Singapore’s model is less about a standalone AI subject and more about system-wide AI literacy. The Ministry of Education’s approach is for students to “learn about AI, learn to use AI, learn with AI, and learn beyond AI”, backed by the “Transforming Education through Technology” Masterplan 2030.	MOE: AI in Education;
United Arab Emirates	The UAE has adopted one of the clearest whole-system curriculum models. From the 2025–2026 academic year, AI is a formal subject in public schools from kindergarten to Grade 12. The curriculum is built around seven areas: concepts, data and algorithms, software use, ethics, real-world applications, innovation/project design, and policy/community engagement. Around 1,000 teachers have been trained to deliver it.	WAM / Emirates News Agency

The international direction of travel is clear: systems are moving from reactive restriction toward structured integration. Education authorities are defining expectations, supporting teachers, and embedding AI literacy progressively across age groups.

15 UNESCO, *AI Competency Framework for Students*, (Paris: UNESCO, 2024). <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391105>

16 OECD, *AI and the Future of Skills, Volume 1: Capabilities and Assessments*, Educational Research and Innovation (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023), Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1787/5ee71f34-en> .

17 U.S. Department of Education, “U.S. Department of Education Issues Guidance on Artificial Intelligence Use in Schools, Proposes Additional Supplemental Priority,” Office of Communications and Outreach (OCO), 2025. Available at: <https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/us-department-of-education-issues-guidance-artificial-intelligence-use-schools-proposes-additional-supplemental-priority>

Economic Transformation and Digital Inequality

Northern Ireland's economic strategy increasingly centers on digital capability, innovation, and high-value technology sectors. Cybersecurity, fintech, software development, and data-driven industries play a growing role in inward investment and regional growth. The Executive's economic vision and the creation of the Office of AI and Digital reinforce this trajectory.

Workforce projections underscore the urgency for reform. The Northern Ireland Skills Barometer projects significant structural shifts driven by automation and digital transformation over the next decade.¹⁸ At the same time, employers report persistent shortages in advanced digital skills.

However, competitiveness is not based solely on technical capability. Employers increasingly demand 'transversal skills' alongside digital literacy. Skills such as collaboration, adaptability, critical thinking, and resilience enable workers to operate effectively in technology-rich environments and to respond to rapid change. Evidence suggests that while many young people leave education with qualifications, employers often identify gaps in real-world problem-solving and collaboration skills. This has the potential to be exacerbated if AI is misused in education, as students become over-reliant on the technology and delegate their problem-solving and writing to AI tools.

The review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum acknowledges that any new framework must reflect evolving economic demands, particularly the growing need for STEM and digital expertise.¹⁹ Yet technical proficiency alone is insufficient in an AI-driven economy. Students must also learn to evaluate automated outputs, interpret data critically, and exercise ethical judgment in their use of technology.

These competencies cannot be developed solely through post-secondary education or employer training. A structured progression in AI literacy from primary through post-primary education would strengthen Northern Ireland's long-term competitiveness by building both technical fluency and adaptive capability.

Moreover, digital access and digital literacy remain uneven across Northern Ireland. Rural communities, lower-income households, and pupils without consistent home connectivity face structural disadvantages in accessing emerging technologies.²⁰ As generative AI becomes more embedded in daily learning and communication, these disparities risk widening.

At the same time, generative AI can support inclusion when deployed deliberately. Structured classroom use can provide personalized feedback, scaffold complex concepts, and assist students who may not have access to additional support outside of school. Used responsibly, AI can narrow gaps rather than widen them.²¹

The difference lies in governance. Without a statutory curriculum, access and literacy will remain inconsistent. A clear framework establishes a baseline entitlement: every pupil, regardless of background, learns how to use AI tools safely, critically, and effectively.

Academic Integrity and Cognitive Development

The rapid adoption of generative AI has intensified concerns about academic integrity. Schools across Northern Ireland are responding inconsistently. While some treat AI assistance as misconduct, others permit its use without setting out clear boundaries. Both approaches create risk. Blanket bans discourage responsible literacy, while permissive ambiguity undermines fairness and assessment credibility.

The core issue is not whether students use AI, but how and when its use is appropriate. Without structured

18 Northern Ireland Skills Barometer, Skills Barometer 2023–33 Overview, (Belfast: Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, 2023) Available at: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/skills-barometer-2023-2033>

19 Education and Training Inspectorate, Digital Skills in the Curriculum: A Baseline Evaluation of the Digital Skills Provision in Primary and Post-Primary Schools (Belfast: Education and Training Inspectorate, 2024) Available at: https://www.etini.gov.uk/files/etini/publications/digital-skills-in-the-curriculum-a-baseline-evaluation-of-the-digital-skills-provision-in-primary-and-post-primary-schools_0.pdf

20 Fatima Ahmed, "The Digital Divide and AI in Education: Addressing Equity and Accessibility," AI EDIFY Journal 1, no. 2 (2024): 12–23.

21 OECD, AI and the Future of Skills, Volume 1: Capabilities and Assessments (Paris: OECD, 2021)..

guidance, teachers must interpret acceptable practice on their own. This leads to uneven expectations across schools and confusion among pupils.

National guidance from the UK Department for Education recognizes this challenge.²² It states that generative AI should support learning but must not replace independent thinking or compromise assessment integrity. Assessment design should evaluate student reasoning and understanding rather than the polished output of a tool.

However, Northern Ireland currently lacks a statutory curriculum framework that translates these principles into a clear learning progression and classroom practice.²³ Rather, only limited guidance exists. The Education Authority has issued advice on the safe use of AI-generated images and media.²⁴ The Department of Education has also supported initiatives such as the Reading with AI Research Project, which provides practical training for teachers.²⁵ While these are important first steps, they do not constitute a coherent curriculum or assessment strategy.

It is not only Academic integrity that can be hindered with the misuse of AI, but also a child's cognitive development itself. A Brookings report outlines how AI can diminish a child's learning if overused with no guardrails. It describes how overuse of AI can undermine students' cognitive development through "Cognitive offloading." Moreover, misuse of AI can impede students' social and emotional development.²⁶

Therefore, a statutory curriculum must provide these guardrails and define where AI use is appropriate, require transparency when it is used for assistance, and align assessment with cognitive development. Clear expectations would protect integrity while equipping students with the skills needed to navigate AI responsibly.

"Without a statutory framework, students are left to navigate a landscape of misinformation, privacy risks, and ethical dilemmas without the necessary critical tools. Education must provide a 'safety-first' approach that empowers pupils to be discerning users of technology rather than passive consumers."

Data Protection and Safeguarding

GenAI tools may collect user data, raising significant safeguarding concerns for young people. Recent incidents in Northern Ireland involving AI-generated image misuse highlight that these risks are immediate.²⁷

However, Restriction alone is insufficient, as students use AI beyond school. Instead, education must equip pupils to understand data use, recognize manipulated media, and protect their digital identity. AI literacy provides a more sustainable safeguard. With appropriate governance and approved tools, schools can help students understand how personal data is used, how manipulated media is created, and how to protect their digital identities. They will also recognize the ethical boundaries that surround AI and use AI in ways that support, rather than replace, learning.

22 Department for Education, *Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Education*, London: Department for Education, 2025.

23 Northern Ireland Assembly, (2025), *Generative Artificial Intelligence in Education: Opportunities and Challenges*, Research and Information Service Research Paper 27/25, Available at: <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2022-2027/2025/education/2725.pdf>

24 Education Authority Northern Ireland, "Guidance Issued to Schools, EOTAS, Youth and Community Settings on Safe Use of AI Images." 2026.

25 Department of Education Northern Ireland, *Reading with AI Research Project: Interim Findings*, (Belfast: Department of Education, 2024.)

26 Michael Burns, Rebecca Winthrop, N. Luther, E. Venetis, and R. Karim, *A New Direction for Students in an AI World: Prosper, Prepare, Protect* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2026). Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/A-New-Direction-for-Students-in-an-AI-World-FULL-REPORT.pdf>

27 Education Authority Northern Ireland, "Guidance Issued to Schools, EOTAS, Youth and Community Settings on Safe Use of AI Images." 2026.

Argument and Analysis

Generative artificial intelligence is already embedded in student learning, and economic transformation is accelerating, while concerns about safeguarding are growing. Yet the education system lacks a statutory framework defining how AI should be taught, governed, and assessed. This is creating inconsistency, uncertainty, and uneven preparedness across schools. Without structured integration, AI will continue to shape education informally, risking widened inequality and weakening academic standards. The Department of Education must move from reactive guidance to clarity and coordinated implementation.

Inconsistency Across the System

Northern Ireland currently sits between experimentation and integration. Students use AI tools for revision, drafting, and creative tasks, often without structured oversight. Some schools have introduced responsible use policies and critical evaluation exercises. Others prohibit AI outright. Many operate in uncertainty.

This inconsistency produces unequal outcomes. In schools with structured digital literacy, pupils learn to question AI outputs, verify information, and reflect on ethical implications. In schools without such guidance, students either overrely on AI or avoid it entirely. Neither approach prepares them for an AI-driven economy.

The governance gap compounds this inconsistency. UK-level AI regulation sets broad principles but lacks clarity at the classroom level. In the absence of statutory curriculum guidance, individual schools must independently interpret complex technological and ethical questions.

This approach is unsustainable. Education systems require coherence. A statutory GenAI curriculum would establish baseline expectations, align practice across schools, and provide clarity for teachers and pupils alike.

What Skills Do Young People Need

Northern Ireland's Skills Barometer projects significant shifts in workforce numbers, indicating that automation and digital transformation will continue to reshape job duties. Employers increasingly seek both advanced digital capability and transversal skills such as critical thinking, adaptability, collaboration, and ethical judgment. These competencies cannot be assumed to develop organically through exposure.

Therefore, a structured framework is required to guide the progressive development of these competencies across all stages of schooling. The 2024 UNESCO AI Competency Framework for Students provides a practical model.²⁸ It emphasizes progression from a fundamental awareness of AI technology to responsible use and ultimately to informed application. This approach ensures students develop the critical and adaptive skills required in an AI-driven economy.

The risks (Safeguarding, Cognitive development, Digital Inequality)

Generative AI presents several risks to young people today. Recent incidents involving AI-generated image misuse in Northern Ireland demonstrate that safeguarding risks are immediate and real. However, prohibition does not eliminate exposure. Students encounter AI tools beyond school settings, often without adult guidance. Students must understand how personal data is processed, how manipulated media is created, how bias emerges in automated systems, and how to protect their digital identities. They must

28 UNESCO, *AI Competency Framework for Students*, (Paris: UNESCO, 2024.)

recognize ethical boundaries and understand that just because a technology can do something, e.g., write your homework assignment for you, this doesn't mean it should.

This misuse of AI is not just an ethical consideration but can also impact a child's cognitive development. When a child delegates a task to an AI tool, this "Cognitive offloading" means they are not doing the thinking for themselves and therefore, not learning.²⁹ Young people need to be shown how to use and interact with tools in ways that enhance, rather than hinder, their learning.

Moreover, if AI literacy remains informal and dependent on home access, inequality will deepen.³⁰ Students with greater digital exposure will advance, while others fall behind. This creates long-term economic risks. A statutory curriculum would establish AI literacy as a baseline entitlement, ensuring all pupils, regardless of background, develop an awareness of how to use AI safely and effectively.

Conclusion

Taken together, these pressures of economic transformation, safeguarding risk, academic integrity disputes, and digital inequality signal that Northern Ireland has reached a critical turning point. With curriculum reform already underway through the TransformED process and the introduction of a Digital Technology strand, a rare and time-sensitive policy window has emerged. Failing to act decisively within this moment will prolong uncertainty for schools, leave teachers underprepared, and place students at a growing disadvantage. In a rapidly evolving technological landscape, inaction is not a neutral choice; it is a decision to fall behind.

The central question, therefore, remains: what do young people need to know in an AI-driven world, and how can education best support that learning? The answer lies in clarity. A structured curriculum would articulate a coherent progression of knowledge, align assessment with cognitive development, and equip teachers with clear guidance rather than uncertainty. Most importantly, it would ensure that every pupil develops not just technical skills but also the critical judgment to engage with AI responsibly and effectively in a complex digital world.

Policy Recommendations and Conclusion

Northern Ireland has both the authority and the opportunity to embed AI literacy within its statutory curriculum. The current curriculum reform, alongside the Executive's AI strategy, provides a clear and deliberate window for action.

Recommendation 1: Mandate a Statutory GenAI Curriculum (KS2–KS4)

Policy Action:

Within 12 months, the Department of Education should direct CCEA to design and consult on statutory GenAI learning outcomes embedded within the Digital Technology strand. Full phased implementation should begin within two academic years.

29 Michael Burns, Rebecca Winthrop, N. Luther, E. Venetis, and R. Karim, *A New Direction for Students in an AI World: Prosper, Prepare, Protect* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2026). Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/A-New-Direction-for-Students-in-an-AI-World-FULL-REPORT.pdf>

30 Fatima Ahmed, "The Digital Divide and AI in Education: Addressing Equity and Accessibility," *AI EDIFY Journal* 1, no. 2 (2024): 12–23.

Implementation Structure:

Phase 1 (Year 1): Framework Design

- Establish a GenAI Curriculum Advisory Group (CCEA, EA, safeguarding leads, industry representatives, teacher unions).
- Map progression from KS2 to KS4.
- Align with UNESCO competency models and the revised NI curriculum framework.
- Conduct public consultation.

Phase 2 (Year 2): Pilot and Teacher Preparation

- Pilot in a representative sample of schools (urban, rural, selective, non-selective).
- Develop exemplar lesson plans and assessment models.
- Provide baseline teacher training.

Phase 3 (Year 3): Statutory Rollout

- Embed mandatory learning outcomes.
- Publish assessment guidance.
- Integrate AI transparency requirements (students document AI use where appropriate).

Core Curriculum Elements:

KS2

- Age-appropriate explanation of AI systems.
- Digital safety and “pause and verify” habits.
- Recognizing manipulated media.
- Guided classroom experimentation with approved tools.

KS3–KS4

- How GenAI generates outputs and why errors occur.
- Prompt design and refinement.
- Bias, fairness, and representation.
- Data protection and digital identity.
- Ethical use and academic integrity standards.
- AI’s impact on work and society.

Recommendation 2: Establish a National AI Teaching Competency Framework

Policy Action:

Within 12 months, the Department of Education should publish a National AI Teaching Competency Framework and fund a structured Continuing Professional Development (CPD) pathway.

Framework Domains:

- Conceptual AI literacy



- Classroom pedagogy and responsible integration
- Assessment and academic integrity
- Safeguarding and data protection

Delivery Model:

- Mandatory baseline training for all teachers (online and in-person hybrid).
- Subject-specific modules (Digital Technology, English, LLW, STEM).
- Creation of designated “AI Lead Teachers” in each school.
- Integration into Initial Teacher Education programs within two years.

Oversight:

- Annual review by the Education Authority.
- Teacher confidence surveys.
- Integration into the ETI inspection framework.

Recommendation 3: Formalize Industry–School Partnerships

Policy Action:

Within 18 months, the Executive should establish a centrally coordinated partnership program matching every post-primary school with at least one technology employer or employer consortium.

Minimum Annual Offer:

- Two curriculum-aligned industry engagements.
- Structured work experience pathways.
- Student innovation challenges using GenAI tools.
- Teacher industry immersion opportunities.

Coordination Mechanism:

- Managed through Invest NI and the Department for the Economy.
- Regional cluster approach for rural coverage.
- Clear safeguarding and compliance protocols.

This ensures alignment between education reform and economic development strategy.

Conclusion

Generative AI is already shaping how students learn, communicate, and create. The policy question is whether Northern Ireland will respond strategically or allow fragmented practice to persist. A statutory GenAI curriculum would provide clarity where confusion currently exists. It would protect academic integrity, strengthen safeguarding, reduce digital inequality, and align education with economic transformation. Most

importantly, it would ensure that every pupil develops the judgment required to navigate AI responsibly. Northern Ireland faces a clear choice: treat GenAI as a fragmented school-level issue and risk leaving many young people behind, or address it system-wide and equip every child with the tools to thrive in an AI-driven future?

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Unfinished Business:

The Case for a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights

by Dara Kievee

Executive Summary

This paper examines the unfulfilled commitment under the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) to establish a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights (NI BoR). While the Agreement incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic law and established the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to lead the NI BoR process, almost 30 years later, the Bill has not yet been legislated. This paper analyzes the political, legal, and institutional barriers that have hindered progress, including the misuse of mechanisms such as the Petition of Concern, the St Andrews veto, and the Executive agenda veto. It challenges common misconceptions about economic, social, and cultural rights, demonstrating their enforceability and importance for sustainable peace and equality. The paper argues that a locally tailored BoR is essential to stabilize institutions, reinforce democratic resilience, and fulfill treaty obligations. It concludes with practical, actionable recommendations for the NI Assembly, the UK government, and the Irish government to advance the implementation of a robust, rights-based framework for NI.

Recommendations

Northern Ireland Assembly

- **Adopt a Cross-Party Motion**

Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) should adopt a cross-party motion reaffirming support for a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights that includes economic, social, and cultural rights and recognizes the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission's 2008 advice as a foundational starting point. Although not legally binding, such a motion would signal renewed political commitment and acknowledge the Bill of Rights as an outstanding commitment under the Good Friday Agreement.

- **Repeal the St Andrews Veto**

The NI Assembly should advocate for repealing the St Andrews veto and replacing it with an NI BoR.

- **Structured Engagement with the UK Government**

MLAs should raise the implementation of a BoR through formal intergovernmental engagement, mandating that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister place the issue on the agenda of meetings with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and using committee processes and parliamentary channels to seek clarity on the UK government's proposed timeline.

- **Commission Updated Expert Advice**

The Assembly should request updated advice from the NIHRC on the content of a BoR, taking into account Brexit, socioeconomic developments, and evolving rights standards across the UK.

- **Public Engagement Program**

The Assembly should partner with the NIHRC and civil society to launch a structured public engagement program that provides accessible information, addresses misconceptions, and highlights the everyday relevance of human rights. It should build on the NIHRC's early-2000s awareness

campaign and draw on engagement models from post-conflict societies such as South Africa.¹

Irish Government

- **UK-Irish Policy Framework**

The Irish government should encourage the UK government to develop and adopt a policy framework that clarifies how each government sees its joint role in implementing the GFA obligations.²

- **Raise the Issue through the British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC)**

The Irish government should publicly reaffirm its commitment to the fulfillment of the GFA and formally place the Bill of Rights on the BIIGC agenda, framing it as unfinished Agreement business and reinforcing its status within the peace settlement architecture.

- **Provision of Funding**

The Irish government should provide funding to support public engagement initiatives and awareness campaigns regarding the Northern Ireland BoR.

UK Government

- **Adopt a UK-Irish GFA Implementation Framework**

The UK government should work alongside the Irish government to adopt an agreed-upon framework for implementing the GFA commitments.

- **Public Reaffirmation of the NI BoR Commitment**

The UK government should publicly reaffirm its commitment to advancing a Northern Ireland BoR that is inclusive of ESCRs and includes rights additional to those in the ECHR.

- **Create a Roadmap for Implementation**

The UK government, in consultation with Northern Ireland political parties and civil society, should develop a roadmap for advancing the Northern Ireland BoR. The roadmap should include a timetable for consultation, scrutiny, and enactment.

- **Appointment of an Independent Human Rights Panel**

The UK government should appoint a panel of independent human rights experts familiar with the circumstances in Northern Ireland to help develop the Northern Ireland BoR. These experts should not be subject to political veto.

Introduction

The GFA, signed in 1998, is often cast as the ‘poster child’ of successful peace agreements.³ While the Agreement brought an end to 30 years of conflict in Northern Ireland, many of its commitments remain unfulfilled. This paper argues that the failure to implement a Northern Ireland BoR has contributed to structural instability in governance and weakened democratic resilience in Northern Ireland. It contends that the BoR

1 Rachel Murray, “The Importance of a Bill of Rights in Northern Ireland as a Process: Comparative Reflections from South Africa,” *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly* 52, no. 3-4 (July 15, 2020): 385–406, <https://doi.org/10.53386/nilq.v52i3-4.678>.

2 Anne Smith and Monica McWilliams, “Ensuring a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland Remains on the Political Agenda” (Belfast, Northern Ireland: Ulster University, 2015), <https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/en/publications/ensuring-a-bill-of-rights-for-northern-ireland-remains-on-the-pol-3/>.

3 Rory O’Connell, Lina Malagón, and Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, “The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and Transformative Change: Promise, Power and Solidarity,” *Israel Law Review* 57, no. 1 (May 9, 2023): 1–33, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0021223723000031>.

is a necessary safeguard in a post-conflict society marked by political vetoes and rights regressions. This paper traces the political trajectory of the commitment to a Northern Ireland BoR, analyzes the sources of resistance, sets out the substantive case for its adoption, and concludes with concrete recommendations for coordinated action across devolved and sovereign levels of government.

From Agreement Commitment to Political Stalemate

The GFA committed the UK government to incorporating the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) into Northern Ireland law⁴. This was fulfilled through the Human Rights Act 1998. Within the GFA was also a commitment to establish the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC), tasked with leading the process for a new Northern Ireland BoR. The Northern Ireland BoR was envisioned as an ECHR+ model.

The process for a Northern Ireland BoR was launched in 2000, and the NIHRC submitted its advice to the UK government in 2008.⁵ The NIHRC's final advice included a range of rights, which some political parties⁶ and the Northern Ireland Office (NIO)⁷ disagreed with. Progress on a Northern Ireland BoR, therefore, stalled.

No further progress was made until 2020. The New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) agreement, a political deal to restore Northern Ireland's political institutions, included a commitment to form a Northern Ireland Assembly Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights to "consider the creation" of a Northern Ireland BoR that is "faithful" to the GFA in that it would contain rights supplementary to those included in the ECHR and reflect the "particular circumstances" of Northern Ireland.⁸ NDNA also stated that a panel of experts would be appointed jointly by the First Minister and deputy First Minister to assist the Committee with its work, its first task being to advise the Committee on what constitutes Northern Ireland's "particular circumstances."⁹

This work was hindered when the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) objected to one of the panelists.¹⁰ The Committee ultimately produced a report on the Northern Ireland BoR in 2022; however, political consensus could not be reached.¹¹ Four of the five main political parties supported the Bill, while the DUP opposed it. No further progress has been made since.

Sources of Political and Institutional Resistance

There are several reasons why the Northern Ireland BoR has not progressed. This section will outline and discuss several of them.

4 "Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement" (1998), <https://assets.ireland.ie/documents/good-friday-agreement.pdf>.

5 Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, "A Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland Advice to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland" (Belfast, Northern Ireland: Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, December 2008), <https://nihrc.org/assets/uploads/publications/bill-of-rights-for-northern-ireland-advice-to-secretary-state-2008.pdf>.

6 Colin Harvey, "Northern Ireland and a Bill of Rights for the United Kingdom" (United Kingdom: The British Academy, 2016), https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/129/NI_BOR_178_0.pdf.

7 Northern Ireland Office, "Consultation Paper: A BILL of RIGHTS for NORTHERN IRELAND: NEXT STEPS" (Belfast, Northern Ireland: Northern Ireland Office, 2009), <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/law/bor/nio301109bor.pdf>.

8 "New Decade New Approach Agreement," Annex E § 5.26 (2020).

9 Ibid, 5.27.

10 Equality Coalition, "Could Rights-Based Safeguards Make Stormont Functional?" (Belfast, Northern Ireland: Equality Coalition, 2024), <https://www.equalitycoalition.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Report-Stormont.pdf>.

11 Northern Ireland Assembly, "Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights" (Belfast, Northern Ireland: Northern Ireland Assembly, 2022), <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/committees/2017-2022/ad-hoc-bill-of-rights/reports/report-on-a-bill-of-rights/report-of-the-ad-hoc-committee-on-a-bill-of-rights.pdf>.

a. The Wording of the GFA

The GFA states that the rights included in the Northern Ireland BoR should reflect the “particular circumstances” of Northern Ireland. There has been much disagreement as to what the “particular circumstances” of Northern Ireland are.¹² Unionists tend to interpret the phrase narrowly, while nationalists adopt a broader interpretation.

b. Northern Ireland Political Party Views

Nationalist parties generally support an expansive NI BoR, including economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCRs). Unionist parties typically favor a more limited set of additional rights; however, there is no single unionist position on human rights.¹³ The Alliance party, which identifies as “other,”¹⁴ is in favor of a Northern Ireland BoR. When the work of the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee concluded in 2022, the DUP was the only major party opposed. This has not always been the case. At the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue in 1996, the DUP called for a Northern Ireland BoR, citing “all-party support” and stating that “there wouldn’t be a need to await the outcome of political talks.”¹⁵ The DUP also accused the UK government of “being afraid of the implications for the rest of the UK.”¹⁶ Unfortunately, the party’s stance has since shifted.

The BoR commitment has gradually shifted from being understood as an integral part of the peace settlement to being treated as a discretionary political choice. However, it is important to acknowledge that unionist and nationalist divisions are not always reflective of the views of the wider public.¹⁷

c. The Irish Government’s position

The Irish government has expressed support for a Northern Ireland BoR on several occasions. Former Taoiseach Brian Cowen mentioned its importance in 2009¹⁸ and former Tánaiste Eamon Gilmore also raised it several times between 2011 and 2013.¹⁹ Additionally, the Northern Ireland BoR was raised in the Dáil (Irish Parliament) several times in 2013,²⁰ in 2015²¹ and in 2017²², no concrete action was undertaken. The NI BoR has largely fallen off the Irish government’s radar in the last decade, despite its support for it. Unfortunately, the Irish government has not leveraged its role as GFA co-guarantor to press the UK government on this issue in recent times.

d. The UK Government’s position

The UK government, when challenged on its failure to introduce a Northern Ireland BoR, argues

12 Anne Smith and Leo Green, “The Processes of the ‘Unfinished Businesses’ of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement: An All-Island Charter of Rights and the Northern Ireland Bill of Rights” (Belfast, Northern Ireland: Ulster University, November 2018), <https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/en/publications/the-processes-of-the-unfinished-businesses-of-the-good-fridaybelf/>.

13 Colin Harvey and Anne Smith, “Designing Bills of Rights in Contested Contexts: Reflections on the Northern Ireland Experience,” *Fordham International Law Journal* 44, no. 2 (2020): 357–96, <https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/ilj/vol44/iss2/2/>.

14 For further information on Assembly designations, visit [here](https://www.assembly-ni.gov.uk/).

15 Ian Paisley Jr, “Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue.” in Anne Smith, Monica McWilliams, and Priyamvada Yarnell, “Political Capacity Building: Advancing a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland ” (Belfast, Northern Ireland: Ulster University, 2014), https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/58271/Advancing_a_BOR_NI.pdf.

16 Ibid.

17 Harvey and Smith, “Designing Bills of Rights in Contested Contexts: Reflections on the Northern Ireland Experience” at 392.

18 Anne Smith, Monica McWilliams, and Priyamvada Yarnell, “Political Capacity Building: Advancing a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland”.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, “Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland: Discussion,” https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/joint_committee_on_the_implementation_of_the_good_friday_agreement/2015-10-22/2/?highlight%5B0%5D=rights&highlight%5B1%5D=bill&highlight%5B2%5D=northern&highlight%5B3%5D=ireland.

22 Dáil Éireann, “Good Friday Agreement Debate,” <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2017-02-22/23/>.

that political consensus has not been reached.²³ However, the GFA does not make consensus a requirement for adopting the Northern Ireland BoR. The GFA was passed by referendum, meaning a majority of people in Northern Ireland voted in favor of it as part of the GFA. Polling also continues to show that the people of Northern Ireland support the Northern Ireland BoR.²⁴

Despite the UK government's failure to adopt a Northern Ireland BoR due to a 'lack of political consensus', this does not mean it has not stepped in before. For example, after the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination of Violence Against Women (CEDAW) reported that the UK government violates the rights of women by "unduly restricting their access to abortion,"²⁵ the Westminster Parliament voted to decriminalize abortion in Northern Ireland, in the absence of functioning institutions.²⁶ Additionally, commitments made in the NDNA were endorsed by all of Northern Ireland's main political parties; however, the Northern Ireland Assembly failed to introduce an Irish Language Commissioner and an Ulster Scots Commissioner, with the UK government instead passing the Identity and Language Act 2022 to "fulfill" these commitments. These examples clearly demonstrate that the UK government has previously stepped in to fulfill both international human rights law obligations and treaty obligations in the absence of a functioning government and political consensus. This precedent raises serious questions as to why the Northern Ireland BoR commitment, also rooted in international and treaty obligations, has been treated differently.

“Positive and enduring peace is not simply the absence of violence; it requires the eradication of systemic inequalities through sustained social, economic, and cultural reform.”

e. ESCRs and Enforceability

Much of the resistance to a Northern Ireland BoR has centered on the proposed inclusion of economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCRs). A common misconception is that ESCRs cannot be enshrined in law, as this would be an improper rebalancing of the separation of powers.²⁷ This argument ignores the fact that ESCR rights are enshrined in law in other jurisdictions. Moreover, the UK government has ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), so the ultimate goal should be to incorporate its obligations under this treaty into domestic law²⁸.

23 Most recently at its 7th examination of its compliance with ICESCR: UK Government, “UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 7th Examination of the UK Government’s Compliance with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).” (2025).

24 Human Rights Consortium, “A Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland: Polling Results” (Belfast, Northern Ireland: Human Rights Consortium, 2021), <https://www.humanrightsconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Bill-of-Rights-Poll-Results-Final-High-Res.pdf>.

25 United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, “Inquiry Concerning the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland under Article 8 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women” (United Nations, 2019), https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2FC%2FOP.8%2FGBR%2F3&Lang=en.

26 Had the institutions been functioning at this time, it is highly unlikely that abortion would have been decriminalized, due to intense division on this issue and the ability of parties to veto rights-based proposals.

27 Equality Coalition, “Written Submission to the NI Assembly Ad Hoc Committee on the Bill of Rights” (Belfast, Northern Ireland: Equality Coalition, 2020), Written Evidence to the NI Assembly Ad Hoc Committee on the Bill of Rights.

28 In fact, Article 2 of ICESCR specifically references legislative measures: “Each State Party to the present Covenant undertakes to take steps, individually and through international assistance and co-operation, especially economic and technical, to the maximum of

An additional misconception concerns the obligations that the inclusion of ESCR rights in a Northern Ireland BoR would place on the state. It is important to distinguish between positive and negative obligations. Positive obligations mean that public authorities must act proactively to protect and fulfill rights to prevent harm from occurring. Negative obligations require the government to refrain from infringing on an individual's rights. Enshrining ESCRs would involve these types of obligations, not an unlimited duty to provide services. For example, the right to housing does not mean the government must provide a house for everyone.²⁹ Rather, public authorities must take reasonable steps to prevent homelessness, ensure housing is provided based on objective need, guarantee equal and non-discriminatory access, and refrain from undue interference. This is very different from providing a house for every individual.³⁰

The Case for an NI BoR

There are many compelling reasons to fulfill this GFA commitment. While it is not possible to list all of them, this section outlines several key arguments.

a. Stabilization of Institutions

A Northern Ireland BoR is necessary to ensure the proper functioning of our institutions. In its absence, different mechanisms continue to be misused to hinder the advancement of rights:

•Petition of Concern (PoC)

The Petition of Concern is a mechanism that requires legislation to have support from both unionist and nationalist MLAs in Northern Ireland. This means that rather than needing just a simple majority to pass legislation, it must gain cross-community backing.³¹ Originally, the PoC was designed to protect minority rights as part of the GFA and was linked to the ECHR and the BoR.³² The intention was that if a PoC were tabled, an Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements would assess whether the measure violated the ECHR or the Northern Ireland BoR. In the absence of a Northern Ireland BoR, these provisions were never put in place³³. Instead, the PoC has been used for party-political purposes and to block legislation advancing equality and human rights³⁴. Even after reforms under NDNA, this mechanism continues to be misused.

•St Andrews Veto

The St Andrews Veto is a mechanism that mandates certain ministerial decisions to be reviewed by the full Executive when they are considered “significant or controversial.”³⁵ In such cases, a cross-community agreement among the parties is required. It's important to note that the criteria for what qualifies as “significant” or “controversial” are not tied to specific rights-based thresholds.³⁶

its available resources, with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of the rights recognized in the present Covenant by all appropriate means, including particularly the adoption of legislative measures.” “International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,” Part I, Article 2 § (1996), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Meaning both unionist and nationalist consent.

32 “Good Friday Agreement,” Strand 1, para 11 § (1998), <https://assets.ireland.ie/documents/good-friday-agreement.pdf>.

33 Daniel Holder, Caroline Arnold, and Delana Sobhani, “Stormont: From Rights-Based Safeguards to Political Vetoes – Has the Intention of the Good Friday Agreement Been Turned on Its Head?,” *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (December 12, 2025): 417–45, <https://doi.org/10.53386/nlq.v76i3.1192>.”

34 Equality Coalition, “Submission by the Equality Coalition to the Committee for the Assembly and Executive Review Committee’s Inquiry into Assembly and Executive Reform” (Belfast, Northern Ireland: Equality Coalition, 2025), <https://www.equalitycoalition.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Assembly-Executive-Review-Committee-submission.pdf>.

35 Equality Coalition, “Could Rights-Based Safeguards Make Stormont Functional?”

36 Ibid.

Additionally, if one party holds three ministerial positions, it may also require a cross-community vote on these decisions.³⁷ This veto has been used to block decisions on bilingual signage, early medical abortion services, and discussions surrounding same-sex marriage³⁸.

• Executive Agenda Veto

The First Minister and deputy First Minister must jointly agree on the Executive's agenda.³⁹ This prevents issues from even reaching discussion, which halts decision-making. Between December 2020 and June 2021, this mechanism was repeatedly used to prevent the Irish Language Strategy,⁴⁰ a legally required framework for protecting and promoting the Irish language, from being discussed.

The operation of these mechanisms demonstrates the structural vulnerability of rights within the current system. A Northern Ireland BoR would promote good governance and accountability by clarifying minimum protections for all communities, reducing the incentive to use institutional vetoes, and ensuring that governance is guided by objective legal standards rather than political veto.⁴¹

b. Democratic Resilience and the ECHR

In a time of rights erosion worldwide, the need for a Northern Ireland BoR is becoming increasingly evident. There is now a serious possibility of the UK withdrawing from the ECHR, which would have uniquely destabilizing consequences for Northern Ireland.⁴² This is because the Convention is not merely an external legal instrument, but a foundational element of the GFA.⁴³ The ECHR was incorporated into Northern Ireland law as a safeguard against abuse of power. It also serves as a confidence-building measure between Northern Ireland's different communities, which was especially important following three decades of conflict. If the UK left the ECHR, it could undermine the GFA by weakening Northern Ireland's rights architecture. It would also strain the UK's international relations⁴⁴ and would be a breach of trust to the people of Northern Ireland.⁴⁵

A Northern Ireland BoR would enhance democratic resilience by establishing clear legal protections for fundamental rights. It would ensure that ECHR rights and additional rights reflecting Northern Ireland's specific context cannot be weakened by shifting political priorities.

37 Ministers who designate as 'other' do not have a vote here. For further information on Assembly designations, visit here. Ibid.

38 Committee on the Administration of Justice, "Written Evidence to the HC Public Bill Committee on the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill the Petition of Concern and Stormont's Other Safeguards and Vetoes" (Belfast, Northern Ireland: Committee on the Administration of Justice, 2021), <https://caj.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Written-evidence-NI-Ministers-Elections-and-PoC-Bill-June-21.pdf>

39 "Northern Ireland Ministerial Code," 2006, <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-executive-ministerial-code>.

40 Conradh na Gaeilge's Application (no 2) (Northern Ireland High Court 2022).

41 Equality Coalition, "Could Rights-Based Safeguards Make Stormont Functional?"

42 Colin Murray and Aoife O'Donoghue, "The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement 1998 & European Convention on Human Rights: Explainer," ed. Committee on the Administration of Justice (Belfast, Northern Ireland: Committee on the Administration of Justice, 2025), <https://caj.org.uk/publications/reports/the-belfast-good-friday-agreement-1998-european-convention-on-human-rights-explainer/?highlight=gfa>.

43 Alice Donald and Joelle Grogan, "The European Convention on Human Rights and the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement," *UK in a Changing Europe* (blog), 2025, <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/explainers/the-european-convention-on-human-rights-and-the-belfast-good-friday-agreement/>.

44 Murray and O'Donoghue, "The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement 1998 & European Convention on Human Rights: Explainer.

45 Human Rights Consortium, "A Dangerous Game: Why Attacks on the ECHR Threaten Peace in Northern Ireland," 2025, <https://www.humanrightsconsortium.org/a-dangerous-game-why-attacks-on-the-echr-threaten-peace-in-northern-ireland/>.

Without a BoR in place, Northern Ireland has been vulnerable to shifts in political priorities at Westminster. A clear example is the enactment of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 by the UK Conservative government. This faced widespread opposition across Northern Ireland, including from all five main political parties, victims' and families' organizations, human rights groups, and much of the wider public. The Act was also found to be incompatible with parts of the ECHR. While the new Labour (UK) government has worked closely with the Irish government and developed a Joint Framework on Legacy, problems still remain. Had a Northern Ireland BoR been in place, however, it could have provided a safeguard against such legislation being imposed on Northern Ireland without adequate protection for human rights.

Another well-known example concerns the UK Home Office's decision to treat people born in Northern Ireland as "British" for statutory purposes, which is not compliant with the GFA.⁴⁶ This approach was used to prevent Northern Ireland-born Irish citizens exercising EU rights tied to Irish citizenship, particularly the right to be joined by close family members.⁴⁷ The UK Home Office argued that individuals born in Northern Ireland would need to formally renounce British citizenship to rely on these rights as Irish citizens.⁴⁸ Had a Northern Ireland BoR been in place, it is unlikely that this issue would have arisen. This illustrates the fragility of protections derived from the GFA when they are not reinforced by a stronger domestic safeguard, such as a Northern Ireland BoR.

c. Peacebuilding

While the Northern Ireland BoR would not be a panacea,⁴⁹ its adoption could make a meaningful contribution to peacebuilding, especially if it included ESCRs. In discussions of peacebuilding and human rights, the focus is often on civil and political rights, and ESCRs are often sidelined. Human rights, however, are indivisible. Civil and political rights, and economic, social, and cultural rights, are interconnected and interdependent, and should not be placed in a hierarchical order. No right exists in isolation; the denial of one right can undermine the realization of others.

ESCRs are also integral to the protection of peace. Research shows that shortcomings in ESCR protection (such as inequalities in housing, education, employment, and access to public services) can act as root causes of conflict and as factors that contribute to its continuation.⁵⁰ When communities experience persistent socio-economic exclusion or unequal access to resources, discrimination in the provision of essential services, such as healthcare and housing, can deepen social divisions, undermine public confidence in government, and weaken the conditions necessary for long-term reconciliation.⁵¹ Positive and enduring peace is not simply the absence of violence; it requires the eradication of systemic inequalities through sustained social, economic, and cultural reform.⁵² For that reason, placing ESCRs on a firm legal footing tailored to Northern Ireland through a BoR is a necessary step. Such a framework could significantly contribute to peacebuilding by

46 Equality Coalition, "Written Submission to the NI Assembly Ad Hoc Committee on the Bill of Rights".

47 Equality Coalition, "Written Submission to the NI Assembly Ad Hoc Committee on the Bill of Rights".

48 De Souza (Good Friday Agreement: nationality) [2019] UKUT 355. (2019).

49 Anne Smith, Monica McWilliams, and Priyamvada Yarnell, "Political Capacity Building: Advancing a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland" (Belfast, Northern Ireland: Ulster University, 2014), https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/58271/Advancing_a_BOR_NI.pdf.

50 Amanda Cahill-Ripley, "Submission to the Northern Ireland Assembly Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights: Human Rights and Peacebuilding" (Belfast, Northern Ireland: Northern Ireland Assembly, 2021), <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/2017-2022/ad-hoc-committee-on-a-bill-of-rights/written-briefings/dr.-amanda-cahill-ripley/>.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

addressing structural inequalities and laying the groundwork for the broader societal transformation that meaningful and lasting peace requires.

d. Minority Rights Protections

Northern Ireland has changed demographically since the GFA was signed, and the traditional majority-minority framing no longer withstands scrutiny.⁵³ The NIHRC in its 2008 advice included the following provision: “Public authorities must fully respect, on the basis of equality of treatment, the identity and ethos of both main communities in Northern Ireland.”⁵⁴ The qualification that “No one relying on this provision may do so in a manner inconsistent with the rights and freedoms of others”⁵⁵ was also an important inclusion in the advice, one which would protect the rights of linguistic and ethnic minorities. This is particularly significant, given ongoing concerns in unionist communities about the protection and preservation of identity. This underscores the fact that the Northern Ireland BoR would benefit all communities, not just one particular community. As demographics change continues, a Northern Ireland BoR can protect the rights of all communities in an inclusive and balanced way.

Why Now?

Almost three decades after the signing of the GFA, the time to fulfill the GFA commitment is now. There are several key reasons for this. Northern Ireland’s political parties are refocusing on Assembly reform, and UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer recently said he would be happy to discuss any proposals for reform.⁵⁶ This conversation is undoubtedly tied to the Northern Ireland BoR. For example, one of the key asks of some political parties is to repeal the St Andrews Veto; however, the veto must be replaced with a mechanism that would provide Northern Ireland’s institutions a more sustainable foundation, which would be the Northern Ireland BoR. Moreover, for the Petition of Concern to function as intended, a Northern Ireland BoR must be in place.

Additionally, with the possibility of the UK government withdrawing from the ECHR all too real, there is an urgent need to future-proof the rights of people in Northern Ireland so they cannot be infringed. With cross-community and cross-party support for a Northern Ireland BoR, the requirement for the Northern Ireland BoR is also linked to this conversation. In this context, advancing it now would strengthen Northern Ireland’s constitutional stability.

Lastly, constitutional change in Northern Ireland is a live issue, and there is also a possibility that a referendum for a united Ireland could be called. For those who wish to remain in the UK, advancing a Northern Ireland BoR would provide assurances to all communities and signal a commitment to protecting fundamental rights.

The Road Ahead

While legislating for a Northern Ireland BoR ultimately rests with the UK government, responsibility is also shared by the Irish government as co-guarantor of the GFA and by the Northern Ireland Assembly, which

53 Equality Coalition, “Written Submission to the NI Assembly Ad Hoc Committee on the Bill of Rights” (Belfast, Northern Ireland: Equality Coalition, 2020), Written Evidence to the NI Assembly Ad Hoc Committee on the Bill of Rights.

54 Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, “A Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland Advice to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland” (Belfast, Northern Ireland: Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, December 2008), <https://nihrc.org/assets/uploads/publications/bill-of-rights-for-northern-ireland-advice-to-secretary-state-2008.pdf>.

55 Ibid.

56 James Martin McCarthy, “Commons to Debate ‘Merits’ of Reforming Stormont,” Belfast Live, January 11, 2026, <https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/commons-debate-merits-reforming-stormont-33207782>.

can help generate political momentum and institutional preparedness. Delivering a BoR, therefore, requires coordinated action across these actors.

Northern Ireland Assembly

- **Adopt a Cross-Party Motion**

MLAs should adopt a cross-party motion reaffirming support for a Northern Ireland BoR that includes economic, social, and cultural rights, and recognizes NIHRC's 2008 advice as a foundational starting point. While such motions are not legally binding, adopting one would formally signal renewed political intent and acknowledge that a Northern Ireland BoR is an outstanding commitment of the GFA.

- **Repeal the St Andrews Veto**

The Northern Ireland Assembly should advocate for the St Andrews Veto to be repealed and replaced with a Northern Ireland BoR.

- **Structured Engagement with the UK Government**

MLAs should raise the implementation of a BoR through structured engagement with the UK government. This includes mandating the First Minister and deputy First Minister to place the issue on the agenda of meetings with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, as well as using committee processes and parliamentary channels to seek clarity on the UK government's proposed timeline.

- **Commission Updated Expert Advice**

The Assembly should request updated advice from the NIHRC on the content of a BoR, taking into account Brexit, socio-economic developments, and evolving rights standards across the UK.

- **Public Engagement Programme**

The Assembly should work in partnership with the NIHRC and civil society to develop and commence a structured public engagement program. This should provide accessible information, address common misconceptions, and emphasize the universality and practical relevance of human rights to everyday governance. It should significantly build on the public awareness campaign that NIHRC carried out in the early 2000s, and look to engagement models from other post-conflict societies, such as South Africa,⁵⁷ for guidance.

Irish Government

- **UK-Irish Policy Framework**

The Irish government should encourage the UK government to develop and adopt a policy framework that clarifies how each government views its joint role in implementing the GFA obligations⁵⁸.

- **Raise the Issue through the British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference**

The Irish government should publicly reaffirm its commitment to the fulfillment of the GFA and formally place the Bill of Rights on the BIIGC agenda, framing it as unfinished Agreement business and reinforcing its status within the peace settlement architecture.

- **Provision of Funding**

The Irish government should provide funding to support public engagement initiatives and awareness

57 Rachel Murray, "The Importance of a Bill of Rights in Northern Ireland as a Process: Comparative Reflections from South Africa," *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly* 52, no. 3-4 (July 15, 2020): 385–406, <https://doi.org/10.53386/nllq.v52i3-4.678>.

58 Anne Smith and Monica McWilliams, "Ensuring a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland Remains on the Political Agenda" (Belfast, Northern Ireland: Ulster University, 2015), <https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/en/publications/ensuring-a-bill-of-rights-for-northern-ireland-remains-on-the-pol-3/>.

campaigns regarding the Northern Ireland BoR.

UK Government

- **Adopt a UK-Irish GFA Implementation Framework**

The UK government should work with the Irish government to adopt an agreed framework for implementing the GFA commitments.

- **Public Reaffirmation of the NI BoR Commitment**

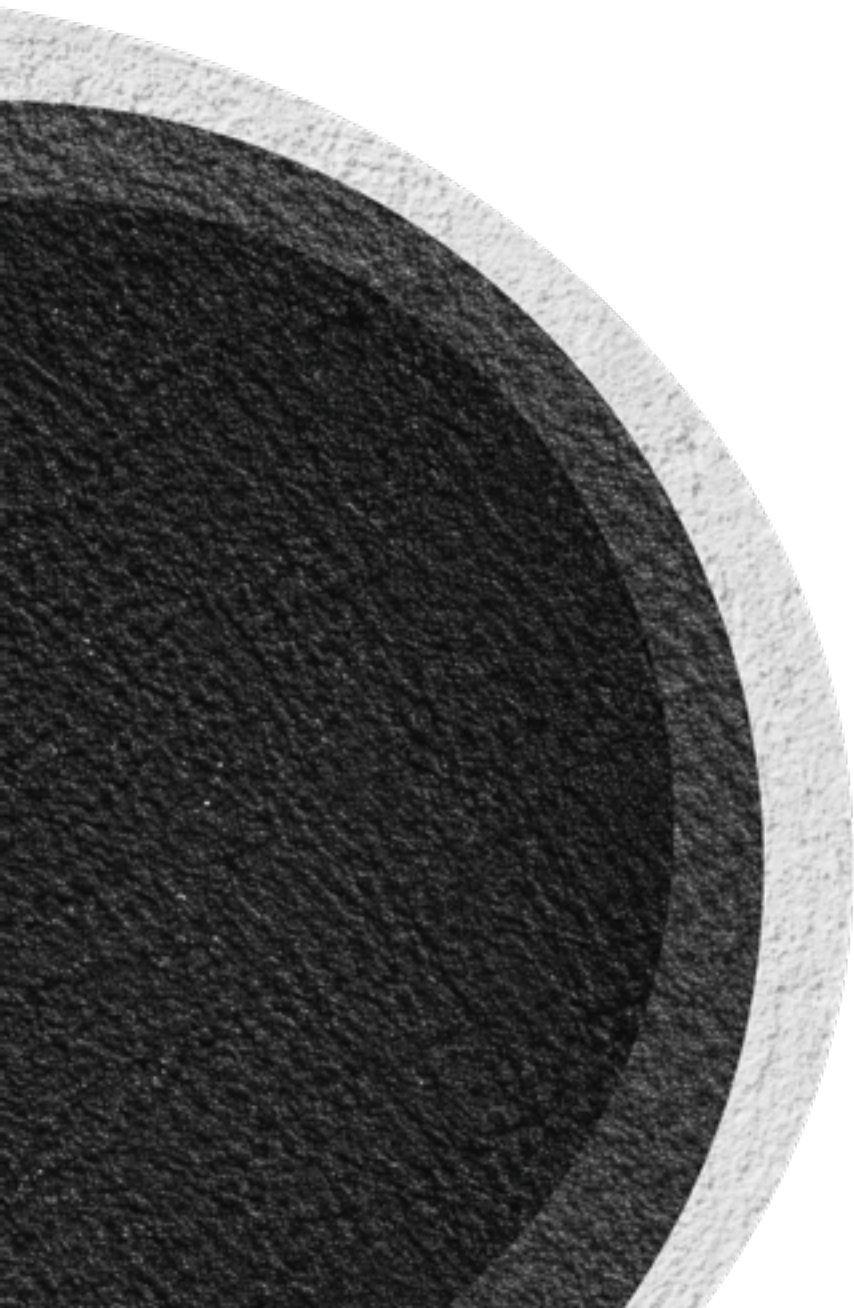
The UK government should publicly reaffirm its commitment to advancing a Northern Ireland BoR that is inclusive of ESCRs, and that includes rights additional to those in the ECHR.

- **Create a Roadmap for Implementation**

The UK government, in consultation with Northern Ireland political parties and civil society, should develop a roadmap for advancing the Northern Ireland BoR. The roadmap should include a timetable for consultation, scrutiny, and enactment.

- **Appointment of an Independent Human Rights Panel**

The UK government should appoint a panel of independent human rights experts familiar with the circumstances in Northern Ireland to help develop the Northern Ireland BoR. The appointment of these experts should not be subject to political veto.



Dara Keeve

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Dara Keeve is a Policy and Legal Officer at Northern Ireland's leading human rights NGO, the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ). Residing in Belfast, Dara has dedicated her career to promoting justice, peaceful institutions, and human rights, with a focus on safeguarding the peace process, socio-economic rights, and democratic governance.

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Dara has represented CAJ at both the United Nations and the Council of Europe Committees. Prior to joining CAJ, she was an Account Executive at a public affairs agency. Her career also includes a position as Referral Coordinator at ASSIST NI, supporting victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse.

Dara is a dedicated board member of the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network and the Irish medium education oversight body, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, and an alumna of the Boardroom Apprentice programme.

Farms, Fuel, and the Future:

Unlocking Northern Ireland's Biomethane Potential

by Daniel Toft

Executive Summary

Northern Ireland stands at a strategic crossroads. With a livestock-intensive agriculture base, pressing climate obligations, and continued dependence on imported fossil gas, the region possesses all the necessary ingredients to become a world leader in farm-based biomethane production. The very organic materials that currently contribute to emissions represent a powerful, underutilized renewable energy resource. Anaerobic digestion allows farms to convert slurry and agricultural residues into dispatchable renewable gas, clean electricity, heat, and nutrient-rich digestate. When deployed at scale, biomethane can simultaneously reduce methane emissions, strengthen farm incomes, enhance nutrient management, and improve energy security. The opportunity is fundamentally structural, and what is required now is coordinated policy leadership to unlock this potential at scale.

With the right framework, agriculture can move from being seen solely as an emissions challenge to becoming a cornerstone of Northern Ireland's renewable energy infrastructure. Biomethane offers not just compliance with climate targets, but also economic resilience, rural growth, and energy independence.

The key recommendations include:

- Formalize and empower the Inter-Departmental Biomethane Working Group with full Executive and external stakeholder participation.
- Publish a dedicated Northern Ireland biomethane strategy with clear milestones for 2030 and 2035.
- Secure inclusion in the UK Green Gas Support Scheme, or establish a Northern Ireland-specific revenue support mechanism.
- Streamline planning and permitting for farm-scale anaerobic digestion projects.
- Enable timely and cost-effective grid and gas network access for renewable gas injection.
- Establish an "Innovation Farm" network to showcase operational success and accelerate adoption.

Introduction

Northern Ireland (NI)'s climate and energy debate is often framed in terms of constraint. Agriculture must reduce emissions. Energy systems must decarbonise. Public finances must absorb costs. Yet this framing obscures a far more constructive reality: NI possesses, within its existing agricultural structure, a significant, underutilised renewable energy resource. The region's farming model is characterized by smaller, owner-occupied, livestock-intensive, grass-based farms deeply embedded in rural communities. Dairy, beef, and sheep production dominate land use and economic output. This structure, therefore, contributes to comparatively high methane emissions, primarily from enteric fermentation and slurry storage. However, those same organic materials that generate methane emissions also provide a substantial and reliable feedstock for renewable energy production through Anaerobic Digestion (AD).

At present, much of the policy conversation positions agriculture primarily as a sector requiring mitigation. While emissions reduction is essential, this singular framing risks overlooking agriculture's capacity to contribute actively to the energy transition. Slurry is a biological resource, not just a compliance issue. When processed through AD, it produces biomethane, a renewable gas capable of injection into the natural gas grid, electricity generation, and heat, and of displacing important fossil fuels¹. NI faces structural energy vulnerabilities, as the region imports the majority of its fossil gas and remains exposed to international market volatility. Recent geopolitical shocks have underscored the fragility of external energy dependence, especially for rural businesses that face domestic commodity price swings. Strengthening homegrown energy production is therefore an environmental, economic, and strategic imperative.

Despite clear technical maturity and a strong feedstock base, deployment in NI remains limited. The barriers are institutional: fragmented governance, planning complexity, infrastructure constraints, and financial uncertainty have stalled momentum. Meanwhile, other European nations have developed coherent biomethane strategic and support mechanisms to scale production. This paper argues that NI's agricultural structure should not be viewed as a climate liability, but as an opportunity waiting to be unlocked. With coordinated policy leadership, support mechanisms, and cross-departmental integration, biomethane can become a central pillar of the region's climate, energy, and rural development strategy.

Research Context & Background

a. Northern Ireland's Agricultural and Emissions Profile

NI's agricultural system is structurally distinct from that of the rest of the the United Kingdom (UK). It is livestock-intensive, export-oriented, and heavily dependent on grass-based production. Dairy, beef, and sheep enterprises generally dominate land use, with grassland accounting for the majority of agricultural area. This structure creates economic value but also results in comparatively high per capita methane emissions from enteric fermentation and slurry storage.²

Agriculture represents a significant share of Northern Ireland's total greenhouse gas emissions, a far higher proportion than other UK regions³. Unlike energy or industry, however, agricultural emissions are more difficult to abate through simple technological substitution. Livestock production cannot be electrified in the way that transport or heating systems can, and as a result, reducing methane and managing nutrients more efficiently are central to meeting climate obligations.

At the same time, Northern Ireland imports much of its energy and remains dependent on fossil gas and on external electricity generation, leaving it exposed to global price volatility and supply disruptions⁴. Rural areas, in particular, face high energy costs and limited infrastructure options. As such, this dual reality of high agricultural methane output and high energy import dependence creates a structural opportunity, as the same organic materials that contribute to emissions also represent a significant renewable energy feedstock.

b. What is Anaerobic Digestion and Biomethane?

AD is a biological process in which microorganisms break down organic material in the absence

1 Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, *Future Policy Framework for Biomethane Production: Call for Evidence* (London: Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, February 29, 2024), <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65df46d5f1cab36b60fc4725/biomethane-production-call-for-evidence.pdf>.

2 Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, "Ammonia Emissions in Northern Ireland," accessed March 13, 2026, <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/ammonia-emissions-northern-ireland>

3 Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, "Northern Ireland Greenhouse Gas Statistics 1990–2023 Released," June 10, 2025, <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/news/northern-ireland-greenhouse-gas-statistics-1990-2023-released>

4 UK Parliament, "Written Evidence (Reference 68466)," Committees, accessed March 5, 2026, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/68466/html/>

of oxygen. On farms, this material typically includes cattle slurry, poultry litter, silage, and other residues. The digestion process produces two primary outputs: biogas and digestate.⁵

Biogas is composed mainly of methane and carbon dioxide. When upgraded by removing impurities and excess carbon dioxide, it becomes biomethane, which is a renewable gas that can be injected into the natural gas network or used directly as fuel. Biomethane can generate electricity through Combined Heat Power (CHP) systems, provide on-site heating, or be used as a transport fuel⁶.

Digestate is a nutrient-rich material remaining after digestion. It contains nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium in more plant-available forms than untreated slurry. When managed correctly, digestate can reduce reliance on synthetic fertilisers and support more precise nutrient application on farms⁷.

Biomethane is dispatchable and storable, enabling continuous production and use when needed, making it complementary to intermittent renewable energy sources⁸. This characteristic makes biomethane particularly relevant in systems seeking energy security and flexibility.

c. Climate and Energy Policy Landscape

The Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 establishes legally binding targets for greenhouse gas reduction. Achieving these targets requires emissions reductions across all sectors, including agriculture. Policy discussions have increasingly focused on ammonia reduction and herd efficiency. However, less emphasis has been placed on converting agricultural byproducts into energy assets.

In parallel, NI's energy strategy seeks to increase renewable electricity generation and improve energy security. Wind energy plays a dominant role in renewable production, but grid congestion and curtailment remain persistent challenges. Additional dispatchable renewable sources could help stabilise supply and reduce or eliminate reliance on imported gas.

Biomethane occupies a unique position at the intersection of the energy policy debate. It contributes simultaneously to emissions reductions and climate targets, renewable energy generation, development of additional renewable enterprises on farms, and nutrient management. In other European jurisdictions, including the Republic of Ireland and Denmark, national biomethane strategies have been developed to scale production and integrate renewable gas into existing networks. Northern Ireland has yet to adopt a comparable coordinated framework.

d. Existing Barriers to Deployment

Despite the technical maturity of AD, deployment in NI remains limited relative to potential feedstock availability. Several barriers contribute to this gap.

First, there is no dedicated NI Biomethane Strategy yet. Policy responsibilities are fragmented across generally siloed departments, with the Department for Agriculture, Environment, and Rural Affairs (DAERA) responsible for agriculture and the environment, the Department for the Economy (DfE) responsible for energy policy, and the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) responsible for infrastructure. Without a coordinated roadmap that brings together all relevant Executive departments and external stakeholders, investment confidence remains constrained.

Second, planning processes for on-farm AD can be lengthy and uncertain. Developers face

5 Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, "Anaerobic Digestion," Farm Practices Survey February 2023: Greenhouse Gas Mitigation, June 8, 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/farm-practices-survey-february-2023-greenhouse-gas-mitigation/anaerobic-digestion>

6 International Energy Agency, *Outlook for Biogas and Biomethane* (Paris: International Energy Agency, 2025), <https://www.iea.org/reports/outlook-for-biogas-and-biomethane>.

7 Environment Agency and Waste & Resources Action Programme, "Quality Protocol: Anaerobic Digestate – End of Waste Criteria for the Production and Use of Quality Outputs from Anaerobic Digestion of Source-Segregated Biodegradable Waste" (London: Environment Agency and WRAP, 2014), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68e7929db6ae95e3c7690785/Withdrawn_QP_Anaerobic_Digestate.pdf

8 National Grid, "What Is Biogas?," *Energy Explained*, February 23, 2023, <https://www.nationalgrid.com/stories/energy-explained/what-is-biogas>.

complex environmental assessments, grid connection negotiations, and consultation with communities, often in opposition to the scheme. Recent local opposition to a plant in Derry-Londonderry and the forced closure of another by the PAC in the same region have cast doubt on the industry.

Third, grid access and gas injection capacity are constrained across Northern Ireland. Renewable electricity projects often face delays due to network capacity limitations. Similarly, clear regulatory pathways for small-scale gas injection are undeveloped.

Fourth, financial uncertainty has dampened investment in the industry. The RHI scheme legacy has made policymakers cautious about support mechanisms, while farmers remain wary of regulatory volatility in the space. Capital costs for AD infrastructure are high, and long-term revenue certainty is essential to secure finance.

Finally, the biomethane policy remains insufficiently integrated with broader nutrient management frameworks. Regulations on digestate, ammonia targets, and water quality rules are often considered in isolation from renewable energy objectives. This approach limits opportunities for environmental gains and calls for a coordinated policy linking energy, nutrient, and water management

Argument & Analysis

a. Reframing Agriculture: From Emissions Source to Energy Infrastructure

Northern Ireland's climate debate often casts agriculture as an emissions problem. While emissions reduction is critical across all sectors, this perspective overlooks agriculture's potential as an energy source. Livestock farming produces large volumes of organic material, and slurry storage emits methane as it decomposes. AD captures that methane before it escapes, converting it into renewable gas. In other words, the very same biological process that generates emissions can also produce renewable energy.

This reframing is crucial, as if agriculture is viewed solely as a compliance challenge, policy will emphasize restrictions. However, if it is recognized as distributed renewable energy infrastructure, policy can support both emissions reduction and energy production at the same time.

On-farm AD allows farms to transform unavoidable byproducts into biomethane, electricity, and heat. Rather than treating methane as a liability, AD converts it into an economic asset, shifting agriculture from a perceived barrier to climate action to a central contributor.

The strategic opportunity is structural, not marginal. Northern Ireland has a consistent, reliable feedstock base embedded across rural communities, and unlocking this resource depends on coordinated policy rather than new technology.

b. Enterprise Diversification and Rural Economic Stability

Farm income in Northern Ireland remains vulnerable to commodity price volatility, input cost shocks, and international market pressure. While there has been an overall upward trend since 1998, the TIF calculation shows peaks and troughs in NI-wide farm income, highlighting volatility experienced by farm businesses on the ground.

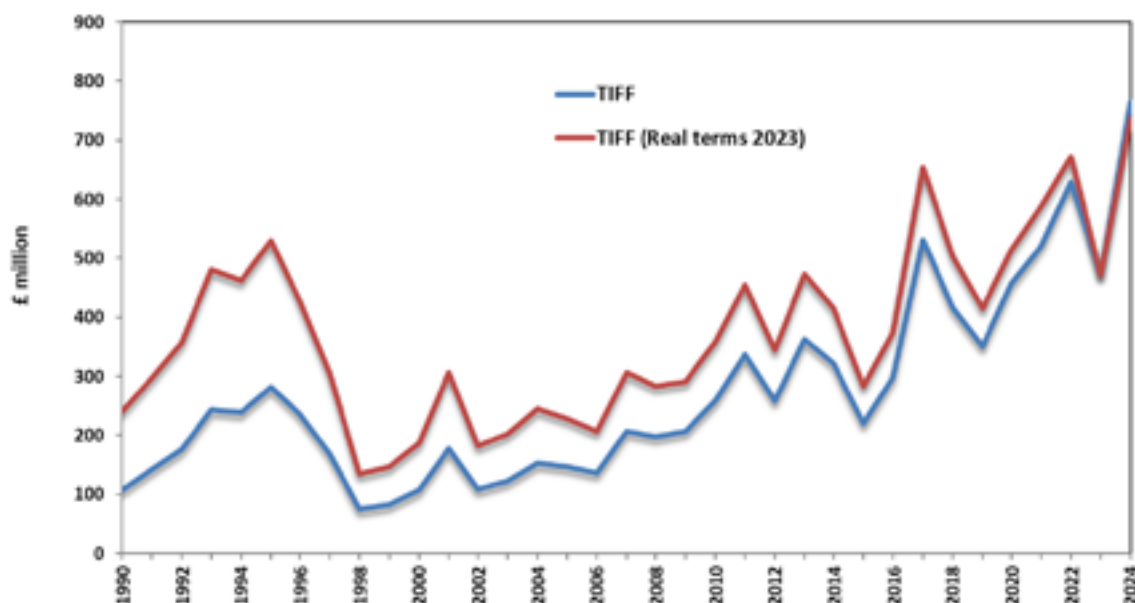


Figure 1: Total Income from Farming (1990-2024)⁹

Further, energy price spikes in recent years, largely driven by the war in Ukraine, have highlighted the vulnerability of rural businesses to global supply disruptions.

On-farm AD offers enterprise diversification rooted in existing farm systems, as slurry and residues are already abundant in NI. The digester simply captures additional value from those materials. Biomethane injection, electricity export, and on-site heat generation create revenue streams that are more predictable than commodity markets, or reduce reliance on the farm business on the existing NI electricity or gas grid.

Long-term power purchase agreements or renewable gas contracts can provide stable cash flow, improving the borrowing capacity of farms and strengthening their balance sheets. This stability supports generational renewal and encourages long-term investment in farm infrastructure.

Importantly, particularly to the farming sector, on-farm AD does not require reducing livestock output to generate income. It complements existing enterprises rather than replacing them, strengthening resilience without forcing a fundamental change in the operations of farming operations or commodities. Beyond the individual farm, the construction and maintenance of AD systems stimulate rural engineering, electrical, and technical employment, with the economic multiplier effect remaining largely local, particularly if AD is rolled out across multiple farms in the same area. In contrast, expenditure on imported fossil gas largely leaves the region.. At its core, energy production anchored in family farms keeps more economic value within rural communities.

c. Nutrient Management and Environmental Integration

Nutrient management is a central policy concern in NI, particularly regarding phosphorus accumulation and ammonia emissions. Agricultural regulations are tightening, especially under the proposed NAP, while pressure from the public is growing. This is driven in part by recurring blue-green algae blooms at Lough Neagh year on year, linked to excess nutrient runoff in the Lough.

AD does not remove nutrients from the system; rather, it changes how they are managed. Digestate contains nitrogen in more plant-available forms and can be applied more precisely, especially when combined with low-emission spreading technologies. Solid-liquid separation enables improved

9 Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, "Northern Ireland Agricultural Incomes 2024," June 26, 2025, <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/news/northern-ireland-agricultural-incomes-2024>

nutrient planning, more controlled application, or nutrient export. When aligned with modern nutrient accounting systems, AD can improve nitrogen use efficiency, reduce reliance on synthetic fertilisers, drastically lower methane emissions from slurry storage, and support ammonia mitigation strategies.

d. Energy Security and System Stability

NI imports the majority of its gas and remains exposed to global energy volatility¹⁰. While renewable electricity generation, particularly wind, has expanded significantly, intermittency and grid congestion remain challenges.

Biomethane offers dispatchable renewable energy. It can be stored, injected into the gas grid, or used directly when required. Unlike wind and solar, it is not weather-dependent. This flexibility strengthens system resilience and complements existing renewable capacity.

In addition, renewable gas provides a decarbonization pathway for sectors that are difficult to electrify, including heavy transport and certain agricultural machinery. Electrification alone will not fully address energy demand across the economy. Every unit of biomethane produced locally reduces fossil fuel imports, supporting energy security and climate goals.

e. Distributed vs Centralized Models: Why On-Farm Deployment Fits Northern Ireland

Both centralized regional AD plants and distributed on-farm systems have roles to play. However, NI's agricultural structure and rural geography favor a distributed model. On-farm AD offers several key advantages.

First, feedstock security is inherent as slurry is produced daily and does not require long-distance transport or contractual aggregation. This reduces logistical complexity and diesel consumption.

Second, nutrient cycles remain localised. Digestate can be applied to the same land base from which the feedstock originated. This improves accountability and simplifies compliance.

Third, economic value remains within the farm business. In regional models, farmers often supply feedstock but do not own the energy asset, or are lumped into cooperatives. A distributed approach strengthens individual enterprise resilience.

Regional AD plants may benefit from economies of scale and professionalised management, particularly for municipal or urban organic waste streams. However, relying solely on centralised infrastructure risks creating bottlenecks in siting, planning approval, and feedstock competition.

A distributed network of farm-based digesters spreads risk, enhances system resilience, and aligns with NI's predominance of small- to medium-sized family farms. The most strategically coherent approach is complementary: regional plants where appropriate, but a primary focus on calling farm-level deployment.

f. Why Deployment has Stalled

Despite clear technical viability, on-farm AD has not scaled in Northern Ireland. The barriers are

“Northern Ireland’s climate and energy debate is often framed in terms of constraint... Yet this framing obscures a far more constructive reality: NI possesses, within its existing agricultural structure, a significant, underutilised renewable energy resource.”

10 UK Parliament, “Written Evidence (Reference 68466),” Committees, accessed March 5, 2026, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/68466/html/>

institutional rather than technical.

Planning processes remain complex and uncertain. Environmental assessments, grid connection negotiations, and regulatory approvals create extended timelines, and without predictable decision-making, financial modeling becomes difficult. Grid and gas infrastructure constraints further complicate development, as export capacity is not guaranteed and connection timelines are often opaque.

The lack of a joined-up policy reduces investor confidence in the space. Responsibilities are divided across departments responsible for agriculture, energy, infrastructure, and the environment. Without a unified biomethane strategy in which all departments can 'own,' long-term direction remains unclear.

Finally, the legacy of previous renewable support schemes has created political caution, as well as the lack of a replacement for the ROCs scheme. However, avoiding policy design mistakes does not require policy paralysis; it requires a disciplined scheme with clear cost controls and oversight.

Northern Ireland has the feedstock base, technical capability, and willing farmers. What is lacking is a coordinated policy architecture.

Policy Recommendations

Northern Ireland has the structural conditions necessary to scale biomethane production: a livestock-intensive agricultural base, clear climate obligations, and a pressing need for greater energy security. What is currently missing is a coordinated policy architecture to unlock on-farm AD, as this requires alignment across departments, regulatory clarity, financial certainty, and visible leadership. The following recommendations provide a roadmap to unleashing biomethane in Northern Ireland.

a. Strengthen the Inter-Departmental Biomethane Working Group

The establishment of an Inter-Departmental Biomethane Working Group represents an important first step. However, to move from discussion to delivery, the group must be formalized, empowered, and broadened. Full representation is essential, including DfE, DAERA, DfI, Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), the Utility Regulator (UR), and relevant network operators. Given that biomethane intersects energy policy, agricultural regulation, planning, and environmental compliance, all decision-making bodies must be represented at the senior level.

In addition, structured engagement or participation with external stakeholders is necessary to build and secure buy-in. Farming representatives such as the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) and the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association (NIAPA), existing anaerobic digestion operators, and industry bodies such as the Anaerobic Digestion and Bioresources Association (ADBA), financial institutions, academic partners, and environmental stakeholders should be included or extensively consulted. The group should be specifically tasked not merely with coordination, but with identifying and removing specific regulatory and administrative barriers within defined timeframes.

b. Publish a Northern Ireland Biomethane Strategy with Clear Milestones

NI remains one of the few European jurisdictions without a dedicated biomethane strategy. In the absence of a coherent roadmap, investment confidence remains weak and deployment fragmented. A NI Biomethane Strategy should be published shortly, setting out production ambitions for 2030 and 2035, supported by interim milestones.

The strategy should identify the preferred deployment model, with distributed on-farm AD forming the backbone of development, complemented by regional plants where appropriate. It should map feedstock availability, outline infrastructure requirements, and establish clear sustainability principles to prevent unintended consequences such as excessive reliance on dedicated energy crops. Most importantly, the strategy must integrate energy, agriculture, and environmental objectives into a unified framework, rather than allowing policy silos to persist.

c. Establish Revenue Certainty and a Support Scheme

NI is one of the very few European regions without a biomethane support scheme¹¹, and scaling biomethane requires long-term revenue certainty. The current UK Green Gas Support Scheme (GGSS) applies to Great Britain only and does not cover NI. This structural exclusion places NI at a competitive disadvantage and discourages early investment. The Executive should engage with the UK Government to secure NI's inclusion in the GGSS or any successor scheme. If inclusion is not achieved, NI should design and implement its own biomethane support mechanism.

Any support scheme must incorporate lessons from previous renewable energy policy design failures. Budget caps, transparent tariff digression, strong sustainability criteria, and phased rollout mechanisms are essential. The objective is not to replicate past mistakes but to provide disciplined, predictable support for projects to reach financial close. Without bankable revenue frameworks, capital-intensive farm-scale AD projects will not proceed at scale as they may be commercially unviable immediately until the production market develops, and finance for such projects will not be readily available.

d. Reform Planning and Permitting Frameworks for Farm-Scale AD

Planning and permitting uncertainty remains a significant deterrent to investment. Farm-scale AD should be recognised as strategic green infrastructure that contributes to climate targets and nutrient management objectives. Clear planning guidance specific to on-farm AD would improve consistency across councils and reduce delays.

e. Enable Grid and Gas Network Access

Infrastructure readiness is critical to the success of AD. Renewable electricity projects already face grid capacity constraints¹², and biomethane injection pathways will require clearer standards and streamlined processes. The Executive must work with network operators, such as Mutual Energy, to ensure the gas grid has a framework for biomethane transmission.

f. Establish an Innovation Farms Network

Adoption will not occur at scale without a visible demonstration of the technology in action. Capital investment in AD is substantial, and farmers will require evidence of operational viability under NI conditions. Therefore, a network of Innovation Farms should be established, geographically dispersed across NI. Rather than creating abstract showcase sites, a network should be built around farmers who already have AD systems operating successfully and integrated into their wider farm business.

These Innovation Farms would be commercial farms with technology fully embedded into their day-to-day operations, partnered formally with the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) and other research institutions for training and evaluation. Farmers hosting these sites should be incentivised to do so, in a similar way to how CAFRE incentivises farmers demonstrating technology presently. Demonstrating these projects reduces perceived risk, improves the confidence

11 European Biogas Association, "Market State and Trends in Renewable and Low-Carbon Gases in Europe" (Brussels: European Biogas Association, 2024), <https://www.europeanbiogas.eu/publication/market-state-and-trends-in-renewable-and-low-carbon-gases-in-europe/>

12 Northern Ireland Assembly, Research and Information Service, "Anaerobic Digestion in Northern Ireland" (Belfast: Northern Ireland Assembly, 2025), <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2022-2027/2025/economy/7525.pdf>.

of both the farm and the financier, and accelerates peer-to-peer learning between farmers within the sector.

Conclusion

Northern Ireland's agricultural structure presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Methane emissions must be addressed, but they also represent an untapped renewable resource. On-farm AD provides a pathway for agriculture to contribute meaningfully to climate action, energy security, and resilience in rural communities. It is clear that the barriers are institutional rather than technological, so with a coordinated governance framework, a published strategy, revenue certainty, planning reform, grid connections, and visible demonstration, biomethane can become a core component of NI's energy transition.

Agriculture should not, and must not, be positioned solely as a sector that must be reduced. It should be enabled to produce.

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Beyond Binary Politics:

Using Reverse Mentoring to Engage 'Other' Voices and Young Voters in Northern Ireland

by Olivia Hamill

Executive Summary

Northern Ireland's governance structures were designed to manage conflict, not to reflect a diverse and evolving society. Public confidence is low, with only 34% of people satisfied with how democracy functions, and younger cohorts are the least likely to feel their voices influence decision-making.¹ At the same time, society has changed significantly. Minority ethnic communities have more than doubled since 2011, newcomer pupils now make up over 6% of the school population, and Northern Ireland ranks among the most socially liberal societies internationally.^{2 3}

Despite these shifts, political structures remain organized around binary communal identities, limiting engagement for those who do not identify within traditional constitutional categories. The issue is not disengagement, but institutional distance and weak responsiveness.

This policy paper proposes reverse mentoring as a practical, low-cost governance reform. By pairing senior decision-makers with younger and underrepresented mentors, it embeds lived experience into policymaking through sustained, structured relationships rather than one-off consultations.

Embedding reverse mentoring across Executive departments would improve policy responsiveness, strengthen democratic literacy, and rebuild trust, particularly among younger and underrepresented groups. As Northern Ireland moves beyond peace-era governance, such relational reform is essential to ensuring institutions remain legitimate, inclusive, and fit for purpose.⁴

Key Policy Recommendations

- **Pilot reverse mentoring across Executive departments through a coordinated two-year program in Education, Communities, and Health.**
- Establish a paid Youth and Civic Mentoring Pool to recruit, train, and support diverse mentors.
- Embed reverse mentoring in senior appointments and onboarding as a standard leadership requirement.
- Introduce structured two-way learning within mentoring cycles to link lived experience with policymaking.
- Commission an independent biennial evaluation to measure impact on trust, engagement, and policy responsiveness.

Introduction

1 Electrical Commission. *Young Voices on Democracy: What They Know and What They Need*. London: Electoral Commission, 2025

2 Department of Education (Northern Ireland). *School Census 2023–24*. Bangor: DENI, 2024.

3 Pivotal. *18 Months of the Northern Ireland Executive*. Belfast: Pivotal, 2024.

4 Bryan, Dominic. *Negotiating Civic Space in Northern Ireland*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Northern Ireland remains governed by institutions created to stabilize a deeply divided society. The Good Friday/Belfast Agreement institutionalized communal designation as a mechanism of conflict management, embedding nationalist and unionist identities within political structures. While this framework secured peace, it also entrenched a binary political architecture that no longer fully reflects the complexity of contemporary society.

By 2025, measurable shifts in attitudes and lived experience highlight this institutional lag. Survey data show that only 34 percent of people in Northern Ireland report being satisfied with how democracy is working, a figure consistently lower than in Ireland or the EU15 average.⁵ Trust in political institutions remains significantly below trust in judicial institutions and civil society actors.⁶ At the same time, residential division persists: the majority of the population continues to live in areas that are at least 80 percent Catholic or 80 percent Protestant, reinforcing everyday separation despite formal peace.^{7,8}

Generational divides are particularly pronounced. Younger cohorts report lower levels of perceived political efficacy, indicating they are less likely to believe their voices influence government decisions.⁹ Meanwhile, values research indicates substantial attitudinal change: levels of homophobia and xenophobia have declined markedly over the past two decades, and younger respondents are significantly more likely to prioritize equality and social liberal values than older generations.¹⁰ In a regional youth survey, over 60 percent of respondents identified climate change as a primary concern for Northern Ireland's future, and a majority expressed dissatisfaction with how effectively government works across party lines.¹¹

The data, therefore, point to a widening misalignment. Society has become more diverse, more socially liberal, and more issue-driven, yet institutional structures and engagement pathways remain rooted in binary designation.¹² The challenge is not disengagement from public issues. There is limited confidence that formal governance structures are accessible, responsive, or reflective of lived experience.

This paper addresses a central policy question: how can the Northern Ireland Executive engage young people and “other” voices in ways that rebuild trust, improve policy responsiveness, and strengthen democratic legitimacy? It argues that reverse mentoring offers a practical and credible response.

Research Context and Background

a. Beyond Binary Understandings of Northern Irish Society

Research over the past two decades has consistently challenged the assumption that Northern Ireland is composed of two fixed, internally unified communities. Evidence shows that identities are

5 European Partnership for Democracy. The Global Youth Participation Index Report 2025. Brussels: European Partnership for Democracy, 2025.

6 Pivotal. Northern Ireland Values and Attitudes Survey. Belfast: Pivotal, 2024.

7 Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). Census 2021: Ethnic Group. Belfast: NISRA, 2022.

8 Pivotal. 18 Months of the Northern Ireland Executive. Belfast: Pivotal, 2024.

9 Electoral Commission. Young Voices on Democracy: What They Know and What They Need. London: Electoral Commission, 2025.

10 Pivotal. Northern Ireland Values and Attitudes Survey. Belfast: Pivotal, 2024.

11 Electoral Commission. Young Voices on Democracy: What They Know and What They Need. London: Electoral Commission, 2025.

12 Bryan, Dominic. Negotiating Civic Space in Northern Ireland. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

more fluid, layered, and diverse than institutional categories suggest.¹³ Treating society as divided into two coherent blocs obscures generational, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic variation within those communities¹⁴

Despite this, public discourse and institutional practice often continue to rely on binary assumptions. Governance structures remain organized around communal designation, reinforcing the idea that political representation must align with one of two constitutional positions. Individuals who do not identify within those categories, including migrants, younger generations, and those who reject traditional labels, are frequently positioned at the margins of political recognition.¹⁵

In practice, newcomers and those outside established identities are often expected to assimilate into existing blocs rather than have their perspectives accommodated within governance structures. These dynamic limits institutional responsiveness to a changing population and contribute to feelings of exclusion among those who do not see themselves reflected in binary political frameworks.¹⁶

b. Migration and Demographic Change

Northern Ireland remains the least diverse nation of the UK, yet its minority ethnic population nearly doubled from 1.8 percent in 2011 to 3.4 percent in 2021.¹⁷ Approximately 293,000 long-term international migrants arrived between 2001 and 2023, with a net gain of 62,000 after accounting for outward migration.¹⁸ Migrants are predominantly young: almost nine in ten are under 35, meaning diversity is most visible among children and young adults.¹⁹

Schools are the clearest indicator of this change. In 2023–24, one in sixteen pupils was classified as a “newcomer,” and in some primary schools, more than half of the pupils spoke English as an additional language rather than their first language.²⁰ These shifts challenge long-standing assumptions about Northern Irish identity and raise questions about whether current political institutions are equipped to reflect an increasingly pluralist society.²¹

c. Youth, Democracy, and Political Disconnection

Research consistently shows that young people in Northern Ireland feel disconnected from formal politics. The Electoral Commission reports that young people in Northern Ireland are less likely than their peers elsewhere in the UK to express interest in politics and are significantly less confident in their understanding of democratic institutions.²² One in three cannot define the term “democracy,” and knowledge of the Northern Ireland Assembly is particularly low among 18–20-year-olds.²³

13 Brubaker, Rogers. “Ethnicity without Groups.” *European Journal of Sociology* 43, no. 2 (2002): 163–189.

14 Komarova, Milena, and Maruška Svašek. “Criss-Crossing Pathways: Place-Making in the New Northern Ireland.” New York: Berghahn Books, 2018.

15 Pivotal. Northern Ireland Values and Attitudes Survey. Belfast: Pivotal, 2024.

16 Komarova, Milena, and Maruška Svašek. “Criss-Crossing Pathways: Place-Making in the New Northern Ireland.” New York: Berghahn Books, 2018.

17 Electoral Commission. *Young Voices on Democracy: What They Know and What They Need*. London: Electoral Commission, 2025.

18 European Partnership for Democracy. *The Global Youth Participation Index Report 2025*. Brussels: European Partnership for Democracy, 2025.

19 Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). *Census 2021: Ethnic Group*. Belfast: NISRA, 2022.

20 Department of Education (Northern Ireland). *School Census 2023–24*. Bangor: DENI, 2024.

21 Komarova, Milena, and Maruška Svašek. “Criss-Crossing Pathways: Place-Making in the New Northern Ireland.” New York: Berghahn Books, 2018.

22 Electoral Commission. *Young Voices on Democracy: What They Know and What They Need*. London: Electoral Commission, 2025.

23 Electoral Commission. *Young Voices on Democracy: What They Know and What They Need*. London: Electoral Commission, 2025.

However, international comparative evidence demonstrates that youth disengagement is rarely driven by apathy. The Global Youth Participation Index (GYPI) 2025 shows that low participation scores typically reflect structural barriers rather than a lack of interest. Across 141 countries, the average overall GYPI score is 61 out of 100, with Political Affairs (51) and Elections (54) scoring significantly lower than Socio-Economic participation (77).²⁴ The report concludes that where youth participation is low, this is “rarely due to young people being apathetic or disinterested,” but instead reflects limited opportunities to participate meaningfully in decision-making structures.

This distinction is critical for Northern Ireland. The United Kingdom ranks 11th overall in the GYPI, with a score of 78, placing it in the “Very High” participation category. Ireland ranks 18th, with a score of 75, also in the “Very High” category.²⁵ Both states perform strongly on Civic Space and Elections relative to the global average. However, even high-ranking democracies exhibit structural weaknesses. The GYPI reports that youth representation in legislatures remains globally low, with an average score of just 12 out of 100. Trust in political parties is also weak, including in established democracies such as the United Kingdom.²⁶

The difference between the UK and Ireland is therefore not one of democratic legitimacy, but of institutional design and participatory culture. Ireland has invested in deliberative mechanisms, such as citizens’ assemblies and youth-oriented civic forums, which create visible links between public engagement and policy influence. In Northern Ireland, by contrast, political institutions operate within a consociational framework structured around communal balance. While this model has been essential for maintaining peace and stability, it was not designed to prioritize generational renewal. As a result, young people often encounter institutions that are formally democratic but procedurally distant.²⁷

The GYPI identifies a recurring gap between civic engagement and formal political integration. Several countries score highly in Civic Space but remain weaker in Political Affairs, indicating that while young people are active in mobilizing, protesting, and engaging online, they remain underrepresented in legislatures and executive decision-making.²⁸ This pattern is reflected in Northern Ireland, where surveys by Pivotal and partner organizations show strong youth concern for education, mental health, climate change, poverty, and equality, alongside limited confidence that political institutions respond effectively to these issues.²⁹

The issue, therefore, is not disengagement but institutional distance. Comparative evidence from both the UK and Ireland shows that even high-performing democracies struggle to translate youth civic participation into meaningful influence over formal decision-making³⁰. In Northern Ireland, this challenge is compounded by a constitutional architecture that embeds power-sharing along identity lines rather than generational lines.³¹

Reverse mentoring directly addresses this institutional gap. Unlike consultation exercises or youth

24 European Partnership for Democracy. *The Global Youth Participation Index Report 2025*. Brussels: European Partnership for Democracy, 2025.

25 European Partnership for Democracy. *The Global Youth Participation Index Report 2025*. Brussels: European Partnership for Democracy, 2025.

26 European Partnership for Democracy. *The Global Youth Participation Index Report 2025*. Brussels: European Partnership for Democracy, 2025.

27 Bryan, Dominic. *Negotiating Civic Space in Northern Ireland*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

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30 Bryan, Dominic. *Negotiating Civic Space in Northern Ireland*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

31 Brubaker, Rogers. “Ethnicity without Groups.” *European Journal of Sociology* 43, no. 2 (2002): 163–189

advisory panels, it embeds structured intergenerational dialogue within decision-making processes themselves.³² It connects senior policymakers with lived youth experience in a sustained, relational format rather than episodic engagement. In systems where formal representation of young people remains low, and trust in political parties is weak, reverse mentoring provides a low-cost, scalable mechanism to translate civic energy into institutional learning.³³

If youth political disconnection stems from structural barriers rather than apathy, then reform should focus on institutional redesign rather than behavioral change. Reverse mentoring provides a practical response: a governance reform that strengthens democratic literacy, reduces institutional distance, and creates clear pathways for influence within existing constitutional arrangements.

d. Trust, Values, and Institutional Legitimacy

Longitudinal values research highlights a growing legitimacy gap. While support for democracy as a principle remains strong, confidence in political institutions is worryingly low, particularly among younger cohorts.⁹ Trust is consistently higher in civil society organizations, universities, NGOs, and community groups than in government or political parties.

This matters for policy effectiveness. The Pivotal “18 Months of the Northern Ireland Executive” tracker notes persistent public frustration with the Executive’s lack of urgency, weak cross-departmental coordination, and limited evidence of tangible improvement in public services.¹⁰ Rebuilding trust requires not only better outcomes, but better processes, ones that allow citizens to see how their experiences shape decision-making.

“Standard consultation exercises often fail because they are transactional; they ask for a contribution and then disappear. Reverse mentoring is relational; it builds a bridge between the lived experience of the mentor and the formal authority of the mentee, creating a feedback loop that is personal, sustained, and harder to ignore.”

Reverse Mentoring: Concept and Rationale

a. Defining Reverse Mentoring

Reverse mentoring is a structured relationship in which individuals who are younger or less institutionally powerful act as mentors to senior leaders. The concept originated in organizational settings in the late 1990s as a response to rapid technological change and generational skill gaps, but has since evolved into a broader mechanism for inclusion and change.³⁴ Unlike traditional mentoring, reverse mentoring deliberately inverts hierarchical norms, positioning senior leaders as learners and requiring institutions to listen to perspectives that are often underrepresented.

Contemporary research highlights reverse mentoring’s capacity to challenge power dynamics, surface lived experience, and foster organizational learning in contexts characterized by inequality

32 Murphy, Wendy M. “Reverse Mentoring at Work.” *Human Resource Management Review* 22.

33 Breck, Bridget, et al. “Intergenerational Learning and Digital Inclusion through Reverse Mentoring.” *Gerontology and Society* 38, no. 4 (2018): 451–468.

34 Ahmed Badar, Shazia. “Reverse Mentoring as a Tool for Inclusive Leadership.” *Journal of Organisational Change Management* 37, no. 2 (2024): 215–229.

or rapid social change.³⁵In higher education and public-sector environments, it has been shown to promote inclusivity, improve decision-making, and create psychologically safe spaces for dialogue across status, age, and cultural difference.³⁶

b. Why Reverse Mentoring Fits the Northern Ireland Context

Northern Ireland's governance structures remain shaped by the imperatives of conflict management: stability, risk aversion, and careful balance between communal blocs. While these features were essential to establishing peace, they now constrain the system's ability to engage a society that is increasingly pluralist, values-driven, and generationally distinct.

Traditional participation mechanisms, such as public consultations, stakeholder events, and advisory forums, tend to favor individuals who possess political literacy, institutional confidence, and social capital. Young people, migrants, and those who do not identify with constitutional binaries are therefore underrepresented, even when policy decisions directly affect them. This reinforces the perception that politics is remote, inaccessible, and unresponsive.³⁷

Reverse mentoring addresses these gaps by recognizing lived experience as a form of expertise and embedding learning within sustained relationships rather than episodic engagement. Evidence from organizational and educational settings suggests that such relational approaches are particularly effective in rebuilding trust where institutional legitimacy is weak.³⁸

c. Youth, Integration, and the Limits of Contact-Based Engagement

Research on integration in Northern Ireland consistently shows that young people experience cross-community engagement as temporary and abstract. Shared education initiatives, youth programs, and one-off events may create short-term contact, but participants typically return to segregated schools, neighborhoods, and social networks.³⁹Integration is therefore often perceived as something that happens occasionally, rather than being embedded in everyday life.

Reverse mentoring offers a means of embedding integration within governance itself. By positioning young people and individuals from diverse backgrounds as mentors to senior decision-makers, the approach moves beyond symbolic inclusion to relational power-sharing. This aligns with findings from educational reverse mentoring pilots, where students reported greater confidence, voice, and sense of belonging, while staff reported increased awareness of structural barriers and exclusionary practices.⁴⁰

d. Reverse Mentoring as Democratic Infrastructure in a Changing Civil Society

This section argues that reverse mentoring should be understood not simply as a participation or engagement initiative, but as a form of democratic infrastructure, a structured mechanism that strengthens the relationship between institutions, civil society, and those who are least well served by conventional democratic channels.

Values and attitudes research in Northern Ireland shows a persistent legitimacy gap. Younger cohorts are less trusting of political institutions

35 Murphy, Wendy M. "Reverse Mentoring at Work." *Human Resource Management Review* 22.

36 Breck, Bridget, et al. "Intergenerational Learning and Digital Inclusion through Reverse Mentoring." *Gerontology and Society* 38, no. 4 (2018): 451–468.

37 Pivotal. *Northern Ireland Values and Attitudes Survey*. Belfast: Pivotal, 2024.

38 Breck, Bridget, et al. "Intergenerational Learning and Digital Inclusion through Reverse Mentoring." *Gerontology and Society* 38, no. 4 (2018): 451–468.

39 Bryan, Dominic. *Negotiating Civic Space in Northern Ireland*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

40 Ahmed Badar, Shazia. "Reverse Mentoring as a Tool for Inclusive Leadership." *Journal of Organisational Change Management* 37, no. 2 (2024): 215–229.

and more skeptical about the effectiveness of formal politics, even as they demonstrate strong commitments to equality, fairness, and social justice.⁴¹ This disengagement is compounded by wider social change: Northern Ireland is becoming more diverse, particularly in schools and youth populations, yet remains institutionally and politically structured around older, binary understandings of community and representation.⁴² At the same time, evidence points to limited democratic literacy among young people and low confidence in how political decisions are made or how influence can be exercised meaningfully.⁴³

Reverse mentoring responds directly to these conditions. It creates an intentional space in which lived experience, particularly from younger people and marginalized groups, informs institutional understanding and policy development.⁴⁴ For policymakers and senior leaders, reverse mentoring provides insight into how policies are experienced on the ground, revealing blind spots that are rarely captured through consultations, surveys, or formal representation. For mentors, it demystifies governance processes, builds confidence, and strengthens democratic literacy by making power, decision-making, and institutional constraints more visible and intelligible.

Importantly, this framing aligns with emerging policy thinking across the UK that positions civil society as an integral partner in democratic renewal rather than a peripheral stakeholder.⁴⁵ Recent government initiatives, such as the establishment of a Civil Society Council to embed partnership with civil society at the heart of policymaking, reflect a growing recognition that democratic resilience depends on sustained, structured relationships between institutions and communities. Reverse mentoring can be understood as a micro-level expression of this agenda: a practical, relational infrastructure that operationalizes partnership, reciprocity, and shared learning rather than one-way consultation.⁴⁶

In post-conflict and post-agreement contexts such as Northern Ireland, this function is particularly significant. Reverse mentoring supports a transition beyond binary political frameworks by foregrounding plural, intersecting identities and everyday experiences of social change. It enables institutions to learn, adapt, and evolve while simultaneously empowering participants as civic actors.⁴⁷ In this sense, reverse mentoring contributes not only to better policy and institutional learning but to the renewal of democratic culture itself, strengthening trust, inclusion, and legitimacy through practice rather than rhetoric.

Policy Recommendations

1. Pilot Reverse Mentoring Across Executive Departments

The Executive Office should coordinate a two-year cross-departmental reverse mentoring pilot involving the Departments of Education, Communities, and Health. Each participating department should pair senior civil servants or ministerial advisers with trained youth or civic mentors for a structured six-month cycle.

41 Pivotal. Northern Ireland Values and Attitudes Survey. Belfast: Pivotal, 2024.

42 Department of Education (Northern Ireland). School Census 2023–24. Bangor: DENI, 2024.

43 European Partnership for Democracy. The Global Youth Participation Index Report 2025. Brussels: European Partnership for Democracy, 2025.

44 Aluko, Oyin, and Amy Oaknin. “Decolonising Gender Studies through Reverse Mentoring.” University College London, 2023–24.

45 Komarova, Milena, and Maruška Svašek. “Criss-Crossing Pathways: Place-Making in the New Northern Ireland.” New York: Berghahn Books, 2018.

46 Murphy, Wendy M. “Reverse Mentoring at Work.” *Human Resource Management Review* 22.

47 Ahmed Badar, Shazia. “Reverse Mentoring as a Tool for Inclusive Leadership.” *Journal of Organisational Change Management* 37, no. 2 (2024): 215–229.

This pilot approach limits political risk while allowing measurable evaluation. It ensures that reverse mentoring is tested within departments that have direct engagement with young people and diverse communities. The aim is to embed institutional learning within governance processes rather than add another consultation exercise. A defined pilot period provides clarity, accountability, and evidence before wider rollout.

2. Establish a Paid Youth and Civic Mentoring Pool

A centrally coordinated Youth and Civic Mentoring Pool should be created to recruit, train, and support mentors aged 16–30 and individuals from underrepresented communities. Participation should be remunerated and supported through safeguarding, governance, and institutional training.

Unpaid participation reinforces inequality and limits who can engage. A compensated mentoring pool professionalizes civic participation and signals institutional commitment. It also ensures diversity of representation beyond those who already possess social capital or political literacy.

3. Embed Reverse Mentoring in Public Appointments and Advisory Onboarding

Reverse mentoring should become a formal component of onboarding for newly appointed civil society representatives, public board members, and senior civil servants entering Director-level roles.

Embedding mentoring at moments of institutional transition normalizes relational governance. It shifts reverse mentoring from optional innovation to structural practice. This ensures that listening to lived experience becomes part of leadership development rather than an external add-on.

4. Introduce Structured Democratic Literacy Exchange

Each mentoring cycle should include structured sessions focused on democratic literacy. Senior leaders should explain institutional constraints, decision-making pathways, and policy trade-offs. Mentors should present lived experience perspectives on how policies are experienced in practice.

Reverse mentoring must strengthen understanding in both directions. Without institutional transparency, engagement risks becoming symbolic. A structured exchange builds confidence among mentors while increasing policymakers' awareness of real-world impacts.

5. Commission Independent Biennial Evaluation

An independent evaluation should be commissioned every two to three years, aligned with the Programme for Government cycle. This evaluation should assess institutional responsiveness, trust, democratic literacy, and evidence of policy learning. Six-month pulse surveys should supplement this longer-term review.

Annual reporting risks superficial compliance. A biennial model makes cultural and institutional change measurable. Transparent publication of findings will strengthen public confidence and demonstrate accountability.

Conclusion

Northern Ireland's peace settlement succeeded in managing division, but it is ill-equipped to engage a pluralist, young, and changing society. Reverse mentoring offers a practical way to move beyond binary politics toward relational governance rooted in lived experience. By embedding listening within power, the Northern Ireland Executive can begin to rebuild trust, legitimacy, and democratic participation for the next generation.

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Northern Ireland Innovation Liaison Office:

Capturing our Capability

by Declan Barry

Executive Summary

Northern Ireland has built a sophisticated innovation ecosystem supported by world-class universities, R&D incentives, and a functional, but sluggish public procurement system. Yet too often, the region's most promising indigenous firms must prove their value abroad before they gain meaningful traction at home. By the time their solutions return to the Northern Ireland market, they do so at full commercial pricing, by which point the region has forfeited its first-mover advantage, diminished its public-sector influence over innovation development, and lost potential economic multiplier effects.

This gap is not regulatory. It is structural. While procurement policy now explicitly seeks to stimulate innovation, there is no dedicated mechanism to identify high-potential local innovators and connect them early to public sector demand.

This paper proposes a two-year Innovation Liaison pilot embedded within Invest NI. The function would proactively identify scalable indigenous firms and match them to defined public sector challenges, using existing procurement flexibilities to enable early-stage adoption and pilot deployment.

Northern Ireland does not need new legislation. It needs connective tissue. Acting now will protect competitive advantage, accelerate public service modernization, and ensure innovation-led growth benefits communities across the region.

Key Recommendations

- Establish a two-year Innovation Liaison Function within Invest NI, formally linked to the Department of Finance and relevant departmental and organizational innovation leads (e.g., PSNI, NHS).
- Identify and publish an annual cross-departmental innovation challenge pipeline aligned with procurement planning cycles.
- Pilot at least ten structured early-adoption engagements with high-potential indigenous firms over a two-year period.
- Require annual public reporting on innovation adoption, regional impact, and economic outcomes.
- Commission an independent evaluation at the end of year two to determine whether the program should be permanently adopted or expanded.

Introduction

Northern Ireland has spent the past two decades building the foundations of a knowledge-based economy. Through targeted inward investment, university research commercialization, and R&D incentives, the region has developed credible strength in sectors such as advanced manufacturing, fintech, cybersecurity, health technologies, and digital services. Public procurement policy has also evolved, embedding social value criteria and modernizing procedures to increase flexibility and small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) participation.

Despite this progress, a persistent structural weakness remains. High-potential indigenous firms frequently struggle to secure early public-sector customers in Northern Ireland. Departments and arms-length bodies often rely on established vendors or externally validated solutions, even when comparable innovation exists locally. As a result, local firms seek validation and scale abroad, particularly in larger markets such as Great Britain, the European Union, or the United States. When their solutions later re-enter the Northern Ireland market, they do so at full enterprise pricing and without the region having benefited from early partnership or influence.

This dynamic produces three systemic costs:

- First, it weakens public service transformation by delaying the adoption of cutting-edge local solutions.
- Second, it reduces economic multiplier effects that could anchor jobs, supply chains, and intellectual property within the region.
- Third, it reinforces geographic and network concentration, as firms outside established innovation hubs face greater difficulty accessing decision-makers.

This paper argues that Northern Ireland's challenge is not a lack of innovation capacity or procurement flexibility. It is a lack of structured alignment between innovation supply and public sector demand. The solution is a bold but practical intervention: a two-year Innovation Liaison pilot embedded within Invest NI, designed to connect scalable indigenous firms to defined public sector challenges before international markets capture their competitive advantage.

Research Context and Background

The Northern Ireland Innovation Survey confirms that a significant proportion of local firms engage in innovation activity, including product, process, and organizational innovation. Business expenditure accounts for the majority of R&D performance in the region, reflecting a growing private-sector contribution to innovation output.¹

Northern Ireland also benefits from strong university-industry collaboration. Research institutions at Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University have developed commercialization pathways that have led to spin-outs and licensing agreements.² Matrix, the Northern Ireland Science Industry Panel, has identified priority sectors including advanced manufacturing, life and health sciences, digital technologies, cybersecurity, and clean energy.³ These sectors represent areas where the region holds competitive potential in both export

1 Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, Northern Ireland Innovation Survey (Belfast: NISRA, year).

2 Department for the Economy, R&D and Innovation Support in Northern Ireland: Final Report (Belfast: Department for the Economy, year).

3 Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, Research and Development Statistics in Northern Ireland (Belfast: NISRA,

markets and domestic applications.

In parallel, Invest NI provides layered support mechanisms for scaling firms. These include innovation grants, R&D tax incentives, graduate placement support, international trade assistance, and advisory services. The ecosystem is not underdeveloped. It is structured and active.

The challenge is not the absence of innovation capacity. It is the translation of that capacity into early public sector demand.

Public procurement in Northern Ireland has also undergone significant reform. The *Public Procurement Policy Statement*, approved in 2025, sets out four guiding principles: accessibility, efficiency and effectiveness, social value, and transparency.⁴ One of its strategic objectives is an explicit commitment to stimulate innovation through procurement.⁵

The *Procurement Act 2023*, which came into effect in 2025, introduces greater procedural flexibility. It enables competitive, adaptive procedures, encourages preliminary market engagement, and promotes SME participation. These changes reduce the rigid barriers that previously limited engagement with smaller firms.

Additionally, the Department of Finance Social Value Strategy 2025–2027 embeds social, economic, and environmental considerations into contract evaluation, including minimum weighting thresholds and structured reporting mechanisms.⁶

On paper, the architecture is aligned. Innovation is a stated goal. Flexibility exists. SME access is a priority. Yet the existence of reform alone does not guarantee alignment between the supply of innovation and public-sector demand.

Anecdotal feedback from scaling SMEs consistently highlights a common challenge: the transition from supported innovation to large-scale public procurement is steep. Compliance requirements, scale thresholds, and risk management practices tend to favor established incumbents. Smaller firms, even when technically capable, struggle to secure early-stage pilots that demonstrate credibility within local public institutions.

The issue is not a legal restriction. The Procurement Act allows early engagement. Social Value policy supports SME participation. Invest NI supports innovation, and the Executive has also initiated a review of procurement governance arrangements to strengthen oversight and leadership.⁷ This creates a timely policy window. System-wide oversight mechanisms are being reassessed. Performance accountability is under scrutiny. Innovation stimulation is now an explicit objective.

In this context, an Innovation Liaison pilot does not represent mission creep; it represents operational alignment. Northern Ireland has built the components of an innovation economy and modernized procurement structures. The missing piece is connective tissue: a structured bridge that moves innovation from capability to impact.

“The emphasis is often on compliance, defensibility, and avoidance of failure rather than on structured experimentation or calculated innovation. This is understandable... However, when risk management becomes the primary lens through which decisions are evaluated, innovation is unintentionally deprioritized.”

2018).

4 Matrix NI, *Strategic Innovation Opportunities for Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Matrix, 2020).

5 Department of Finance, *Public Procurement Policy Statement* (Belfast: Department of Finance, 2025).

6 Department of Finance, *Public Procurement Policy Statement* (Belfast: Department of Finance, 2025).

7 Department of Finance, *Social Value Strategy 2025–2027* (Belfast: Department of Finance, 2025).

Argument and Analysis

Public procurement systems are designed to manage risk. Accountability mechanisms, audit scrutiny, and political oversight naturally incentivize caution. In Northern Ireland, this caution has become embedded as a dominant operating principle. The emphasis is often on compliance, defensibility, and avoidance of failure rather than on structured experimentation or calculated innovation.

This is understandable. Public officials operate within tight budgetary constraints, strong oversight environments, and reputational risk. However, when risk management becomes the primary lens through which decisions are evaluated, innovation is unintentionally deprioritized.

In practice, this manifests as:

- Preference for established vendors over emerging firms
- Higher evidentiary thresholds for smaller companies
- Reliance on prior public-sector track record as a qualification filter
- Tendency to replicate existing procurement models rather than explore flexible procedures
- The *Procurement Act 2023* introduces mechanisms such as competitive flexible procedures and early market engagement. Yet procedural flexibility alone does not eliminate cultural risk aversion. Without a structured champion for indigenous innovation, departments default to known providers and established frameworks.
- The result is not corruption or incompetence; it is institutional caution. The cost of this caution, however, is rarely quantified.

The Cost of Delayed Adoption

When local firms such as TalentSensus develop solutions relevant to public-sector workforce challenges, the absence of structured adoption pathways produces predictable outcomes.

First, firms seek validation in external markets where decision-making structures may allow faster pilot engagement. Larger jurisdictions with structured innovation adoption programs often provide clearer entry points for SMEs.

Second, once firms scale internationally, their pricing, deployment models, and contractual expectations adjust accordingly. Northern Ireland public bodies then re-engage with those firms not as early partners but as mature vendors.

This sequence has three measurable costs:

- **Economic Leakage:** Early-stage employment growth and supply chain expansion may occur elsewhere rather than in Northern Ireland.
- **Loss of Influence:** Product development evolves in response to external markets rather than local public needs.
- **Reduced First-Mover Advantage:** Northern Ireland forfeits the reputational and operational benefits of deploying homegrown innovation ahead of peer regions.

Risk avoidance, therefore, does not eliminate risk; it redistributes it. The risk shifts from operational uncertainty to strategic stagnation.

Structural Gaps in the Process

Invest NI provides layered innovation support. Firms receive assistance for R&D, workforce development, internationalization, and commercialization. However, there is no structured, accountable mechanism

to transition firms from innovation support to early public sector engagement. This creates a “cliff-edge” moment.

A firm can receive years of public support, develop a credible solution, and still face an abrupt jump when seeking access to procurement frameworks. The compliance expectations of large contracts often exceed the operational scale of scaling SMEs, even when their technology is relevant and competitive.

The system effectively separates innovation policy, procurement governance, and departmental operational needs. No single entity is responsible for aligning them.

An Innovation Liaison Function embedded within Invest NI would address this coordination gap directly. It would not weaken procurement safeguards or bypass competitive processes. Instead, it would act upstream, identifying alignment opportunities before formal procurement cycles begin.

Critics may argue that procurement neutrality must be preserved and that public bodies cannot favor local firms. This is correct. The proposal does not advocate protectionism; rather, it advocates structured opportunity identification within existing legal frameworks.

The *Procurement Act* allows early engagement, Social Value criteria allow economic and community considerations; competitive, flexible procedures enable innovation-friendly approaches. The barrier is not a legal restriction. It is a lack of proactive coordination.

Another counterargument is resource constraint. Public bodies are already stretched. This is precisely why a centralized liaison function within Invest NI is appropriate. It consolidates scanning, matchmaking, and coordination responsibilities, rather than adding to individual departments' workloads.

Finally, some may argue that market forces should determine success. Yet public procurement is already a market-shaping instrument: it influences supply chains, workforce standards, environmental outcomes, and regional development. Choosing not to engage proactively with indigenous innovation is, therefore, itself a policy choice.

Managed Experimentation

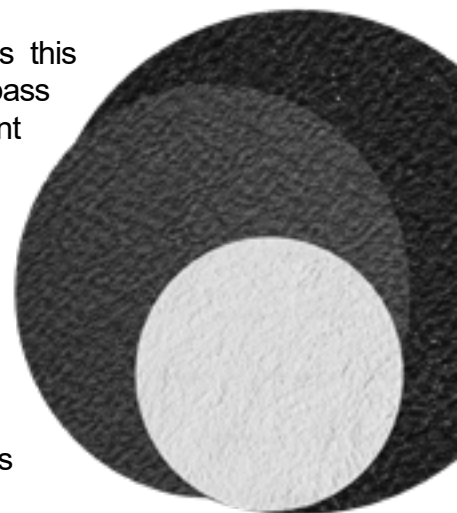
A mature innovation economy does not eliminate risk; it manages it. The purpose of an Innovation Liaison pilot is not to replace due diligence but to introduce structured experimentation. Small-scale pilots, time-bound evaluations, and defined performance metrics can allow departments to test indigenous solutions without committing to large-scale rollouts.

This shifts the question from “Why should we risk trying this?” to “What is the cost of not trying?” Northern Ireland's ambition to build a knowledge-based economy extends beyond commercialization to include the adoption of innovations. Without a mechanism that rewards calculated experimentation, risk aversion will continue to dominate.

Policy Recommendations

The proposal in this paper is simple: establish a two-year Innovation Liaison pilot embedded within Invest NI. It should be small, senior, and action-oriented. Its role is not to run procurement competitions or bend rules. Its job is to address the work that currently falls through the cracks between organizations. It identifies indigenous companies with real capability. It identifies public sector challenges with clear demand and connects the two early, before the system defaults to incumbents or waits for international validation. Departments are then supported in taking a structured, defensible step into early adoption using the tools that already exist.

This pilot should run for two years and be designed to align with a three-year budget cycle. This matters because it makes the idea fiscally realistic and allows for clear evaluation before any scaling is required.



Resourcing should include three to four staff with credibility, cross-departmental relationships, and the confidence to influence, as a junior team will not shift behavior. The unit needs a leader with access to Permanent Secretary-level decision makers when required, supported by colleagues who can operate comfortably across Invest NI, departmental digital and operational teams, and CPD procurement structures. Alongside that senior core, the unit must be proactive and opportunistic in its approach, actively seeking opportunities where indigenous capability aligns with defined departmental needs.

The pilot should also deliver one practical output that quickly changes market behavior. This does not need to be complicated and should outline the real operational challenges departments are trying to solve, highlight areas with known local capability or emerging solutions, and describe the likely routes to market engagement. Each year, the unit should publish a short Innovation Challenge Pipeline to make demand visible early and reduce uncertainty. For the government, this forces prioritization. For companies, it provides clarity on where efforts should be focused. For the wider ecosystem, it creates a simple accountability mechanism that can be tracked.

Over two years, the Innovation Liaison team should facilitate a minimum of ten early-adoption engagements. These should be small, tightly scoped, time-bound pilots with clear success metrics and an agreed decision point on whether the work is stopped, extended, or scaled. The pilot model is important because it directly addresses the cultural risk problem. It provides public bodies a defensible way to try something new without committing to long-term adoption and converts innovation from a perceived risk into a managed, outcome-focused exercise. The goal is not experimentation for its own sake but to create a credible route to first-customer adoption for companies that have already demonstrated technical merit through R&D support but cannot clear the procurement threshold without an early reference client.

This approach also supports a moderate social mobility and regional growth agenda without turning the proposal into an ideological document. Northern Ireland's innovation economy remains concentrated. Firms outside established networks and hubs are more likely to struggle for decision-maker access. The Innovation Liaison team should therefore have an explicit remit to identify high-potential firms beyond the usual circles, including those emerging through further education pathways, regional enterprise agencies, and universities that are not always in the center of policymaker attention. This is not a quota exercise. Rather, it recognizes that the economy will grow faster and more sustainably when opportunity is not concentrated in the same places or among the same networks.

Northern Ireland's procurement policy direction now explicitly includes stimulating innovation. The Social Value strategy embeds economic outcomes through procurement, and procurement law is more flexible than it has been in years. Yet none of this will matter if public bodies remain culturally conditioned to look first for reasons not to act. Risk aversion is rational in the short term, but it becomes expensive in the long term. It delays public service modernization, exports local competitive advantage, and forces the system to buy back solutions later at full maturity and full price.

The Innovation Liaison pilot is a practical mechanism to break this cycle. It does not ask the system to take reckless risks; instead, it encourages measured steps. The pilot creates accountability for connecting the innovation we already supported with the public outcomes that are already needed. If Northern Ireland wants a knowledge-based economy that delivers local impact, it cannot stop at funding innovation. It must become better at using it.

Conclusion

Northern Ireland funds companies to develop solutions, helps them recruit talent, and supports them in scaling internationally. However, it does not consistently create a structured pathway for those same companies to become early public-sector partners at home. The result is predictable. Firms seek validation in larger markets, and products evolve in response to external demand. Northern Ireland re-engages only after international traction is secured, often at full commercial maturity and pricing. By that stage, the opportunity to shape, pilot, and benefit from early deployment has already passed.

This pattern is not the result of weak policy ambition. Procurement reform has introduced flexibility, and Social

Value policy embeds economic and community considerations. Innovation is now explicitly referenced in procurement strategy. The barrier is not legislative but structural and cultural.

Public institutions are understandably cautious. Accountability pressures encourage compliance and defensibility. Over time, however, caution becomes default behavior. The system first looks for reasons not to proceed. Innovation becomes something to be admired rather than adopted. Risk avoidance becomes a substitute for leadership.

The proposed two-year Innovation Liaison pilot embedded within Invest NI is a practical response to this dynamic. It does not require legislative change, undermine procurement neutrality, or bypass competitive processes. It introduces coordination and accountability where they are currently fragmented.

This is not about favoring local firms for the sake of locality. Rather, it is about protecting competitive advantage, accelerating public service modernization, and ensuring that public investment in innovation produces visible local return. It is also about widening opportunity so that firms outside established networks have a realistic pathway to public impact.

Northern Ireland cannot afford to build innovation capacity without building innovation adoption. The ambition to become a knowledge-based economy must extend beyond commercialization to include real-world utilization. The question is no longer whether the region can generate breakthrough solutions, but whether it is prepared to use them.

If the answer is yes, the next steps are clear: act deliberately, align structures, pilot boldly, evaluate honestly, and scale what works.

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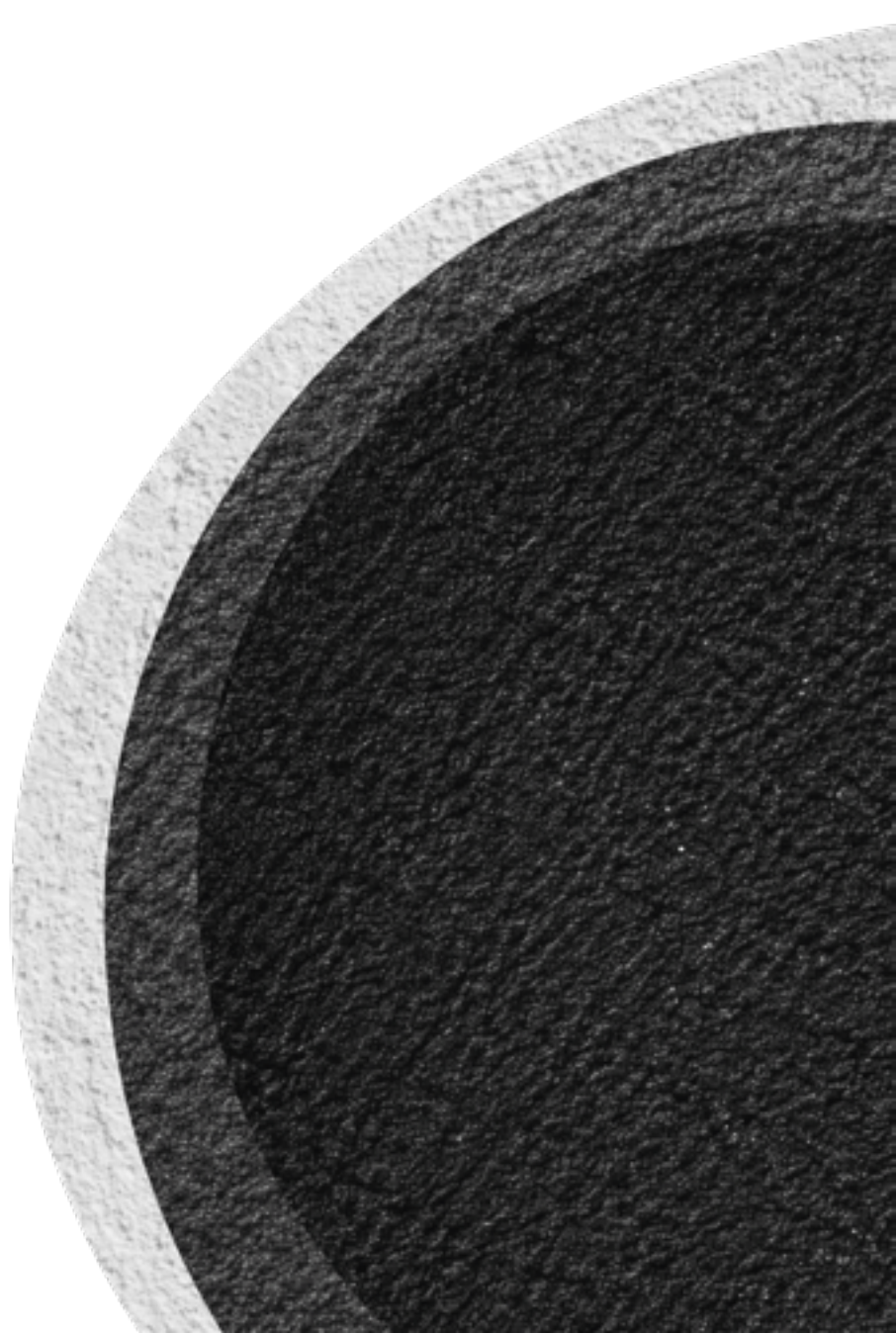
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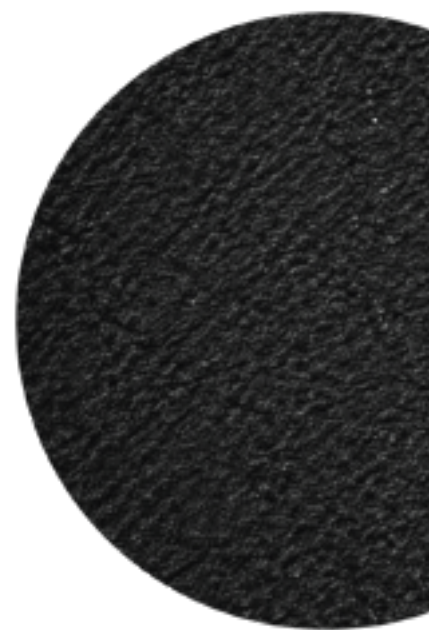
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Walls Within Walls:

Rethinking Social Housing in Post-Conflict Northern Ireland

by Grant Warren

Executive Summary

This policy paper examines the relationship between housing inequality in Northern Ireland and the broader structural divisions in a post-conflict society. It explores how social housing policy can help address these inequalities, mitigate the drivers of conflict, and reduce the financial burden on the Northern Ireland Executive caused by social division. This paper considers the costs of ongoing division and inequality in housing for both government and society, evaluates current government initiatives to promote shared housing, and, finally, draws on comparative evidence to provide practical recommendations for policymakers in Northern Ireland. By advocating for shared housing as a policy response, this paper sets out a vision for a cost-effective, people-centred social housing system that can foster stable and peaceful community life in a post-conflict society.

This paper makes the following recommendations:

- The Department for Infrastructure should update its Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) to clarify the definition of “affordable housing”.
- The Executive should create a council-led working group to coordinate the rollout of the developer contributions for affordable housing across local development plans.
- Local development partnerships should be developed in areas with significant housing demand to support the delivery of social homes within mixed-tenure developments.

Background

Through its flagship peacebuilding strategy *Together: Building a United Community* (T:BUC), the Northern Ireland Executive seeks to create communities of “good neighbors” and increase the options available for those who wish to live in mixed areas.¹ This objective is noteworthy as Northern Ireland continues to experience significant levels of social segregation, which is compounded by current policies. For instance, 90% of social housing is concentrated in segregated areas² of Northern Ireland, despite survey data indicating that about 78% of people would prefer to live in a mixed neighborhood.³

A lack of meaningful choices in the type of neighborhood people can live in is exacerbated by the high costs of societal division. As a society still dealing with the legacies of conflict, there is a clear link between people living in segregated areas and facing structural inequalities in health, education, and economic prospects, both unionist and nationalist, at the lower end of the income scale, who often do not experience any real benefits from the “peace dividend.”⁴ Without social policies designed to address these structural inequalities in communities, the Northern Ireland Executive’s efforts to promote good community relations are unlikely to succeed.

Addressing the financial impact of division in Northern Ireland is crucial. Providing duplicated services to communities that are separated incurs high costs for the Executive, diverting funds away from other important policy areas. A comprehensive report by Ulster University in 2016, highlighted that Northern Ireland spends up to £830 million annually on additional public services (including policing and justice, health, education, and housing) due to this division.⁵ Calculating the precise cost of division for public finances is difficult due to certain unavoidable costs and the generally higher resources needed to operate services in Northern Ireland. However, the available figures indicate that persistent community division leads to increased public spending to meet the specific demands it creates on services. In a limited fiscal environment, it is not only essential for peacebuilding to address the structural causes of these costs, but it is also a financial imperative.

Taking into account these structural and financial factors, this paper argues that shared housing should evolve beyond a peacebuilding initiative to become a fundamental part of the broader housing supply strategy for Northern Ireland. By aligning housing delivery with a reduction in spatial division, the Northern Ireland Executive can effectively address housing insecurity, minimize public spending inefficiencies, and advance long-term social stability.

Argument and Analysis

a. Shared Housing Risks Falling off the Agenda

Shared housing in Northern Ireland, as a policy response to advance peace and reconciliation, has yielded mixed results since the flagship Housing For All initiative developed from the Executive’s T:BUC strategy in 2013. In meeting the scheme’s objectives of creating neighborhoods that are safe, built to last, and help everyone feel included, it has delivered 33 shared housing developments

1 Northern Ireland Executive, “Together: Building a United Community”, 2013, https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm_dev/together-building-a-united-community-strategy.pdf.

2 FactCheckNI, “Housing in NI: Is 90% of social housing segregated?”, 2025, <https://factcheckni.org/articles/housing-in-ni-is-90-of-social-housing-segregated/>

3 Clanmil Housing, “Shared Neighbourhoods”, 2026, <https://www.clanmil.org.uk/homes/shared-neighbourhoods>.

4 Knox C., “Polarisation and inequality: ‘peace’ in Northern Ireland”, *Journal of Social Policy*, 2025.

5 Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, “Cost of Division: A benchmark of performance and expenditure”, 2016, <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/epc/pdf/2016/cost-of-division/Cost-of-Division-Detailed-Paper.pdf>

comprising over 1,000 social homes, with a further 43 in the pipeline (1,477 social homes).⁶ These existing and planned developments are a welcome step toward providing genuine choice for social housing tenants to avail of good quality, secure housing in a shared neighborhood.

Nonetheless, shared housing is not immune to wider pressures facing the social housing sector in Northern Ireland, which are challenged by relatively low volumes of new social homes being built and a funding shortfall. Analysis from the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) shows that the number of expected new social home builds starting in the 2025/26 financial year is 1,000, less than half of the projected level needed of 2,200 per year.⁷ Adding to the low volume of new social home starts being delivered is the limited capital budget allocated to new social housing development; this stands at £168.5 million, representing a ‘shortfall of £61.5 million’ needed to build the target of 2,200 new social home starts per year.⁸ The most concerning aspect is the lack of allocation made for *Housing For All* in 2025/26, as any planned schemes are dependent on existing funding. This means that shared housing is at significant risk of falling off the Executive’s agenda. A constrained fiscal outlook is likely to push funding toward already planned social housing developments, and even then, provision will still fall short of the identified need.

b. The Risks of Inaction

With the shortfall in new social housing development and funding dedicated to its delivery, existing pressures in the social housing sector will, in all likelihood, be exacerbated. The level of need of social housing applicants in Northern Ireland is acute; waiting lists stand at 49,588 households, 77% of which are said to be in “housing stress,” meaning that they hold over 30 points under the housing selection scheme for needs such as homelessness, overcrowding, complex health and social needs, mobility requirements, and unsuitable accommodation.⁹ Trends indicate that the number of people in this situation of acute housing need will increase as rising rents in the private rented sector cause insecurity of tenure, forcing greater numbers of people onto social housing waiting lists, while supply falters.

Drilling down into these numbers, the human and economic costs of intersecting housing insecurity and spatial division become even more stark. The effects of poverty fall disproportionately hard on social renters due to economic stress; the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) found that 36% of social renters fall below the poverty line, driven by lower incomes.¹⁰

Interlocking inequalities compound this economic strain. Spatial division, poverty, and a constrained social housing supply combine to create significant barriers to social mobility and well-being. Residential segregation in Northern Ireland is closely linked to a range of health inequalities, including higher rates of poor mental health. The overlap between deprivation and neighborhood segregation further increases the likelihood of poor health outcomes.

A 2016 study by Maguire et al., examining the relationship between residential segregation in several of Belfast’s ‘interface’ areas, is particularly instructive. It found that people living in close proximity to an interface are 19% more likely to be prescribed antidepressant medication, and 39% more likely to use anxiolytic medication, even after socio-economic factors were adjusted for in their model.¹¹

6 AgendaNI, “Housing Executive: Steps forward with Housing For All”, 2023, <https://www.agendani.com/housing-executive-steps-forward-with-housing-for-all/#:~:text=The%20programme%20had%20its%20origins,construction%20or%20programmed%20to%20start>.

7 CIH Northern Ireland, “CIH Northern Ireland’s response to Department for Communities Budget 2025/26 equality impact assessment”, 2025, <https://www.cih.org/news/cih-northern-irelands-response-to-department-for-communities-budget-202526-equality-impact-assessment/#:~:text=Additionally%2C%20the%20Housing%20for%20All,for%20this%20ethnic%20minority%20group>.

8 Northern Ireland Housing Executive, “Response to Department for Communities Budget 2025-26 Equality Impact Assessment”, 2025, <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/nihe-response-to-dfc-budget-2025-2026-eqia>

9 Northern Ireland Statistics Research Agency, “Northern Ireland Housing Bulletin: July-September 2025”, 2025, https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/communities/northern-ireland-housing-bulletin-july-september-2025.html#Section_Two:_Social_Renting_Demand.

10 Joseph Rowntree Foundation, “Poverty in Northern Ireland 2025”, 2025, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/poverty-in-northern-ireland-2025>

11 Maguire et al., “Residential segregation, dividing walls and mental health: a population-based record linkage study”, *Journal of*

Taken together with evidence that the 20% most deprived communities in Northern Ireland are concentrated near “peace walls” that physically separate residential areas, this suggests a consistent relationship between socio-economic deprivation, health inequalities, and spatial segregation in housing.¹²

Consequently, the price of continued shortfalls in social housing supply and investment is likely to be high, given the growing levels of need and the cost to ongoing public service provision. By integrating the promise of shared housing with investment in social housing supply and regeneration, there is potential to simultaneously address closely related policy problems: housing insecurity, socio-economic inequalities, and the promotion of a more cohesive community.

c. International context

International experience demonstrates that housing policy can play a central part in post-conflict peacebuilding, particularly where communities are divided. A notable example of where housing featured prominently in post-conflict peacebuilding efforts is Bosnia-Herzegovina. This case study provides lessons on where strategic attention can be directed in order to maximize the success of shared housing.

Firstly, following the Bosnian War between 1992 and 1995, one of the key questions facing decision-makers was how to enable the return of people displaced by the process of ethnic cleansing, which had taken place during the conflict. As one of the characteristics of the conflict had been the forced movement of Bosnian Muslims across the territory, an objective reached in the Dayton Peace Agreement, which concluded the conflict, was the idea of property restitution. As part of this, a Commission for Real Property Claims was set up to receive residential claims for people displaced by the conflict. This was based on the principles of a human right for refugees to return to their home following conflict and a belief that restitution of property was a core component in regenerating the rule of law through a just process of redressing grievances for minority communities.¹³

The program of property restitution in post-conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina yielded mixed results. On one hand, the percentage of successful restitution claims from people who were displaced by the conflict was very high, with 92% of claims resulting in restitution of vacated housing units by 1999. However, in practice, not everyone who received a successful¹⁴ restitution claim was able to return to their pre-war home due to limited funding for rebuilding destroyed homes, poor economic opportunities, and social infrastructure. For instance, a 2006 report by the Berghof Foundation highlighted that unemployment amongst returnees in some rural areas of Eastern Bosnia topped 50%, with the industrial jobs that returnees had held before the conflict no longer existing. This

“90% of social housing is concentrated in segregated areas of Northern Ireland, despite survey data indicating that about 78% of people would prefer to live in a mixed neighborhood.”

Epidemiology and Community Health, 2016.

12 Garbutt, Nick, “The true cost of deprivation and division”, ScopeNI, 2023, <https://scopeni.nicva.org/article/the-true-cost-of-deprivation-and-division.html#:~:text=The%20report%20states:%20%E2%80%9C86%25,can%20even%20approach%20reconciliation%20here.%E2%80%9D>

13 Katanyagi, M., “Property restitution and the rule of law in peacebuilding: examining the applicability of the Bosnian model”, Annual World Bank Conference on Land and Property, 2014.

14 Forced Migration Review, “Property rights and reconstruction in the Bosnian return process”, 2015.

created barriers for the reintegration of¹⁵ multi-ethnic communities in Bosnia-Herzegovina, reinforcing conflict divisions.

The Bosnia-Herzegovina case demonstrates the importance of housing rights in providing a just response to the events of conflict. Being assured of a secure, good-quality home on the same terms as your neighbors is crucial to establishing confidence in peacebuilding efforts and to giving conflict-affected populations a stake in a post-conflict society. Nevertheless, integrating divided communities through housing cannot simply be about meeting targets; place-based dynamics are fundamental to ensuring that communities are stable and cohesive.

While the nature of conflict in Northern Ireland and Bosnia-Herzegovina differs, similar lessons can be drawn on how to maximize the chances of success of a post-conflict housing policy. For shared housing in Northern Ireland to have its desired impact, it is vital that the Executive and stakeholders in the housing sector plan effectively. It is important that the right mix of housing types is agreed for developments, that consensus is built so that it carries the widest possible support, and finally, that supporting infrastructure is invested in, providing residents with access to employment opportunities, transport links, schools, and services.

d. Getting the Mix Right

As noted, shared housing remains largely siloed as a peacebuilding initiative of the Executive and is subject to fiscal tightening and de-prioritization, even amid the pressing need to increase housing supply more generally. Nevertheless, the choice between shared housing and greater housing supply need not be an either-or dilemma for decision-makers. Recent

developments in the Executive's wider housing policies offer insights into how shared housing could be integrated with the broader goal of increasing the overall number of homes, particularly through the Department for Communities (DfC)'s embrace of mixed-tenure development.

Mixed-tenure development involves a combination of owner-occupier, private rental, and social homes on the same site. It has been identified as a catalyst for building more sustainable communities by reducing place-based stigma, promoting a more cohesive sense of community, improving socio-economic opportunity, and enhancing the mental health and well-being of residents. As the DfC's draft thinkpiece on mixed-tenure housing notes, Northern Ireland could gain a 'unique benefit' from 'supporting greater integration in terms of shared housing and shared space.'¹⁶ Through mixed-tenure development, residents could be offered greater access to shared housing, supporting both choice and integration of communities.

It is worth reflecting on research into the cross-cutting benefits of mixed-tenure development, which could position it as a tool to advance the Executive's commitment to shared housing and increase housing supply. These benefits can be categorized into two areas: the compatibility of outcomes and a cost-effective mechanism to incentivize development more generally.

e. Compatibility of Objectives

Mixed-tenure development has been highlighted for its role in reducing the stigma associated with single-tenure social housing estates, which are often related with higher levels of poverty, poor health outcomes, and lower educational attainment.¹⁷ Research in England and Northern Ireland suggests that tenants in mixed-tenure estates report satisfaction with their area, stronger social links, and better access to economic opportunities than tenants in single-tenure neighborhoods.¹⁸

15 Kleck, Monika, "Refugee Return – Success Story or Bad Dream? A Review from Eastern Bosnia", Berghof Foundation 2006.

16 Department for Communities, "Mainstreaming Mixed-Tenure in Northern Ireland", 2018, Mainstreaming Mixed-Tenure in Northern Ireland | Department for Communities

17 Spatial Economics Research Centre, "Policies for 'Mixed Communities': A Critical Evaluation" (June 2008), 2008, <https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/sercpp002.pdf>

18 Joseph Rowntree Foundation, "UK Poverty 2023", 2023, <https://jrf-jrht-brand.frontify.com/api/asset/eyJjbGllbnRJZC16ImNsaWVudC10enFieWtsc2Z0ZHp0N3V3IiwiaWQiOiJ0J05NTGslbnRpbWVzdGFtcCI6MTcyNjY3Mzc2NSwidmVyc2lvcil6MTc>

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Shared housing therefore shares complementary objectives with mixed tenure, particularly in promoting cross-community integration and choice for tenants. The social and economic opportunities observed in mixed-tenure schemes, such as access to local networks and improved social cohesion, directly reinforce the aims of shared housing. Moreover, in both shared housing and mixed tenure, exposure to a diverse resident mix supports attitudinal shifts and intercultural understanding, reducing social isolation and the risks of entrenched division.

f. Cost Effectiveness and Development Levers

Mixed-tenure housing also acts as a cost-effective mechanism for increasing housing supply while supporting community integration. By combining tenures, developers can cross-subsidize social homes through higher value owner-occupier or private rental units, reducing reliance on high levels of public capital to develop single-tenure estates¹⁹. This is particularly significant given the deficit of around 1,200 new social homes in Northern Ireland. The incentives for development specific to mixed-tenure housing allow for complementary shared housing to be embedded at scale without creating significant additional funding pressures.

Furthermore, mixed-tenure schemes can attract wider investment in infrastructure and services, further strengthening the benefits of integration. Statutory agencies and housing associations are more likely to prioritize areas where developments are economically viable, while private investment is encouraged when developments combine a mixture of tenures with accessible public space, transport, and community facilities.²⁰ To this end, mixed tenure functions as a way to mainstream shared housing rather than confining it to small, specialist schemes, simultaneously increasing housing supply and encouraging integration.

g. Lessons for Integrating Shared Housing and Development

Guiding principles for integrating shared housing into mainstream housing supply in Northern Ireland can be drawn from existing evidence on the wider benefits of mixed-tenure development. These lessons can be summarized as follows:

- **Mainstream:** Ensuring that shared housing is embedded within mixed-tenure developments normalizes integrated community living and allows integration to be achieved at scale rather than through isolated projects.
- **Strategic housing allocation:** A balance of tenures, incomes, and identities across estates reduces the risk of communities becoming concentrated on identity or income. 3. **Financial efficiency:** The financial burden on Executive finances to deliver social housing is reduced due to cross-subsidization of social housing units by developers in financially viable housing projects.
- **Supportive infrastructure:** Mixed-tenure developments create a platform to align housing with employment opportunities, community facilities, and shared spaces, enhancing social and economic outcomes for tenants.

Overall, mixed-tenure approaches to housing supply act as a policy bridge for shared housing in Northern Ireland, reconciling the need for more homes with the aims of supporting social integration. Building on the principles drawn from the evidence on mixed-tenure development, the following recommendations will detail how housing policy can be optimized to deliver a more sustainable and socially cohesive housing system in Northern Ireland.

Recommendations

To translate evidence into actionable policy, the Northern Ireland Executive should take an integrated approach, aligning shared housing principles with mixed-tenure development and wider housing supply policy. The recommendations below focus on the planning system to ensure that shared housing becomes mainstream, scalable, and financially viable, as this is the policy area that underpins broader housing policy.

To improve the delivery of shared housing, the Executive should strengthen planning policies so that new developments provide an appropriate number of social homes while remaining financially viable for developers.

Under current planning rules, new developments in Northern Ireland must address specific housing needs in the locality in which they are built, with a proportion of these newbuild units required to meet the definition of “affordable housing.”²¹ In practice, this means either social housing for rent, or intermediate housing for rent or sale. In other words, private housing may be offered to would-be homeowners or tenants at incentivized rates.

While these planning measures aim to promote a mix of tenures, ambiguity over the definition of “affordable housing” often leads to private ownership units being prioritized over social housing. Unlike other UK regions—England, Scotland, and Wales—the share of social housing funded through developer contributions (“planning gain”) is limited, relying heavily on public grants provided by the DfC. Local assessments of housing must be carried out and then advised to planners, who can then include sites in NIHE’s Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP), which is overwhelmingly supported by public grant funding.²²

As we have already seen, the SHDP falls short by 1,200 social homes, and existing planning guidance is not fully realizing its potential to expand social housing. To better align the planning system with housing need and deliver greater volumes of mixed-tenure social homes in a financially effective way, this paper proposes the following steps:

- **The Department for Infrastructure should update its Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) to clarify the definition of “affordable housing”** to reflect the strategic need for local development plans to support the delivery of additional social homes. This would ensure that local councils receive clearer guidance when preparing local development plans to support local housing needs, and would reduce the ambiguity that allows affordable housing quotas to be met by intermediate private housing rather than social housing.
- **The Executive should create a council-led working group to coordinate the rollout of the developer contributions for affordable housing across local development plans.** This working group would develop consistent guidance on how planning agreements are used to secure social housing within mixed-tenure developments, while working with developers to assess their viability. Through strengthening the use of ‘planning gain’ mechanisms, local councils could unlock an additional funding stream for social housing delivery, reducing reliance on public grant funding through the SDHP.
- **Local development partnerships should be developed in areas with significant housing demand to support the delivery of social homes within mixed-tenure developments.** These partnerships would involve local councils, housing associations, and private developers to coordinate the delivery of sites, pooling developer contributions and public funding to support more social housing. As an institutionalized pathway for development, the expertise and resources within these partnerships could complement the SDHP and enable social housing to be more effectively delivered within mixed-tenure developments.

21 Department for Infrastructure, “Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS), Edition 2”, 2025, <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-12/The%20SPPS%2C%20Edition%202%20%28December%202025%29.pdf>.

22 Department for Communities, “Development and associated procurement approaches”, 2026, <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/development-and-associated-procurement-approaches?>

These recommendations would help put housing needs in Northern Ireland more explicitly at the heart of planning guidance, open up new private funding streams to complement overstretched public grant funding for social housing, and create collaborative arrangements to deliver more social housing in mixed-tenure developments where it is most needed.

Conclusion

This paper has set out how Northern Ireland experiences ongoing social division and spatial inequality through its housing system, highlighting the costs of ongoing community segregation in both human and financial terms.

Through synthesizing insights from two promising strands of Northern Ireland Executive housing policy, shared housing and mixed-tenure development, an original framework for integrating shared community living into broader housing supply in Northern Ireland has been established. It is hoped that this will offer policymakers in the Executive a practical way forward that is financially effective and has cross-cutting benefits for their policies to promote social cohesion and wellbeing.

Finally, a suite of recommendations for reforming Northern Ireland's planning system has been outlined to ensure that housing delivery systems are optimized to tackle spatial inequality, promote good relations through a mix of housing tenures, and support the delivery of more social housing units in a challenging fiscal environment.

While what has been proposed in this paper cannot address all the outstanding policy challenges posed by ongoing social division in Northern Ireland, the analysis and recommendations offered are designed to serve as a strategic enabler for the Executive's work to build a more cohesive and prosperous community.

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From Lived Experience to Law:

Grassroots Campaigns and Democratic Change in Northern Ireland

by Máirtín Mac Gabhann

Executive Summary

Northern Ireland continues to face a growing disconnect between people and policymaking, shaped by repeated periods of political instability, delays in decision-making, and a wider sense that institutions are slow to respond to everyday issues. This paper examines the role that story-driven, grassroots campaigns can play in bridging this divide.

Analyzing the Donate4Dáithí campaign as a case study reveals the way in which lived experience, in tandem with a clear and focused policy ask, can influence decision-making when backed by sustained public engagement. The campaign demonstrates, in practice, that the efforts of comparable social movements are not limited only to raising awareness of important issues but can aid in shaping their outcomes by influencing the direction of policy.

The Donate4Dáithí campaign led to the introduction of Dáithí's Law, establishing a soft opt-out system for organ donation in Northern Ireland.

To strengthen democratic resilience, this paper identifies several practical steps centered on establishing structured lived experience mechanisms, improving administrative response times, and formalizing cross-party collaboration to ensure policymaking remains responsive to those it affects, even during periods of political stasis.

Key Recommendations

- Establish structured public engagement and remunerated lived experience mechanisms
- Improve response times through administrative mandates that persist during Assembly suspension.
- Formalize cross-party collaboration through Statutory Working Groups to build pre-legislative consensus.



Introduction

There is a real disconnect between people and policymaking in Northern Ireland. This is reflected in public attitudes, with survey data *Political Attitudes in Northern Ireland 25 Years after the Agreement* indicating low levels of trust in political institutions. Only 17 per cent of respondents expressed trust in the Northern Ireland Executive, while 52 per cent reported distrust, pointing to a wider issue in how institutions are experienced by the public.¹ Low levels of trust such as this matter because they weaken public engagement with democratic processes, reducing confidence in decision-making and increasing the distance between institutions and the people they serve.

Northern Ireland's consociational system of governance, which requires opposing political parties to share power, has resulted in a volatile and unstable system, with frequent collapses and long periods of stasis that have weakened trust in democratic structures.

The failure to deliver effective governance has a real impact on people's daily lives; Northern Ireland has the longest waitlists for healthcare in the United Kingdom, homelessness is at a record high, and long-term infrastructure planning rarely gets off the ground. The stop-start nature of Northern Ireland's political system often forces civil society, and individuals to intervene to force legislative change. Building a campaign within a divided political system prone to collapse does however pose its challenges; Legislative bills get shelved, and campaigns lose momentum.

Yet, change is still possible. Individuals and civil society-led campaigns have forced legislative changes in several areas including language rights, abortion access, citizenship, and climate law. Each of these campaigns found ways to progress change despite the limits of Northern Ireland's political system. That is where the *Donate4Dáithí* campaign sits.

When my son Dáithí was placed on the heart transplant waiting list, I encountered a system where lived experience was not immediately recognized as something that could shape policy. At the beginning, I was often seen as a parent with a story, rather than someone who could contribute to how decisions were made. There have also been previous attempts to progress organ donation legislation, including work brought forward by Joanne Dobson MLA, which had not succeeded. That history made it more difficult to bring the issue back onto the agenda. What began as a personal situation became a national campaign with a clear mission; introducing a soft opt-out organ donation system in Northern Ireland.

The passing of Dáithí's Law by the Northern Ireland Assembly was a significant political moment. One week later, the government collapsed. At that point, the process could have stalled. Instead, the *Donate4Dáithí* campaign adapted, utilizing Northern Ireland's unique position within the United Kingdom to secure a political intervention from the UK government.

This paper draws directly from that experience. It uses *Donate4Dáithí* as a case study to examine how grassroots campaigns have circumvented an elite-driven political system to deliver effective change. The objective is to formulate a series of practical policy recommendations that can bridge the divide between grassroots campaigns and the political elite to strengthen democratic resilience and policymaking.

Research Context & Background

a. Political Context and Institutional Instability

The political system in Northern Ireland is built around the Good Friday Agreement and employs a structure of power-sharing between unionist and nationalist parties to maintain balance and stability

¹ Katy Hayward and Ben Rosher, *Political Attitudes in Northern Ireland 25 Years after the Agreement*, ARK Research Update no. 151 (Belfast: ARK, 2023).

in a post-conflict society.

However, this arrangement also presents challenges; the system depends on parties working together, and when cooperation breaks down, the institutions can stop functioning. This has happened on multiple occasions, including in 2017 and 2022, resulting in extended periods without a functioning Executive. During these periods, policymaking slows significantly or stops altogether.

In some cases, responsibility then falls to Westminster. While this can enable the undertaking of crucial decision-making procedures, it also widens the distance between local communities and policymaking, with choices being made on behalf of Northern Ireland that may not reflect the interests of those ultimately affected by them.

b. How Policymaking Currently Works

In theory, policymaking in Northern Ireland follows a structured process. Legislation is introduced as Bills, debated within the Assembly, reviewed by committees, and progressed through several stages before receiving Royal Assent.

There are also formal mechanisms for public engagement. These include consultations, committee evidence sessions, and opportunities for stakeholders to contribute to policy discussions.

In practice, however, access to these processes can be limited. Engagement through consultations and committee evidence sessions often take place at later stages, after key decisions have already been shaped. It is not always clear how individuals or groups can participate effectively.

Limited access to policymaking processes, combined with late-stage engagement, creates a gap between policy design and lived experience. While the system is representative in structure, it does not always feel participatory to those engaging with it.

c. Public Relations, Public Affairs, and Advocacy

Public relations and public affairs play a central role in shaping how issues are communicated and understood by the public and policy makers. Public relations focus on communication between organizations and their publics,² while public affairs relate more directly to engagement with political and policy environments.³

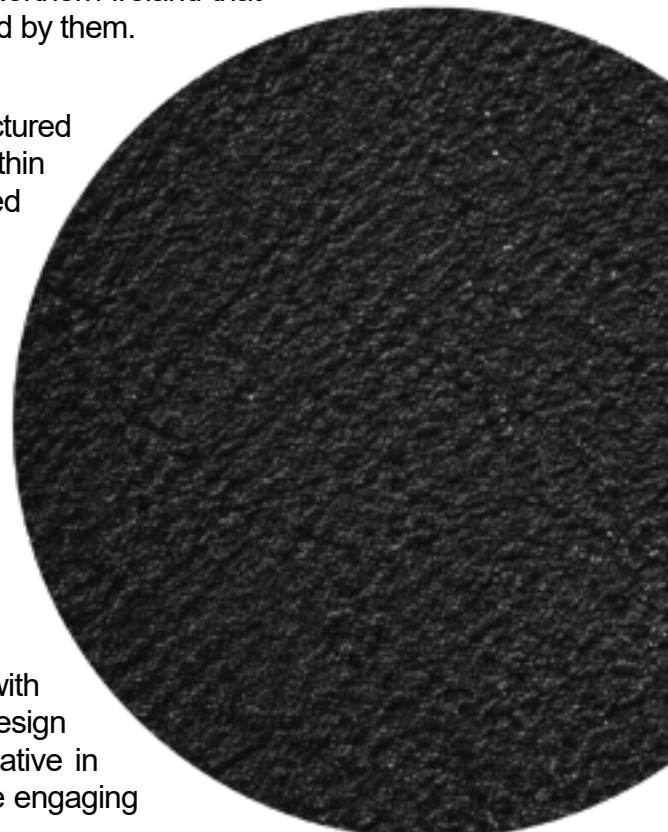
In practice, this involves shaping how issues are presented, understood, and prioritized. It can include media engagement, stakeholder management, and direct communication with policymakers. Lobbying, as a subset of public affairs, focuses on influencing specific policy decisions.⁴

These approaches are often employed by larger organizations but are also accessible to grassroots groups; influence is not determined solely by financial resources, but by clarity of message, public support, and sustained engagement.

d. The Role of Grassroots Campaigning

Grassroots campaigns are typically driven by individuals or communities directly affected by an issue. They often begin without formal structures, emerging from lived experience rather than strategic planning.

Despite limited resources, these campaigns can be effective. Their strength lies in their ability



2 James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt, *Managing Public Relations* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984).

3 Phil Harris, Craig S. Fleisher, and Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, eds., *The Handbook of Public Affairs* (London: Sage, 1999).

4 Sam Black, *Practical Public Relations* (London: Kogan Page, 2013).

to connect with people on a more personal level, allowing issues to be communicated in a familiar, more relatable way. Research by McHale and McGrath highlights the role of framing and communication in shaping public opinion and influencing policy.⁵⁶ Campaigns also build strength through coalition-building, bringing together organizations and individuals with shared objectives. However, challenges remain; navigating policymaking systems can be complex, access to decision-making processes is not always clear, and institutional power remains concentrated.⁷

Despite these challenges, grassroots campaigning provides a pathway for participation. It enables individuals and communities to move from observation to engagement, contributing to shaping policy outcomes.

Grassroots campaigning has been influential in bringing about social change in Northern Ireland for decades, in a manner that may not have been possible within the framework of official political processes. Instead, grassroots campaigns tend to emerge because of circumstances in which people believe that action must be taken to address problems arising within the community, when existing policies fail to resolve the issues affecting residents daily, especially when they feel that they have been underrepresented or overlooked.

One prominent example of this was the civil rights movement of the late 1960s. The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA), formed in 1967, concentrated on issues such as voting rights, housing allocation, and discrimination. During this period, these issues were not adequately resolved through proper policies, and NICRA brought attention to them by protesting and demonstrating.

Another instance is the formation of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition in 1996. This political organization emerged outside established political parties and was geared towards ensuring representation during political negotiations, including the Good Friday Agreement.

This history of challenging the political elite has continued post-Good Friday Agreement with a new generation of activists pushing back against traditional top-down processes and political inertia. In 2019, the Alliance for Choice campaign successfully decriminalized abortion in Northern Ireland, using the collapse of Northern Ireland's devolved institutions to force Westminster to intervene and make the changes on behalf of the Northern Ireland government. The campaign used strategic litigation to apply political pressure, with an individual, Sarah Ewart, taking a personal case through the courts after being denied an abortion in Northern Ireland despite a fatal fetal diagnosis, contributing to wider legal and political pressure for change. That same year, the Love Equality campaign for same-sex marriage followed a similar approach, using the absence of Northern Ireland's devolved institutions to push for legislative change through Westminster.

Other notable examples include Irish language rights, climate legislation, stalking legislation, and citizenship rights. In the case of the 2022 Climate Change Act, a coalition of over 30 civil society

“Storytelling is more than just a communication tool; it is a bridge that connects the lived reality of individuals with the technical world of legislation. It humanizes the policy process, making it impossible for decision-makers to ignore the real-world consequences of their actions.”

5 John McHale, *Public Relations and Social Theory: Key Figures and Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2004).

6 Conor McGrath, “Framing Lobbying Messages: Defining and Communicating Political Issues Persuasively,” *Journal of Public Affairs* 7, no. 3 (2007): 269–280.

7 Alnoor Ebrahim, “Accountability in Practice: Mechanisms for NGOs,” *World Development* 31, no. 5 (2003): 813–829.

organisations drafted alternative legislation that was stronger than the government's proposal and submitted it through a Private Members' Bill. This approach not only challenged the government's position but provided the Northern Ireland Assembly with a workable alternative.

The use of Westminster legislation during periods of institutional collapse became a recurring pathway for change. However, over time, this approach became more restricted, with greater caution around attaching additional measures to Executive Formation and related legislation. This made it more difficult for subsequent campaigns to follow the same route, increasing the challenge of securing legislative change. By the time the Donate4Dáithí campaign sought legislative change, this route had become more constrained, requiring a different approach and ongoing engagement to achieve the same outcome.

Across these examples, several consistent features can be identified. Campaigning often emerges where existing policy fails to address an issue affecting people directly, and from this, several common approaches can be observed.

First, the use of storytelling and lived experience plays a central role. In several cases, individual experiences helped bring attention to the issue and made it more accessible to the public.

Second, there is usually a clear and focused policy ask. Campaigns that have been effective tend to be built around a specific objective, whether that is legislative change, reform, or the introduction of a new framework.

Third, campaigns often build cross-sector support. This includes collaboration between community groups, civil society organizations, and advocacy networks, which helps to strengthen credibility and increase reach.

Fourth, the use of media is consistent across these examples. Maintaining visibility and keeping the issue in public discussion is a key part of building and sustaining pressure.

Finally, in some cases, strategic litigation is used alongside campaigning to challenge existing law and create additional pressure for change.

These features can be observed across different campaigns in Northern Ireland, despite differences in issue or context. They form the basis of how grassroots campaigns operate in practice. Rather than sitting outside the system, they are connected to it and play a role in shaping how issues are raised, understood, and addressed.

Argument & Analysis

Changing the law is a complex and formidable endeavor under the best of circumstances, and changing it at Stormont, when there isn't even a sitting government, is another thing entirely. The Donate4Dáithí campaign didn't begin as a policy campaign. It started with my son. Dáithí has been waiting on a heart transplant since 2018. At the beginning, the focus was purely on raising awareness around organ donation. But it didn't take long to realize that awareness on its own wasn't going to change anything. If lives were going to be saved, then the law would have to change. That's where the shift occurred, and we moved from talking about the issue to trying to act on it.

At the center of the campaign was a clear policy ask: introduce a soft opt-out organ donation system in Northern Ireland. It was straightforward and the proposal resonated with both the public and policymakers. The presence of a clear and focused policy ask gave the campaign a clear direction and something that others could support. This reflects a wider pattern within grassroots campaigning; campaigns that succeed tend to move beyond awareness and towards a defined outcome. Similar approaches can be seen in Irish language campaigning, particularly through An Dream Dearg, where a clear and sustained focus on legislative change, combined with public pressure, contributed to the passing of the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022. In both cases, the presence of a specific legislative aim, combined with sustained visibility through media engagement, public events, and ongoing stakeholder communication, made it more difficult for the issue to be delayed or set aside. The campaign developed over a sustained period rather

than through a single event, with different elements, including media engagement, political outreach, and community support, coming together to create sustained pressure through repeated engagement with policymakers, consistent media coverage, and ongoing public support.

Storytelling was a key part of how the campaign gained traction. Dáithí's situation provided a clear, relatable example of the impact of organ donation policy, focusing attention on the lived consequences rather than abstract policy language or statistics. Research supports the role of storytelling and framing in shaping how issues are understood and responded to.⁸ In this case, the story did not just raise awareness; it created support and maintained attention. However, the story alone would not have been enough.

Relationships were equally important in building trust and securing access to decision-makers. Engagement took place across all political parties, with a deliberate decision to keep the campaign outside of party politics and ensure that the focus remained on the outcome. This helped build trust and created space for cross-party support, a strategy that is recognized as a key factor in effective advocacy.⁹ Cross-party engagement did take place during the campaign, but it was informal and relied on individual relationships rather than any structured mechanism within the policymaking process.

Comparable structured approaches exist in other contexts, including multi-sector agreements such as the Danish Climate Act and independent advisory bodies such as Canada's National Housing Council, where collaboration between political actors and stakeholders is formalized within the policy development process. The absence of similar mechanisms in Northern Ireland meant that cross-party support relied heavily on informal engagement rather than embedded structures.

Consistency was also instrumental. And then there was just showing up. Keeping the issue visible required showing up again across media, schools, public events, and meetings. Once an issue drops off the agenda, it becomes much harder to bring it back. Sustained engagement is identified in research as central to maintaining momentum and influencing outcomes.¹⁰ There were points where this approach was tested, particularly during periods of political instability when the Assembly was not functioning and the campaign risked losing momentum.

Dáithí's Law passed the Assembly with support from all major parties. Shortly thereafter, the government collapsed, and with it, the campaign lost its primary route for engagement. There was no Assembly, no Executive, and no clear process to follow. The expectation at that point was to wait for restoration and for the system to return. That did not happen. Instead, the approach shifted; engagement moved towards the Secretary of State and the Northern Ireland Office. Previous instances of Westminster intervention were used to frame the argument, positioning the issue as one of public interest rather than political debate. Through this effort, the campaign had maintained pressure despite the absence of a functioning Assembly.

This shift in approach, particularly engaging with the UK Government during the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly, resulted in the British Government legislating at Westminster, with cross-party support. This outcome highlights an important point; grassroots campaigns, when structured around a clear ask, supported by public engagement, and sustained over time, can operate both within and outside formal political structures, unbound to standard legislative and decision-making processes within the Northern Ireland Assembly. At the same time, the experience also highlights the limitations within the Northern Ireland policymaking system. Delays are a consistent issue. Momentum can be built and support can be earned, and yet progress can stall due to slow responses and extended timelines. This impacts both campaigners and outcomes.

8 Anne Gregory, *Planning and Managing Public Relations Campaigns: A Strategic Approach*, 3rd ed. (London: Kogan Page, 2010).

9 Jeffrey M. Berry, *Lobbying for the People: The Political Behavior of Public Interest Groups* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977).

10 John McHale, *Public Relations and Social Theory: Key Figures and Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2004).

Access to policymakers and formal decision-making processes is also limited; when formal structures are not functioning, there is often no clear alternative route for engagement, and campaigners are left navigating systems without clear guidance.

In addition, lived experience is frequently introduced too late in the process. By the time engagement takes place, key decisions have often already been shaped. This creates a gap between how policymaking is intended to operate and how it is experienced in practice. From this, several consistent factors can be identified. A defined objective is required, without which, progress is unlikely. Public support is also necessary. Without it, there is no pressure. Relationships matter as well, and access is limited without them. And persistence is essential, particularly in the face of delay.

This approach, based on a clear policy ask, public engagement, and sustained pressure, is not limited to one campaign. Similar methods have been applied in other areas, including work relating to post-19 Special Educational Needs through Caleb's Cause. This suggests that the model is transferable. Grassroots campaigns do not replace formal policymaking structures. They improve the quality of policymaking by bringing forward lived experience, identifying gaps in existing policy, and maintaining pressure where institutional processes stall. In doing so, they create a stronger connection between policymakers and lived experience, ensuring that policy is more reflective of the realities people are experiencing.

In many cases, campaigns have operated outside formal political structures, often with limited resources, yet have still delivered legislative changes. This suggests that grassroots advocacy is not separate from policymaking, but a contributing part of it.

Rather than being viewed as external pressure, there is a case for integrating grassroots engagement more formally within policymaking processes. Establishing structured public engagement mechanisms, embedding lived experience within policymaking, and formalizing cross-party collaboration could strengthen both participation and outcomes.

In a political context such as Northern Ireland, where decision-making can be delayed or disrupted, this becomes particularly significant.

Policy Recommendations

The disconnect in Northern Ireland isn't just about communication; it's about how the system works. Engagement is not just about giving people a chance to take part; it has an impact on outcomes. When lived experience is part of the process, policy is more grounded and more likely to be supported.

1. Establish structured public engagement and lived experience mechanisms

Information on access points to policymakers is currently limited and ad hoc. To address this, a central public engagement portal should be established, allowing issues from the public and civil society to be submitted and directed to the appropriate policy team. This should be supported by a clear engagement protocol setting out how government departments and policy teams respond to and engage with campaigns.

This should be complemented by the introduction of structured lived experience mechanisms within policymaking. This could include the use of citizens' assemblies, as outlined in *New Decade, New Approach*, as well as participatory mechanisms such as participatory budgeting, which has been used in cities such as New York to give communities a direct role in decision-making. It could also include the development of 'experts by experience' panels, like those used within NHS trusts in England. In addition, co-design approaches, such as the Scottish Approach to service design, could be embedded within policy development processes to ensure that lived experience informs decision-making from the outset.

These panels should be framed as a specialized evidence stream rather than a replacement for elected representatives. By treating lived experience with the rigor of statistical data, policymakers reduce the risk of implementation failure. To ensure diversity and avoid the "usual suspects" trap, participation should be supported by a formal remuneration policy (covering travel and time), ensuring

policymaking is inclusive of those who cannot afford to volunteer.

2. Improve response times and communication

Response times to campaigns and civil society should be timebound, with a requirement that substantive responses are provided within 30 days.

These protocols should be established as administrative mandates. This ensures that departmental policy teams continue to provide technical feedback and gather evidence even during Ministerial absence or Executive collapse. This administrative bridge prevents the loss of momentum that currently characterizes Northern Ireland's stop-start political cycle.

3. Formalize cross-party collaboration on social issues

Cross-party collaboration on social issues should be formalized through statutory Working Groups.

Unlike the current informal All-Party Groups (APGs), these should be a formal requirement within the departmental policy-design stage.

While international models like the Danish Climate Act are binding legislative frameworks, their success is built on the same principle of pre-legislative consensus that these proposed Working Groups would provide. By addressing complex social issues before they reach the adversarial environment of the Assembly floor, these groups reduce the likelihood of veto mechanisms being used to stall progress. These groups should operate on a principle of "Sufficient Consensus"—ensuring that a significant majority agreement between parties and lived-experience partners allows a proposal to advance, preventing a single party from unilaterally halting the design phase behind closed doors.

Risk Mitigation and System Resilience

For these recommendations to be effective, the system must account for the specific hurdles of a consociational government. The following measures ensure that grassroots engagement is protected from institutional failure:

- **Addressing Northern Ireland's "Veto Culture":** As noted, Statutory Working Groups should operate on the principle of "Sufficient Consensus." This forces any opposition into the public arena of the Assembly rather than allowing it to happen behind closed doors during the design phase.
- **Administrative Continuity:** Framing engagement protocols as non-discretionary administrative duties ensures that civil servants are mandated to continue co-designing policy with grassroots groups during stasis. This ensures that when the Assembly is restored, a suite of "oven-ready" social legislation is waiting.
- **Safeguarding Against Gatekeeping:** Direct access via a Central Public Engagement Portal ensures the merit of a policy ask is judged on its impact and evidence rather than its political alignment or the influence of local gatekeepers.

Conclusion

If these changes were put in place, the impact would go beyond individual campaigns. It would change how people experience the system. Engagement would feel clearer. Communication would be more consistent. And progress would be more visible.

At present, many people feel removed from policymaking. Decisions can feel distant, and involvement can feel limited. This contributes to frustration and, over time, disengagement.

From experience, engagement often involves navigating processes that are not always clear. There are delays, limited feedback, and uncertainty around where decisions sit. Even where there is support and agreement, progress can stall.

The Donate4Dáithí campaign shows that change is possible within that context. It also shows the level of sustained effort required to achieve it, often at a high personal cost. Addressing this cannot sit with campaigners alone.

Ultimately, formalizing these processes ensures that engagement is not lost when progress is delayed. It creates continuity, so that work done by campaigners, policymakers, and communities carries forward rather than starting again each time the system resets. It also creates a clear record of engagement and evidence, ensuring that even where progress is delayed, there is a foundation to support future legislative efforts or, where necessary, judicial review. Strengthening access would contribute to more effective, responsive, and life-saving outcomes.

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Máirtín Mac Gabhann

Founder and Campaign Manager, Donate4Dáithí

Máirtín Mac Gabhann is a campaigner, communicator, and changemaker based in Belfast, Northern Ireland. He is the father of Dáithí, a young boy born with half a working heart who has spent nearly seven years on the heart transplant waiting list. Máirtín co-founded and leads the Donate4Dáithí campaign, which successfully led to the introduction of Dáithí's Law - Northern Ireland's soft opt-out organ donation system. It became the first major piece of health legislation passed during a political deadlock, setting a precedent for people-powered policy change.

Even after Dáithí's Law came into effect in 2023, Máirtín continues to raise awareness about organ donation and stays active in public engagement. He has supported other families, charities, and grassroots campaigns in both health and education. Máirtín's work is inspired by spotting gaps in systems and then working to bridge those gaps by using storytelling, lobbying, and communication.

Alongside his organ donation advocacy, Máirtín works closely with sector leaders, government officials, and civil society groups to push for change and open new routes for progress. He was awarded an MBE for his contribution to organ donation and is a regular speaker at events involving policymakers, healthcare professionals, and universities. His campaigns have been featured across national and regional media and are recognised for shifting narratives and delivering impact.

With a background in education, strong public affairs experience, and a proven ability to turn lived experience into public policy, Máirtín is committed to creating meaningful and lasting change. He is particularly interested in connecting local action with global learning, and in exploring how Northern Ireland's experience can shape conversations on democratic resilience, community leadership, and transatlantic cooperation.

From Brain Drain to Brain Gain – A Transatlantic Talent Alliance to Strengthen Northern Ireland’s United States FDI Competitiveness

A delivery plan to retain, return and attract skilled talent through a U.S.– Northern Ireland Innovation Corridor

by Malachy McManus

Executive Summary

Northern Ireland’s ability to attract and retain high-value US foreign direct investment (FDI) is increasingly constrained by talent outflow and emerging skills shortages in knowledge intensive sectors. While the region maintains strong economic ties with the United States and benefits from dual market access to Great Britain and the European Union, a persistent “brain drain” sees many highly skilled graduates leave with limited rates of return, weakening the talent pipeline that underpins US-linked investment.

Recent empirical studies show that workforce depth, rather than cost advantage, is now the primary factor for securing and upgrading FDI mandates¹. As global competition intensifies and Artificial Intelligence (AI) adoption raises skill thresholds, Northern Ireland risks losing future investment to locations with deeper and more mobile talent pools.

To address this challenge, a coordinated transatlantic approach is needed to transform outward mobility into talent circulation. This paper proposes a Transatlantic Talent Compact to strengthen return pathways, diaspora engagement, and US-Northern Ireland workforce partnerships, ensuring the region remains a leading destination for US investment in the AI era.

Recommendations:

- Establish a Transatlantic Brain Gain Program to incentivize skilled talent return
- Launch two-way executive and specialist exchanges with US firms
- Create a Joint innovation and mandate upgrading fund focused on AI and advanced skills
- Enhance transatlantic business connectivity and collaboration

1 Becker, Bettina, Nigel Driffeld, Sandra Lancheros and James H.Love. 2020 “FDI in Hot Labour Markets: The implications of the War for Talent.” *Journal of international Business Policy* 3:107-133. <https://doi.org/10/1057/s/42214-020-00052-y>

Introduction

Northern Ireland's strategic economic ties with the United States are enduring. Commercial links date back to the 18th century, when Irish linen and provisions were shipped to the American colonies. This relationship was officially formalised in 1796, when the US established its first consulate in Belfast—making it the oldest continuous US consular post in the world². Today, these historic foundations are reinforced by ongoing US investment, influential diaspora networks, and bipartisan support in Washington, all of which underpin Northern Ireland's transformation and its continued global competitiveness.

In 2023, UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak described Northern Ireland as “the world's most exciting economic zone,” emphasising its unique post Brexit advantage of tariff free access to both GB and the EU³. For US firms, the appeal is clear. Northern Ireland offers dual-market reach from a “single base”, with operating costs 40–55 percent lower than much of Western Europe⁴. Northern Ireland's Atlantic time zone enables “follow-the-sun” delivery, allowing problems from US operations to be resolved overnight in Northern Ireland before American teams start their day⁵.

Recent investment announcements confirm ongoing US interest in Northern Ireland. In September 2025, major US financial firms pledged over £1.25 billion in new UK investment, with Bank of America creating 1,000 new jobs in Belfast⁶. The pipeline is active, however the challenge is ensuring Northern Ireland can develop and retain the skilled talent required to sustain this level of investment. Northern Ireland's economic strengths are reinforced by deep US ties, from peace process cooperation to diaspora networks that convert relationships into investment opportunities. Investment has proven durable, with externally owned firms consistently choosing to deepen their footprint rather than withdraw. Yet this advantage is increasingly constrained by talent outflow. Each year, Northern Ireland educates ambitious young people, then exports them. The real loss occurs not at 18 years of age, but at 28, when skills and networks built elsewhere do not return, limiting the region's ability to capture the full economic return on human capital. The emerging imbalance between talent production and retention poses a growing challenge for sustaining high-value US Foreign Direct Investment (FDI).

The imbalance between talent production and retention weakens Northern Ireland's competitiveness for higher-value U.S.-linked investment. The challenge is not attraction, but depth. Without strengthening retention, return and specialist capability the region risks plateauing while more complex functions consolidate elsewhere. This paper argues that Northern Ireland must shift from unmanaged talent loss toward structured talent recirculation, retaining more, enabling return and strengthening specialists capability, if it is to sustain and deepen U.S. born FDI.

2 U.S. Mission United Kingdom, “A Short History of U.S. Consulates: Belfast,” accessed March 2026,

3 Emma Owen, “Live: Reaction as Sunak hails ‘special position’ for NI under Brexit deal,” **BBC News**, 28 February 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/uk-64794293>

4 Invest Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland's Unique Market Access Position (June 2023), 1, https://www.investni.com/sites/default/files/2023-06/northern_irelands_unique_market_access_position.pdf.

5 Erran Carmel, J. Alberto Espinosa, and Yael Dubinsky, “Follow the Sun’ Workflow in Global Software Development,” *Journal of Management Information Systems* 27, no. 1 (2010): 17–38.

6 Rhea Rose Abraham, Angela Christy M, and Nilutpal Timsina, “US financial firms pledge \$1.7 billion to UK ahead of Trump's visit,” *Reuters*, September 13, 2025.

Context and Evidence

Definitions and Scope

This paper examines the talent conditions shaping Northern Ireland's ability to attract and upgrade U.S. foreign direct investment in knowledge-intensive sectors. This section defines the key terms to ensure readers can fully understand the analysis, findings and recommendations that follow


Scope:

- Brain drain (outcome): A persistent net loss of human capital from Northern Ireland. This occurs when the combined effect of departures and non-return reduces the local stock of skills over time.
- Brain gain (outcome): A sustained net increase in Northern Ireland's skills base. This occurs when retention, return, and inward attraction strengthen local stocks of skills.
- Skilled out-migration (process): The outward movement of students, graduates, and skilled workers relevant to knowledge-intensive sectors. This term captures who leaves and when, without implying whether the net outcome is drain or gain.
- Talent recirculation (process): A managed system that shapes flows in three ways. It retains more local talent, enables more to return, and recruits to fill critical gaps so outward mobility does not translate into a lasting net loss.

Structural Drivers of the Talent Challenge

Talent Mobility

This section contextualizes Northern Ireland's talent flows using higher-education enrolment data by student domicile and destination. The first table shows where NI-domiciled students study (NI, GB, ROI). The second details student composition at NI institutions by domicile (domestic, cross-border, international). Together, these tables provide a snapshot of outward mobility and inward enrolment patterns that shape the future workforce pipeline relevant to U.S.-linked, knowledge-



“Leaving home for university is a rite of passage for many the world over, but in Northern Ireland a disproportionate number of young people are choosing to move permanently, continuing the brain drain that began during the Troubles.”

intensive investment. ⁷⁸⁹¹⁰¹¹¹²

Table 3b1 Northern Ireland – domiciled students by destination of study (24/25)

Destination of Study	NI- Domiciled Students
Northern Ireland HEIs	46500
Great Britain HEIs	13700
Republic of Ireland HEIs	1,255* (2021)
Total NI Domiciled Students	60,270

Table 3b2 Students enrolled at Northern Ireland higher-education institutions by domicile (24/25)

Students Domicile	Students Enrolled in NI
Northern Ireland	46500
Great Britain	2885
Republic of Ireland	4025
International (Non UKI)	12230
Total Students in Northern Ireland	65695

Regional Earning Differentials

Earning differentials play a material role in shaping where high skilled workers choose to build careers. Official data shows that NI is the lowest paying region amongst its UK and Irish peers, with a median salary of £34,400 in 2024.

7 Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), “Figure 7 – HE Student Enrolments by HE Provider and Permanent Address, Academic Year 2024/25,” in Higher Education Student Enrolments and Qualifications Obtained at Higher Education Providers in the United Kingdom 2024/25 (London: HESA, 2025).

8 Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), “Table 1 – HE Student Enrolments by HE Provider, Academic Years 2014/15 to 2024/25,” in Higher Education Student Enrolments and Qualifications Obtained at Higher Education Providers in the United Kingdom 2024/25 (London: HESA, 2025).

9 Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), “Table 11 – HE Student Enrolments by Permanent Address and Region of HE Provider, Academic Years 2014/15 to 2024/25,” in Higher Education Student Enrolments and Qualifications Obtained at Higher Education Providers in the United Kingdom 2024/25 (London: HESA, 2025).

10 Emer Smyth and Selina McCoy, Higher Education Student Flows Across the Island of Ireland (ESRI Research Series No. 166, May 2023), 13, https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS166_1.pdf.

11 Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, “ASHE Headline Statistics Northern Ireland, 2024,” May 2024, <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/ashe-headline-statistics-northern-ireland>.

12 Office for National Statistics. “Employee earnings in the UK: 2024.” April 2024. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/annualsurveyofhoursandearnings/2024>.

Table 3b3 Regional Earning Differentials

Region	Median Annual Salary for Full-Time Employees (2024)
NI	£34,400
UK Overall	£37,430
London	£44,370
Republic of Ireland	£39,173
Dublin	£43,026

Local Skills Shortages

The Northern Ireland Skills Barometer Summary Report 2023¹³ analyzes Northern Ireland's current and future skills needs over ten years, from 2023 to 2033. It provides evidence-based forecasts to help policymakers and employers plan for the evolving demands of the labour market, highlighting key areas of skills shortages and the importance of talent retention.

Key findings include:

- By 2033, Northern Ireland will face an annual shortfall of 2,700 people with Level 4 or higher qualifications (degree level and above).
- The report forecasts an annual undersupply of 1,100 STEM graduates (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) by 2033.
- ICT and professional services are expected to experience the strongest growth, with ICT projected to require an additional 4,000 workers by 2033.
- Business and financial services are expected to see the fastest employment growth, with an anticipated 13% increase in jobs over the decade.
- An annual oversupply of about 1,200 people with Level 2 qualifications (equivalent to GCSEs) is projected, highlighting a mismatch between qualification levels and labor market demand.
- The report notes that Northern Ireland loses around 2,000 graduates annually to outmigration, primarily to Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland.

Current Baseline: NI & U.S. FDI Model

This section examines the current landscape of FDI from the United States into Northern Ireland, highlighting both the established economic ties and Northern Ireland's strategic advantages in attracting and sustaining such investment.

• Current State of Play with the U.S

The United States is Northern Ireland's top source of foreign direct investment, with US companies investing about £1.5 billion and creating roughly 13,000 jobs in the past decade.¹⁴ This investment is mainly focused on technology, financial services, cybersecurity, and advanced manufacturing. For example, Citi group employs over 4000 people—making it one of the largest Citi offices in Europe—

13 Department for the Economy, "NI Skills Barometer Summary Report 2023–33*" (February 2025), https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-02/NI%20Skills%20Barometer_Summary%20Report_2023-33_Final_With%20accessibility%20checks%20%2831.01.25%29.pdf.

14 Gordon Lyons, "US & NI Investment Stronger Than Ever," Department for the Economy, June 23, 2022, <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/news/us-ni-investment-stronger-ever-lyons>

and Allstate NI is the region's biggest IT employer, with more than 1,800 staff.¹⁵¹⁶

These investments have helped Northern Ireland become a leader in knowledge-intensive sectors like fintech, cybersecurity, and advanced manufacturing. However, recent shifts in US policy, such as the "America First" approach, have introduced new uncertainties. By prioritizing domestic investment, US multinationals are rethinking their global strategies, which could limit future investment in regions like Northern Ireland.¹⁷ To stay competitive, Northern Ireland will need to offer not only cost and talent advantages, but also resilience in the face of changing international priorities.

• Strategic Positioning of NI

Northern Ireland stands out to international investors as a gateway with unique access: it's the only region in the world offering tariff-free trade with both Great Britain and the European Union. Operating costs are 40–55% lower than in other parts of Western Europe¹⁸, and office rental in Belfast is highly competitive compared to than in London or Dublin.¹⁹

The region also boasts a strong talent pipeline, with over 65,000 students in higher education. Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University are both ranked among the UK's top 50 for graduate employability²⁰. Government agencies like Invest NI support investors with financial incentives, relocation assistance, and R&D grants, backed by over £372 million in annual higher education funding.²¹²²

Belfast is recognized as a leading global destination for cybersecurity investment. In 2023 the UK government announced its plans to create a new 'Cyber-AI hub in Belfast following an 18.9 million investment packages for the regions cyber security.²³

Comparative Context

To situate NI within a broader international context, the following review outlines selected examples of how advanced economies and innovation regions integrate talent policy with FDI strategy. The cases below highlight different institutional mechanisms including mobility corridors, high-skilled visa pathways, and digital facilitation used to strengthen workforce depth in support of innovation growth.

15 Belfast Chamber. "Citi Belfast: Two Decades of Driving Economic Growth and Talent Excellence in Northern Ireland." Accessed March 2026. <https://belfastchamber.com/citi-belfast-two-decades-of-driving-economic-growth-and-talent-excellence-in-northern-ireland/#:~:text=Starting%20with%20375%20employees%20at,talent%20for%20global%20financial%20career>

16 McAleer, Ryan. "Technology giant Allstate cut 278 posts within Northern Ireland operation last year." The Irish News. Accessed March 2026

17 Citi, Foreign Direct Investment: Global Implications of "America First" Policies (2023), https://ir.citi.com/z_uHeVkh6705ka7JQGF880asUbFP1wAuptreipFTOk2-hz-g0Pw_nalEK7Na0eKbLoAa0OnhSk0aT82zQbwMPXRHQuAFINJU.

18 Invest Northern Ireland, Built for Business: International (February 2025), <https://www.investni.com/sites/default/files/2025-02/invest-ni-built-for-business-international-brochure.pdf>.

19 Belfast City Council, Investing in Belfast's Future: A Real Estate Research Report (2023), http://belfastcity.gov.uk/getmedia/6f717e8b-d747-47b4-93e6-b774af14eadc/Investing-in-Belfasts-Future-A-Real-Estate-Research-Report_final_HR.pdf?ext=.pdf.

20 Times Higher Education, "UK University Rankings 2025," accessed June 7, 2024, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2025/world-ranking>

21 Invest NI, "Support for Business," 2025, <https://www.investni.com/support-for-business#:~:text=Help%20your%20business%20boost%20productivity,Regional%20business%20network>.

22 Northern Ireland Audit Office, Developing Skills for Northern Ireland's Future (2024), <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/publications/html-document/niao-developing-skills-northern-irelands-future>.

23 ICC Belfast, "Belfast: The Cyber Security Capital," 2024, <https://iccbelfast.com/news/belfast-the-cyber-security-capital>.

- **Canada–U.S. Innovation Corridor (Toronto–Waterloo)**²⁴

Policy/Initiative: The Toronto-Waterloo Corridor’s cross-border talent ecosystem and strong regional branding have positioned it among the world’s largest tech talent markets outside Asia-Pacific, with 300,000 to 500,000 tech workers.

Mechanisms: The region’s growth is driven by high educational attainment, a strong tech ecosystem, and the adoption of new technologies like artificial intelligence.

Impact/Results: Increased tech startups, enhanced research collaboration, and attraction of major tech investors. Toronto-Waterloo accounted for 1.8% of global venture capital funding in 2023 and continues to attract major tech employers and investment.

Lessons for NI: Northern Ireland could replicate cross-border talent mobility agreements to build a transatlantic innovation ecosystem.

- **Singapore’s Tech Pass and Global Talent Pass**²⁵

Policy/Initiative: Targeted visa schemes for top tier tech professionals.

Mechanisms: Fast track immigration, business support, and networking platforms.

Impact/Results: Influx of global tech leaders, growth of innovation clusters, and increased R&D investment.

Lessons for NI: Northern Ireland could replicate targeted visa schemes to attract high-calibre professionals in technology and innovation.

- **Estonia’s Digital Nomad Visa and e-Residency Programme**²⁶

Policy/Initiative: Digital residency and remote business registration.

Mechanisms: Seamless digital administration and online business facilitation.

Impact/Results: Over 100,000 e-residents from more than 170 countries, boosting international profile and FDI.

Lessons for NI: Northern Ireland could replicate digital first policies to attract remote workers and global entrepreneurs.

- **Germany’s Blue Card and STEM Talent Initiatives**²⁷

Policy/Initiative: EU Blue Card for skilled non-EU professionals and STEM cluster funding.

Mechanisms: University, industry partnerships and simplified skilled migration.

Impact/Results: Growth in international STEM workforce and increased innovation.

Lessons for NI: Northern Ireland could replicate STEM focused migration and cluster initiatives to attract and retain international talent.

24 CBRE, “Toronto-Waterloo Corridor Is One of the World’s Biggest Tech Talent Markets Outside of Asia-Pacific,” CBRE Canada, 2024, <https://www.cbre.ca/press-releases/toronto-waterloo-corridor-is-one-of-the-worlds-biggest-tech-talent-markets-outside-of-asia-pacific>.

25 Singapore Economic Development Board, “Tech.Pass,” accessed March 27, 2026, <https://www.edb.gov.sg/en/incentives-and-programmes/incentives-and-facilitation-programmes/tech-pass.html>.

26 e-Residency of Estonia, “New Milestone for e-Residency with Record Number of Companies Founded in 2024,” Baltic Times, 2025, https://www.baltictimes.com/new_milestone_for_e-residency_with_record_number_of_companies_founded_in_2024/.

27 Eurostat, “89,000 EU Blue Cards Issued for Skilled Workers in 2023,” European Commission, May 8, 2025,

Interpreting the Evidence

Why the Talent Gap Exists?

Evidence from Section 4 highlights a structural challenge in Northern Ireland's growth model. Although the region has attracted substantial US investment and built strengths in knowledge intensive sectors, its talent pipeline is under strain. Patterns of student mobility, wage differences, and skills shortages are putting pressure on workforce depth just as global investment is moving toward higher value, skills driven roles. The key question is not whether Northern Ireland can keep attracting investment, but whether it can sustain and upgrade it over time.

- **Earning Differentials**

Higher wages and faster career progression in places like London and the Republic of Ireland encourage skilled professionals to leave Northern Ireland. These pay differences matter because workers consider both current salaries and future earning potential when deciding where to build their careers. For Northern Ireland, this trend reinforces outward mobility and weakens the mid-career workforce that US investors rely on to fill advanced, higher-value roles.

- **Skills Shortages**

The NI Skills Barometer shows that Northern Ireland faces a structural skills shortage, not just a temporary labor gap. By 2033, the region is expected to have an annual shortfall of 2,700 people with advanced qualifications and about 1,100 STEM graduates. These shortages are most acute in fast-growing sectors like ICT and professional services, with ICT alone needing 4,000 additional workers.

This points to a mismatch: while there is an oversupply of people with lower-level qualifications, there aren't enough workers with advanced technical, analytical, and digital skills. As AI automates routine tasks, demand is rising for higher-order problem-solving and governance skills. Without enough specialists, Northern Ireland's economy risks being limited in its ability to handle complex functions.

Combined with ongoing graduate out-migration, these shortages reduce the depth of mid-career talent over time. For US-linked firms, persistent recruitment challenges make it harder to scale up advanced roles and may force companies to focus on lower-value functions. The real challenge is not the size of the workforce, but the density of specialist skills in key sectors.

Importance for US FDI?

US investment in Northern Ireland focuses on knowledge-intensive sectors that need scalable, specialist teams, not just low-cost labor. According to Dunning's eclectic paradigm, multinational firms choose locations based on ownership, location, and internalization advantages, with workforce capability forming a central component of location attractiveness.²⁸ Research shows that the productivity benefits of foreign direct investment only occur when there is enough skilled talent in the host economy. As AI automates routine tasks, companies increasingly look for regions with strong analytical and higher-order skills.²⁹

28 Dunning J.H (1988). "The Eclectic Paradigm of International Production: A Restatement and some possible Extensions." *Journal of International Business Studies* 19, no 1:1-31

29 Borensztein, E., De Gregorio, J., and Lee, J.W. (1998). "How Does Foreign Direct Investment Affect Economic Growth?" *Journal of*

Sustained outward mobility and specialist skills shortages have strategic consequences. The risk is not immediate disinvestment, but mandate stagnation: higher-value functions are more likely to be assigned to ecosystems with deeper pools of mid-career expertise. Strengthening talent recirculation is therefore central to ensuring that the U.S.–Northern Ireland Innovation Corridor continues to evolve rather than plateau.

Stakeholder Analysis

Strengthening Northern Ireland's talent base to support U.S. linked investment is a shared responsibility. It requires coordinated action from government, investors, educational institutions, and mobile talent. The below table outlines the key stakeholders, highlighting their influence, interest in talent development, and the risks of withdrawal from reform efforts.



Stakeholder	Level of Influence	Level of Interest	Strategic Position	Risk if Disengaged
NI Executive	High	High	Manage Closely	Skills strategy remains fragmented; talent depth is not prioritized; long-term FDI upgrading stalls
UK Government	High	High	Manage Closely	UK-wide migration and industrial policy fail to reflect NI's specific talent and FDI upgrading needs, constraining recruitment and skills development
Invest NI	High	High	Manage Closely	Continued focus on FDI attraction without sufficient focus on mandate deepening and skills conversion
U.S Multinational Investors	High	High	Manage Closely	Higher-value mandates are allocated to regions with deeper talent pools
U.S Government	High	Medium	Keep Satisfied	Policy shifts increase pressure to reshore or consolidate higher-value work in core U.S. locations
Irish Government	Medium	Medium	Keep Informed	Continued wage pull from Dublin accelerates outward mobility and reduces NI's mid-career talent density
Universities & Colleges	Medium	High	Keep Informed	Graduate output remains disconnected from regional demand; outward mobility persists
Students & Graduates	Low	High	Monitor/Engage	Sustained outward mobility reduces the entry pipeline for future mid-career density
NI Diaspora	Low	Medium	Monitor/Engage	Lost opportunity to convert global experience and networks into local economic value

This mapping shows a clear imbalance between institutional power and mobility incentives. High-influence actors, such as government bodies, Invest NI, and multinational investors set the strategic direction for investment and skills policy. Meanwhile, high-interest groups like graduates and the diaspora shape long-term talent outcomes but have limited structural authority.

The main risk is not active opposition, but fragmentation. Without coordinated action, talent policy remains reactive and investment policy stays focused on acquisition rather than upgrading. Closing this coordination gap is essential for strengthening Northern Ireland's US-linked investment model and ensuring sustainable growth.

Competitive Pressures and Structural Constraint

Artificial intelligence is transforming foreign direct investment by automating routine jobs and shifting multinational firms' attention to regions with advanced digital, problem solving, and creative skills.³⁰ Upskilling and innovation are now essential; regions that neglect workforce development risk losing FDI mandates³¹. This challenge is intensified by "America First" policies, which prioritize domestic capabilities and operational resilience, making cost advantages alone insufficient to attract US investment³². The Republic of Ireland's 12.5% corporate tax rate adds further competition, drawing significant US investment away from higher-tax regions³³. As a result, areas focused on lower-value service roles face mandate contraction, while those fostering innovation are better positioned for AI-era FDI³⁴.

Despite Northern Ireland's strengths, such as dual-market access and a skilled workforce—its corporate tax rates (19–25%) are much higher than the Republic of Ireland's 12.5%, creating a clear competitive disadvantage.³⁵ Limited physical connectivity to North America is also a strategic constraint. Belfast International Airport offers only one seasonal direct US route, compared to Dublin Airport's 240 weekly transatlantic flights. Over 90% of transatlantic business travel from Northern Ireland requires a connection, increasing time, cost, and uncertainty, and discouraging executive engagement. According to Invest NI's 2023 survey, 62% of US decision-makers cited connectivity as a moderate or significant barrier to expansion.

Policy Recommendations and Conclusion

Transatlantic Talent Compact

Northern Ireland's competitiveness for U.S.-linked investment will increasingly depend on workforce depth rather than cost advantage alone. Skilled out-migration, wage differentials, and rising capability thresholds risk constraining the region's ability to upgrade into higher value mandates. The objective of policy is therefore not to prevent mobility, but to structure it converting external experience into local capability and aligning talent flows with the evolving needs of U.S.-active sectors.

To achieve this, Northern Ireland should establish a Transatlantic Talent Compact built around three reinforcing pillars:

- Pillar I: The Transatlantic Brain Gain Programme

This pillar converts outward mobility into structured return. Northern Ireland should establish a cofounded fellowship scheme enabling students and early career professionals to undertake postgraduate study or specialised training in partner U.S. institutions, tied to a multi-year employment commitment in designated shortage sectors upon return. The focus should extend beyond graduates to include mid-career professionals in areas such as AI governance, cyber security, advanced analytics and product operations. By embedding return obligations and sector targeting, mobility becomes an instrument of brain gain rather than permanent brain drain. The Fellowship Programme strengthens the domestic skills base while deepening institutional ties between Northern Ireland and

30 Elia, S., Buckley, P.J., Gaur, A., and Krakowski, S. (2026). "Artificial Intelligence and International Business: Theoretical Challenges, Strategic Implications, and Research Agenda." *Journal of International Business Studies* (forthcoming).

31 OECD (2023). *FDI Qualities Policy Toolkit*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

32 The White House (2025). *America First Investment Policy*. Presidential Memorandum, 21 February 2025. Washington, DC.

33 UNCTAD (2024). *World Investment Report 2024: Investment Facilitation and Digital Government*. Geneva: United Nations.

34 U.S. Department of State (2025). *2025 Investment Climate Statement: Ireland*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs.

35 PwC. 2025. *Ireland: Corporate — Taxes on Corporate Income*. Tax Summaries. <https://taxsummaries.pwc.com/ireland/corporate/taxes-on-corporate-income>.

36 HM Revenue & Customs. 2025. *Rates and Allowances: Corporation Tax*. London: HM Revenue & Customs. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rates-and-allowances-corporation-tax/rates-and-allowances-corporation-tax>.

U.S. firms.

- **Pillar II: Two-Way Executive and Specialist Exchange**

Northern Ireland's long-term competitiveness depends not only on graduate supply, but on the depth of mid-year career specialities and emerging leaders within U.S.-linked firms operating locally. Higher-value roles tend to cluster where experienced professional, technical specialists and decision makers are concentrated. The transatlantic talent compact should therefore establish a structured two-way professional mobility programme between Northern Ireland operations and U.S. based headquarters or centres of excellence. This would include:

- 12–24-month placements for Northern Ireland-based mid-career professionals within U.S. corporate or technical teams.
- Reciprocal secondments of US based specialists and managers into Northern Ireland operations.
- Leadership-track development pathways focused on sectors such as AI governance, cyber security, financial services and advanced analytics

The purpose is capability transfer rather than short term exchange. By embedding Northern Ireland professionals within global decision-making structures and bringing advanced expertise into local operations the region strengthens its ability to host more complex and strategically significant organisations longer term.

- **Pillar III: A Joint Innovation and Mandate Upgrading Fund**

The third pillar of the transatlantic talent compact focuses on anchoring higher-value functions in Northern Ireland through targeted AI capability development and strengthened transatlantic integration. In an environment where AI is reshaping the allocation of work within multinational firms, regions must demonstrate not only cost competitiveness but depth in digital capabilities.

A joint AI innovation fund should be established through co-investment between the Northern Ireland Executive, Invest NI, universities and participating U.S. firms that would prioritise:

- Applied AI research and governance capability in sectors where U.S. investment is concentrated, including cyber security, financial services and advanced analytics.
- Industry university laboratories focused on AI implementation and regulatory readiness.
- Mid-career upskilling pathways to transition workers from routing roles into higher order analytical and supervisory functions.

Public funding for these initiatives should be tied to clear evidence that they are creating higher-value roles in Northern Ireland, such as advanced analytics, AI oversight, or regional leadership positions. At the same time, improving transatlantic business connections should be seen as essential infrastructure. The compact should review how to make it easier for executives, investors, and researchers to collaborate across the Atlantic, whether through better coordination among US-active firms, more effective trade missions, or reducing barriers to engagement. By investing in AI skills and strengthening international links, this pillar helps secure high-value business activities for Northern Ireland and reinforces its place in global networks.

Implementation Considerations

Risks include limited take-up or perceptions of exclusivity if programmes are not transparent and merit based. To mitigate this, participation criteria should be clearly defined and aligned with published shortage sectors. Both the UK and Irish Governments have a role here: The UK's Migration Advisory Committee and Northern Ireland's Department for the Economy can anchor eligibility criteria through the Temporary Shortage List framework, while the Irish Government's Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment publishes a Critical Skills Occupations List that offers a complementary all-island reference point. Joint designation of shortage sectors across both jurisdictions would strengthen credibility and reduce the risk of perceived arbitrariness.

Conclusion

Northern Ireland has established itself as a credible destination for U.S.-linked foreign direct investment. Yet in an environment shaped by AI adoption, geopolitical realignment, and rising skill thresholds, future competitiveness will depend less on access and more on depth.

The Transatlantic Talent Compact provides a focused and memorable framework to convert skilled out-migration into structured talent recirculation and sustained brain gain. By linking mobility, exchange, and mandate upgrading, Northern Ireland can move beyond acquisition toward long-term capability development. In doing so, it strengthens not only its investment proposition, but its position within the evolving transatlantic economic relationship

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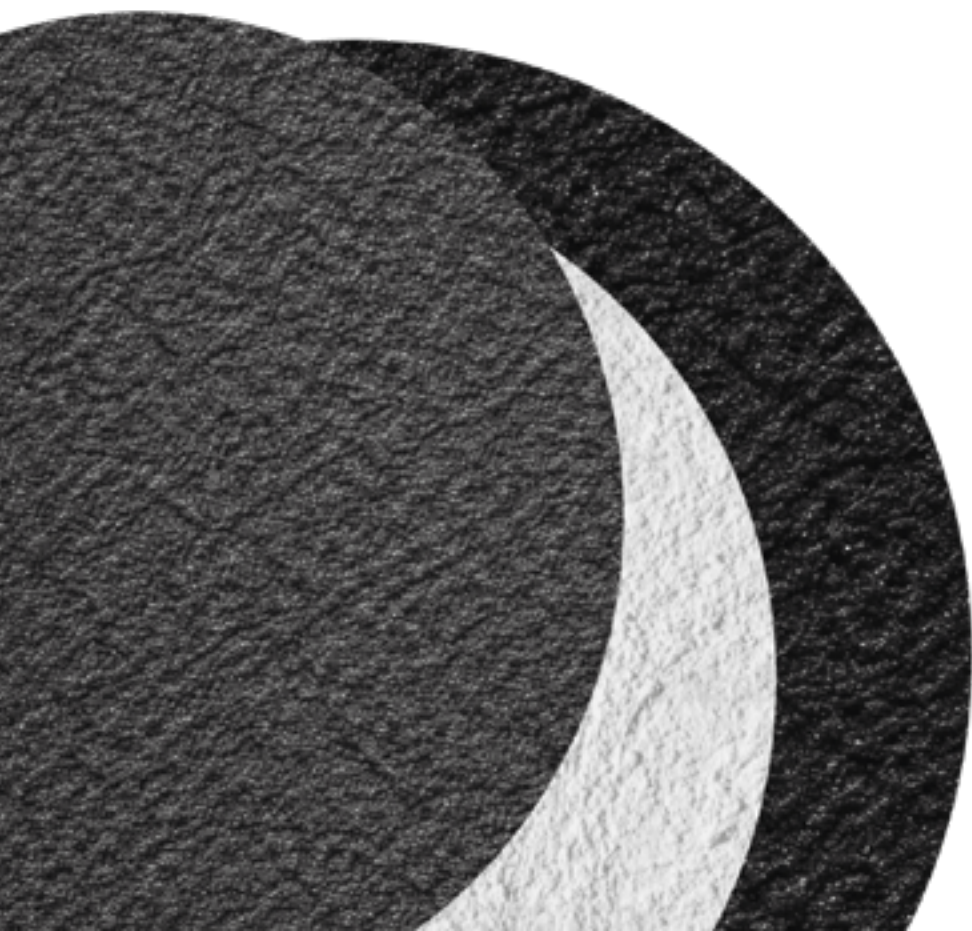
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Malachy McManus

Manager at a large professional services firm

As a manager at a professional services firm, Malachy leads complex international programs for senior executives at major American and UK corporations (S&P 500 and FTSE 100), based out of Belfast. Through this work, he has led diverse, multi-disciplinary teams connecting the island of Ireland with the United States and beyond. A One Young World Ambassador, Malachy has used his platform to lead internal conversations about values-driven leadership, including hosting a Q&A session for 1,000 new joiners on the role of purpose in global business. He has authored public writing on environmental stewardship for The Irish News, distilling global issues into accessible ideas for local audiences.

At a community level, Malachy is a playing member of the Drumragh GAA Senior Team and a coach for the U10s, mentoring young players and fundraising for environmental projects like installing bat roosts. He also ran and led a local autism-friendly youth club through the Buddy Program, supporting inclusive spaces for neurodivergent children. In addition, he has served as an Election Poll Clerk with the Northern Ireland Electoral Office, helping ensure fair and secure voting processes.

USA 250 - Ulster Scots to America

A Strategy for Heritage, Tourism and Global Leadership

by Aaron Callan

Executive Summary

This strategy for Heritage, Tourism, and Global Leadership positions Northern Ireland to capitalize on the 250th anniversary of American independence by highlighting the deep historical and cultural connections between Ulster Scots and the United States. The main focus is a proposed Presidential Heritage Center in Northern Ireland, which will feature up to twenty U.S. Presidents with Ulster-Scots ancestry. The strategy will seek a blend of American philanthropy, U.K. and Northern Ireland public investment, and partnership with the Irish Government – especially through Shared Island and all-island tourism initiatives – to ensure projects have both reach and resilience.

The Center will serve as a key attraction for heritage tourism, diaspora engagement, and cultural diplomacy. Through a formal agreement with the U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission, Northern Ireland has a special role in the America250 program. This partnership enables collaboration with leading institutions like the National Archives, Library of Congress, and Smithsonian, as well as several partners from Northern Ireland. By combining significant investment with heritage trails, festivals, and digital storytelling, the strategy aims to drive economic growth, increase international visibility, and strengthen relations across the Atlantic.

Key Recommendations

1. Establish a Presidential Heritage Center as the main legacy project of USA250 in Northern Ireland.
2. Develop coordinated Ulster Scots trails, festivals, and genealogy programs.
3. Build long-term partnerships with U.S. institutions, cities and community groups.
4. Mobilize American donations and diverse public funding.
5. Implement strong accountability and monitoring focused on results.



Introduction

The 250th anniversary of American independence offers Northern Ireland a rare strategic opportunity: to tell a story that is both deeply local and profoundly global. From the siege of Londonderry to the Appalachian frontier, Ulster Scots have helped shape the American identity, values, and leadership, yet their contribution remains under-recognized in both nations.¹USA250 provides a powerful framework to correct that imbalance, uniting historical memory, tourism, and international relations into a single, compelling vision.

For centuries, Ulster has been a crucible of ideas about constitutional liberty, religious conscience, and communal resilience. The settlement of 1688-89, with its emphasis on a limited monarchy and parliamentary sovereignty, formed part of the constitutional inheritance that colonists carried to America and later debated in Philadelphia.²The combination of defending religious freedom and being denied full civil rights fostered a culture wary of arbitrary power and protective of local autonomy. When large numbers of Ulster Presbyterians crossed the Atlantic in the eighteenth century, they took these cultural attitudes with them.

Over time, the Ulster-Scots became a distinctive thread in America's social fabric, particularly in the Appalachian backcountry and the emerging West. They gained a reputation for hard work, piety, and readiness to fight, qualities romanticized but also acknowledged by observers such as Theodore Roosevelt and, more recently, Jim Webb.³Their descendants have been represented in the U.S. military, in frontier expansion, and in political leadership, including a significant number of presidents with Ulster ancestry.

Today, Northern Ireland's tourism sector is growing, its global profile is rising, and U.S. visitors are among its highest-value and fastest-growing markets.⁴At the same time, American institutions are actively preparing for the Semiquincentennial, seeking international partners, stories, and experiences which illuminate the broader cross-Atlantic world from which the United States emerged. With its special status in the America250 framework, Northern Ireland is uniquely positioned to seize this historic opportunity.

Recent public remarks by the United States Consul General James Applegate in Northern Ireland have explicitly framed USA250 as an opportunity to highlight the Ulster-Scots (Scots-Irish) contribution to the making of the United States. Writing for a Northern Ireland audience, the US Consul General went on to link the upcoming 250th anniversary to a wider decade of historical reflection on these islands and underlined that American commemorations will highlight the history, civic engagement, and the individuals and communities who shaped the nation's democratic character. In that context, he drew attention to the role of Presbyterian settlers from Ulster in forging America's frontier culture, its commitment to liberty and self-government, and its distinctive civic ethos. This aligns with growing recognition in U.S. political discourse that America's "frontiers were shaped by Scots-Irish... from the hills of Ulster" whose traditions of independence and congregational organization helped to drive America's revolutionary generation.

1 James Webb, *Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004).

2 Rory Fitzpatrick, *God's Frontiersmen: The Scots-Irish Epic* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989).

3 Webb, *Born Fighting*.

4 Visit Belfast, "Visit Belfast: Official Belfast Tourist Information," Visit Belfast, <https://visitbelfast.com>

The Consul General also acknowledged that the Ulster-Scots legacy lacks proper recognition and appreciation in contemporary United States history, and argued that this anniversary period offers a unique chance to correct that imbalance. He highlighted ongoing work by the Northern Ireland Department for Communities, the Ulster-Scots community, and the Public Record Office to surface local stories and connections, commending initiatives that link town and village-level history in Northern Ireland with community narratives in America. This diplomatic endorsement provides a powerful platform for policy intervention, signaling that the US Government is actively invested in supporting structured, high-quality celebration of Ulster-Scots migration, faith, culture, and political thought as part of USA250. It also reinforces the need for sustained investment through an Ulster-Scots strand in USA250, support for digital alongside broadcast projects, and local partnerships, ensuring the Ulster-Scots experience is a central part of the transatlantic story rather than a marginal add-on.

This paper argues that Ulster Scots heritage should be elevated from a niche interest to a central pillar of a multi-year strategy for heritage, tourism, and global leadership. It sets out the historical foundations of the Ulster-American connection, assesses the current tourism and policy context, and proposes an integrated program of flagship projects and supporting initiatives. The core thesis is that an ambitious, well-resourced USA250 strategy can deliver tangible economic benefits, strengthen cultural confidence and inclusion, and deepen U.S.-Northern Ireland connections well beyond 2026.

Research Context

Historical Background

Migration from Ulster to the American mainland accelerated from around 1718. More than 200,000 people left Ulster for the colonies, making them the largest voluntary European migrant group of that period.⁵ Many were Presbyterian dissenters facing rising rents, limited economic prospects, and civic disabilities under the Anglican establishment. Economic pressure and religious frustration propelled families to seek security and opportunity in the New World.

In America, these migrants became known as “Scotch-Irish” and developed a reputation as tough frontier settlers ready to defend their homes and communities. They settled initially in ports like Philadelphia before moving into Pennsylvania’s interior, the Shenandoah Valley, and the Carolinas. Contemporary observers noted their prominence in local militias and the Continental Army, particularly in backcountry campaigns.

Religion remained foundational to the Ulster Presbyterians in America, who were accustomed to self-governing congregations inside presbyteries. In America, this ecclesiastical tradition reinforced habits of lay leadership and local deliberation that aligned with emerging republican ideals.⁶

Demographic and Cultural Legacy

The Ulster-American connection remains strong in modern day demographic data and cultural patterns. Millions of Americans identify as Scotch-Irish or claim Ulster ancestry.⁷ Genealogy organizations report sustained interest from U.S. visitors seeking to trace ancestors to particular Ulster townlands and congregations.

Scholars and political figures have highlighted this group’s cultural impact. Theodore Roosevelt described the Scotch-Irish as a “kernel” of distinctively American stock.⁸ Jim Webb characterizes the Scots-Irish as a

5 Whitelaw Reid, *The Scot in America and the Ulster Scot* (Edinburgh: R. & R. Clark, 1911).

6 Ford, *The Scotch-Irish in America*.

7 United States Census Bureau, “2021 American Community Survey: Irish Ancestry Data” (Washington, DC: United States Census Bureau, 2021), <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2021.C04006>

8 Reid, *The Scot in America*.

“fighting” populist culture whose influence is visible in American military traditions and politics.

One particularly visible manifestation is the number of U.S. presidents with Ulster Scots ancestry. Andrew Jackson’s parents came from County Antrim; James Knox Polk, Chester Arthur, James Buchanan, Andrew Johnson, Ulysses S. Grant, and Woodrow Wilson also trace their lines to Ulster families.⁹This pattern offers a compelling narrative anchor: Ulster as a cradle of American leadership.

Tourism and Market Data

Northern Ireland’s tourism sector has made significant gains in recent years. Events like the 153rd Open at Royal Portrush in 2025 delivered over £200 million in direct benefits and global media exposure.¹⁰Attractions such as the Giant’s Causeway, Titanic Belfast, and Bushmills Distillery continue to draw high visitor numbers.

The U.S. market is particularly important. Americans are among the highest-spending visitors per capita, with U.S. arrivals rising steadily in the years preceding USA250.¹¹For Northern Ireland, U.S. visitors represent one of the fastest-growing segments. Research indicates U.S. visitors are especially motivated by scenery, culture, heritage, and key attractions—precisely areas where Ulster Scots stories add depth and distinctiveness.

Tourism Ireland has explicitly identified America250 as a strategic opportunity.¹²Northern Ireland’s special status within the official Semiquincentennial program allows direct branding, co-curated content, and targeted programming with major U.S. institutions.

Precedent: Belfast-Nashville Partnership

A practical precedent exists in the Belfast-Nashville Sister City partnership. Through sustained collaboration between Belfast City Council, cultural organizations, universities, and U.S. partners, the cities developed a multi-year program featuring music festivals, genealogy promotion, academic exchanges, and media production. The initiative delivered increased visitation, broadcast exposure, and durable institutional links.¹³

Crucially, the partnership demonstrated that when heritage narratives, tourism marketing, and civic diplomacy are aligned, they generate tangible economic and reputational gains. The Belfast-Nashville model provides a tested template for broader USA250 engagement.

Economic Partnership and Investment

“Northern Ireland is the only place outside of the United States that can lay claim to such a dense concentration of ancestral homes of U.S. Presidents. This represents an unparalleled opportunity for heritage tourism and high-level diplomatic engagement.”

9 Fitzpatrick, God’s Frontiersmen.

10 Visit Belfast, “Visit Belfast: Official Belfast Tourist Information.”

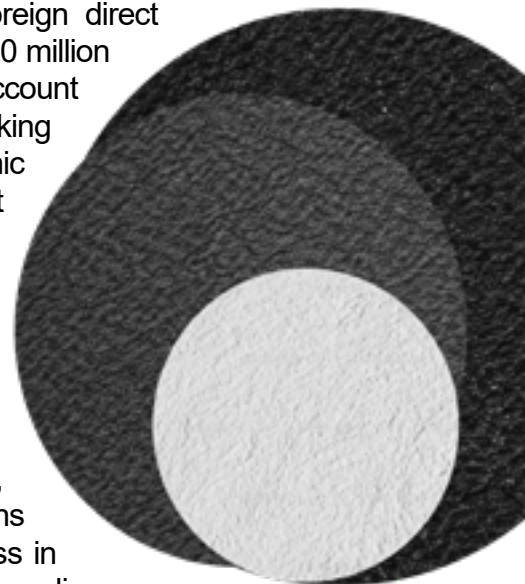
11 Tourism Ireland, “America250 Experience Development Programme,” Tourism Northern Ireland, <https://www.tourismni.com/america250-experience-development-programme/>

12 Tourism Ireland, “Tourism Ireland Launches 2025 Marketing Plans,” Tourism Ireland, January 15, 2025, <https://www.tourismireland.com/news-and-press-releases/press-releases/article/tourism-ireland-launches-2025-marketing-plans-northern-ireland>

13 Belfast City Council, “Appendix 1: Sister City Nashville Action Plan, 2010-2011” (Belfast: Belfast City Council Development Committee, 2010), <https://minutes.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/s12913/Appendix%201%20-%20Sister%20City%20Nashville.pdf>

The Ulster-American connection extends beyond heritage and tourism into a substantial economic partnership. The United States is the largest source of foreign direct investment (FDI) into Northern Ireland, with American firms investing £360 million and creating nearly 3,000 jobs in the past five years alone. U.S. exports account for approximately 15 per cent of Northern Ireland's total exports, making America both a critical market and an investment partner. This economic foundation provides a practical platform for USA250 engagement that goes beyond commemoration.

In March 2024, the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce signed its first international Memorandum of Understanding with the North Carolina Chamber, formalizing collaboration between two jurisdictions with strong synergies in aerospace, health and life sciences, advanced manufacturing, technology, and financial services. The MOU commits both parties to promoting international trade, investment, and cooperation, leveraging existing links established by companies such as Almac, Collins Aerospace, and Queen's University. As the top-ranked state for business in the United States, North Carolina represents a strategic partner for expanding Ulster Scots heritage narratives into concrete business development opportunities. This business-led partnership demonstrates how cultural diplomacy and economic cooperation can reinforce one another within the USA250 framework.



Argument and Analysis

Ulster Scots Heritage as Strategic Asset

Central to this paper is that Ulster Scots heritage should be treated as a strategic asset capable of advancing economic, cultural, and diplomatic objectives. The USA250 context, Northern Ireland's existing tourism strengths, and established U.S. interest in genealogy create a unique moment to leverage that asset at scale. A globally-connected Ulster-Scots identity, with economic contribution and diaspora connections.

Economically, Ulster-American heritage can diversify Northern Ireland's tourism offer. While attractions like the Giant's Causeway and Titanic Belfast draw large numbers, the Ulster Scots story binds multiple sites into extended itineraries from the Ulster American Folk Park to presidential sites and coastal towns.¹⁴ Genealogy generates higher-value visits, longer stays, and off-season travel as families undertake detailed research and multiple site visits.

Culturally, an Ulster-American strategy provides a framework for exploring histories of migration, conflict, faith, and identity that resonate across nations. When handled with care and inclusivity, these narratives support nuanced public history, encourage cross-community participation, and counter stereotypes.¹⁵

Diplomatically, the Ulster-American connection offers a soft-power platform for deepening U.S.-Northern Ireland links at federal, state, municipal, and community levels. Engagement with the National Archives, Library of Congress, Smithsonian, and universities through USA250-linked projects raises Northern Ireland's profile among key American stakeholders.¹⁶ Sister-city relationships and cultural programming create networks that persist beyond political cycles.

14 Tourism Ireland, "America250 Experience Development Programme."

15 Fitzpatrick, God's Frontiersmen.

16 Northern Ireland Department for Communities, USA-NI250 Memorandum of Understanding for Cooperation in Support of the 250th Anniversary of the United States (Belfast: Department for Communities, 2025), <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/usa-ni250-memorandum-understanding-cooperation-support-250th-anniversary-united-states>

Stakeholders and Interests

An Ulster Scots USA250 strategy involves multiple stakeholders: Northern Ireland departments and agencies (culture, economy, tourism, international relations); local councils and heritage organizations; universities and colleges; U.S. institutions (federal/state agencies, museums, archives); the Irish Government, including its Shared Island and diaspora initiatives; diaspora groups and philanthropic foundations; and local communities and cultural groups.

Each stakeholder group stands to gain but also faces potential risks. For the government, opportunities include job creation, inward investment, and an enhanced international profile, balanced against opportunity costs and the need to avoid politicization of heritage. For communities, benefits include recognition, skills development, and local regeneration; risks include the commodification or reinforcement of divisive narratives if programming is not inclusive.¹⁷ For the Irish Government, USA250-linked Ulster-Scots initiatives align with the Shared Island agenda, all-island tourism, and diaspora engagement, offering a practical way to support inclusive heritage on a genuinely island-wide basis. Partnerships should be developed with existing diaspora institutions, including EPIC The Irish Emigration Museum in Dublin, so that Ulster-Scots stories sit within the wider narrative of Irish migration and global influence.

Core Components: Presidential Heritage Center

Within this broader framework, the proposed Presidential Heritage Center in County Antrim serves as a flagship project crystallizing the wider argument: Ulster has contributed disproportionately to American leadership. By focusing on presidents with Ulster Scots ancestry, the center offers a clear, media-friendly narrative that resonates with U.S. and domestic audiences.¹⁸

The Center performs several strategic functions. As an anchor attraction, it becomes a must-see site for American visitors interested in presidential history and genealogy, driving regional footfall. As a story hub, it provides interpretive space to explain the wider Ulster-American story, from migration to constitutional ideas. As a platform for diplomacy, it offers a venue for high-profile visits involving U.S. and U.K. leaders and civic delegations. As a gateway to wider trails, it signposts visitors to other Ulster Scots heritage sites, extending stays and dispersing economic benefits. The creation of a North America Diaspora Development Officer in the NI Bureau, which would link into an Ulster Scots tourism strategy, a tourism development fund, an economic strategy for Ulster Scots soft power, a social economy company and a major USA250 initiative. There is also scope to align a Northern Ireland Presidential Heritage Center with emerging thinking in the Republic. In 2023, Fine Gael TD Edward Timmins proposed an ‘American Presidents Trail’ to mark the strong Irish-American presidential connection and deepen links with the United States. A coordinated approach would allow an Ulster-Scots-focused Presidential Heritage Center in Northern Ireland to dovetail with any future trail or presidential heritage offer in the Republic, creating an all-island network of presidential sites and stories that can be marketed jointly to U.S. visitors and diaspora communities.

The symbolic resonance is particularly strong in the USA250 context, where American institutions will be receptive to stories about the international roots of the American republic and its leaders.

Lessons from Belfast-Nashville: Integration and Coordination

The Belfast-Nashville partnership underscores that success depends on integrated, multi-year programming rather than isolated projects. Music festivals, genealogy workshops, exhibitions, and exchanges reinforced one another through coordinated oversight by an advisory group.¹⁹

For USA250, a Presidential Heritage Center will only achieve its potential if integrated with a network of Ulster Scots trails and festivals; academic partnerships and conferences; strong media and digital

17 Tourism Ireland, “America250 Experience Development Programme.”

18 Fitzpatrick, God’s Frontiersmen.

19 Belfast City Council, “Sister City Nashville Action Plan.”

strategies, including documentaries and online archives; and coordinated funding that aligns public and private investment. Without such integration, isolated projects struggle to achieve financial sustainability or international visibility.

Risks and Mitigations

Several risks must be addressed:

- **Political sensitivity and identity politics:** Ulster Scots heritage intersects with contested histories of plantation, unionism, and the Troubles. If narrowly framed, projects could be perceived as serving only one community.²⁰

Mitigation: Emphasize shared transatlantic narratives and migration; involve diverse partners; foreground inclusive participation.

- **Over-reliance on capital projects:** Large investments can become burdensome if they don't generate sufficient revenue.

Mitigation: Phase development, link to robust business plans, prioritize flexible multi-use spaces.

- **Short-termism around 2026:** Activities may peak during the anniversary year, then decline.

Mitigation: Design as legacy projects with endowments; embed in long-term tourism and education strategies; leverage future 275th and 300th anniversaries.

- **Fragmentation and duplication:** Without coordination, overlapping initiatives dilute impact.

Mitigation: Establish a formal USA-NI Ulster Scots Steering Group with clear terms of reference and responsibility for alignment.

Policy Recommendations Conclusion

1. Establish a Presidential Heritage Center in Northern Ireland

Government and partners should commit to creating a Presidential Heritage Center as the flagship USA250 legacy project,

- Feasibility study: covering site options, visitor projections, and capital/operating costs.
- An international advisory board: including representatives from U.S. presidential libraries and the National Archives; and a business model blending public funding, philanthropy, earned income, and digital products.
- Phased development: should allow an initial core exhibition and genealogy service to open in time to benefit from USA250 publicity.

2. Develop a Coordinated Ulster Scots Heritage Network

- Policy should support a coordinated network of Ulster Scots experiences:
- Thematic trails: linking ports, churches, folk parks, and historic homesteads; annual or biennial festivals combining music, storytelling, genealogy, and living history, plus
- "Homecoming" initiative: reaching the wider diaspora; and support for community-led projects interpreting local Ulster-American connections inclusively.
- A modest grant program: could incentivize councils and community groups to align local initiatives with the wider USA250 narrative.

- North America Diaspora Development Officer: Based in the NI Bureau, which would link into an Ulster Scots tourism strategy.

3. Strengthen Academic, Civic, and Cultural Partnerships with the United States

Building on the Belfast-Nashville model, government and institutions should expand sister-city partnerships with U.S. localities having strong Scotch-Irish heritage (Pennsylvania, Virginia, the Carolinas, Tennessee);

- Support university agreements: for student exchanges and public-history projects focused on Ulster-American themes.
- Collaboration: with U.S. museums, archives, and libraries on exhibitions, digitization, and educational resources.
- Links should be formalized: through memoranda of understanding and tracked as part of Northern Ireland's international engagement strategy.

4. Mobilize American Philanthropy and Diversified Funding

Mobilize American Philanthropy and Diversified Funding: To ensure sustainability, the strategy should secure funding from multiple sources:

- U.S. philanthropy: foundations and individual donors with Ulster or Scotch-Irish roots
- Corporate sponsorship: companies with transatlantic operations in finance, technology, tourism, whiskey, and food brands
- Public funding: Northern Ireland, U.K., and Irish government sources, including Shared Island, tourism and culture programmes where the project delivers clear all-island benefits. A dedicated development function should coordinate fundraising across all projects to prevent duplication and donor fatigue, ensuring a more sustainable approach

5. Embed Robust Monitoring, Evaluation, and Legacy Planning

Embed Outcomes-Based Accountability: The strategy should establish clear indicators across three domains:

- Economic: visitor numbers, overnight stays, spending, and jobs created
- Cultural and social: community participation, educational engagement, and qualitative feedback on identity and belonging
- Transatlantic partnerships: number and quality of international collaborations, media reach, and public perception

Annual public reporting will build confidence with funders, communities, and partners. Legacy planning should extend beyond 2026, setting milestones to sustain long-term impact and momentum.

Conclusion

Ulster Scots heritage is a strategic resource with the capacity to generate jobs, deepen cultural understanding, and strengthen international relationships. USA250 provides a limited-time opportunity for Northern Ireland to position itself as a central partner in the American story, built on authentic history and contemporary collaboration.

Recent interventions by U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who praised the “proud, hearty clan from the hills of Ulster” who shaped America’s frontiers, together with Vice President J.D. Vance’s identification as a Scots-Irish “hillbilly at heart,” underline renewed recognition at the highest levels of U.S. administration of the Ulster Scots contribution to the American story. Association with, and endorsement from, the Irish Government could also strengthen the case for U.S. philanthropy, signalling that Ulster-Scots-focused projects form part of a broader, cross-border effort to interpret Irish and Ulster-American connections in an inclusive way. An obvious early opportunity is structured collaboration with EPIC, which already positions itself as a hub for ‘Global Irish’ connections and the contemporary diaspora. Working together on Ulster-Scots and Scotch-Irish content would demonstrate, in a very practical way, what Shared Island cooperation on heritage and tourism can look like in practice.

By committing to a Presidential Heritage Center, developing a coordinated network of trails and festivals, building durable partnerships, mobilizing philanthropy, and embedding rigorous evaluation, policymakers can ensure USA250 drives long-term regeneration and transatlantic engagement. Now is the moment to transform it from history into a living legacy, one that shapes Northern Ireland’s future as well as its past.

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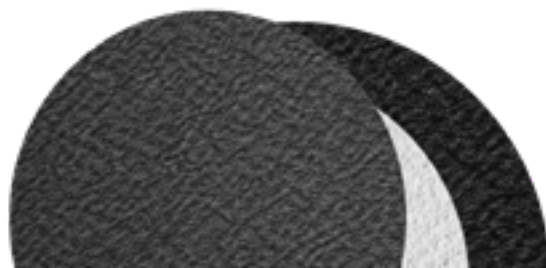
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Appendix

US Presidents with Ulster-Scots Links to Northern Ireland

Seventeen of the American Presidents are generally accepted as being of Ulster-Scots ancestry. Some have more direct Ulster links than others, but the connection to 18th and 19th century emigrants from the north of Ireland is tangible.

ANDREW JACKSON Democrat 1829-37

JAMES KNOX POLK Democrat 1845-49

JAMES BUCHANAN Democrat 1857-61

ANDREW JOHNSON Democrat 1865-69

ULYSSES SIMPSON GRANT Republican 1869-77

CHESTER ARTHUR Republican 1881-85

GROVER CLEVELAND Democrat 1885-89 and 1893-97

BENJAMIN HARRISON Republican 1889-93

WILLIAM McKINLEY Republican 1897-1901

THEODORE ROOSEVELT Republican 1901-09

WOODROW WILSON Democrat 1913-21

HARRY TRUMAN Democrat 1949-53

RICHARD NIXON Republican 1969-74

JAMES EARL CARTER Democrat 1977-81

GEORGE BUSH Republican 1989-93

BILL CLINTON Democrat - 1993-2001

GEORGE W. BUSH Republican 2001-09

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Aaron has played a leading role in promoting USA250 initiatives and fostering civic and cultural links between Northern Ireland and the United States, and is an alumnus of the Washington Ireland Programme. He serves as a School Governor at Limavady Grammar School and is actively engaged in community development projects that use heritage tourism to drive economic growth and social cohesion. His work bridges academic research, practical policy development, and community engagement.

Forging the Transatlantic Corridor:

How the United States and Northern Ireland Can Build a Strategic Economic Partnership

by Emma Murphy

Executive Summary

Northern Ireland stands at an inflection point. After decades shaped by conflict, political instability, and chronic underinvestment, it now possesses the institutional foundations, sectoral strengths, and a unique post-Brexit market position that make it one of the most strategically attractive investment destinations for American firms. Yet this opportunity remains largely untapped in Washington.

This paper argues that the United States has both a strategic interest and a practical opportunity to deepen its economic partnership with Northern Ireland. That interest is rooted in America's long-standing commitment to the Good Friday Agreement and the peace it secured through sustained diplomatic and economic investment. The opportunity lies in Northern Ireland's singular status as the only territory with guaranteed access to both the UK and EU goods markets under the Windsor Framework. With access to high quality graduates, a small, English-speaking population, aligned with unique integrated health and social care model, Northern Ireland offers ideal opportunity to act as a test bed for American investors. Three quarters of all Northern Irish deep tech startup companies originate through Queen's University's commercial arm QUBIS and in 2022, Queen's ranked 2nd in the UK for converting academic achievements into thriving companies. Key ingredients are on offer for an American market, and Northern Ireland is ripe with opportunities.

To convert this opportunity into outcomes, this paper puts forward five concrete policy recommendations: the establishment of a NI-US Technology Investment Corridor; a Transatlantic Research Partnership linking NI and US universities; targeted US backing for community enterprise zones in post-conflict areas; and the codification of the US Special Envoy to Northern Ireland as a permanent, Senate-confirmed trade and investment role. Together, these measures constitute a coherent and achievable agenda that can deliver measurable results within a single presidential term.

Recommendations:

1. Set up a NI-US Investment Zone focusing on Tech and AI
2. Focus on research collaborations between NI and US universities to drive
3. Set up a Dual Market Access Office in Washington, D.C.
4. Establish Community Enterprise Zones in Post-Conflict Areas
5. Codify the US Special Envoy to Northern Ireland as a Permanent Trade Role

Introduction

This policy paper takes a practical approach to the current situation in Northern Ireland and argues that deeper economic integration between the two countries serves US interests as well as those of Northern Ireland. The argument is clear: Northern Ireland's emerging technology sectors, world-class universities, and unmatched dual-market access under the Windsor Framework position it as a highly attractive partner for American investment and research collaboration. The United States, in turn, brings capital, institutional prestige, and a political commitment to NI's stability that no other external actor can replicate.

By focusing on what existing governmental structures can achieve rather than on aspirational institutional reform, the recommendations identify policy levers that the US Administration, Congress, and the NI Executive can enact in the short term. The recommendations are deliberately designed to work with current US foreign policy priorities: near-shoring of strategic supply chains, strengthening democratic allies, and expanding American commercial influence in sectors where the US leads globally.

Context

Economic Background

The Northern Irish economy has been shaped by conflict from the Troubles and by wider global economic uncertainty stemming from events such as the 2008 economic crash, the Covid pandemic, and ongoing disruption from the war in Ukraine. Northern Ireland has traditionally had a large percentage of its workforce in long-term unemployment, struggled to meet the skills gap between its workforce and business requirements, and has the lowest economic productivity in the UK and Ireland¹.

The NI Executive's current ambitious legislative agenda reflects a recognition of this challenge. It aims to publish a 'Good Jobs' Bill², and to meet the targets set in the Skills Barometer³, the recommendations from the newly established Office of AI and Digital, and to implement the 14-19 Framework⁴. With its mandate ending in Spring 2027, it is unlikely that the Program for Government priorities will be fulfilled, including its aim to 'Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy'.

The Brain Drain

One of the most corrosive and well-documented features of Northern Ireland's economic landscape is the emigration of its most educated young people⁵. Northern Ireland invests significantly in its universities and graduates, yet a disproportionate number leave for London, Dublin, and, increasingly, North America, taking with them the skills and taxes the economy needs. This is not a problem unique to Northern Ireland; the Republic of Ireland has experienced similar dynamics⁶, and Western Europe is grappling with an ageing population and the fiscal consequences of youth emigration.

1 Ruth Donaldson, David Jordan, and John Turner, "NI Productivity 2040: Addressing Northern Ireland's Productivity Gap for Greater Prosperity," Productivity Insights Paper No. 49 (Manchester: The Productivity Institute, January 2025).

2 Department for the Economy, "Good Jobs Employment Rights Bill Public Consultation Response," 28 April 2025, <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/good-jobs-employment-rights-bill-public-consultation-response>

3 Department for the Economy, "Skills Barometer 2023-2033," 10 February 2025, <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/skills-barometer-2023-2033>

4 Department for Education, "14 to 19 policy" <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/14-19-policy>

5 Pivotal, "*Retaining and regaining talent in Northern Ireland*," 24 March 2021, <https://www.pivotalpolicy.org/assets/files/publications/retaining-and-regaining-talent-report-v1.pdf>

6 Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). "Emigration in an Age of Austerity". Dublin, 2013.

What makes the NI case distinctive is the compounding effect. An ageing population skews public spending toward healthcare, pension provision, and social care, leaving less fiscal room for the investment in education, infrastructure, and innovation that would make Northern Ireland more competitive and more attractive to young people. The most effective intervention is not to reform the education system in isolation, but to create high-value employment conditions that give graduates a reason to stay. US investment in technology and research, the sectors where Northern Ireland already has genuine strengths, is the most direct lever available. Without targeted policy implementation in the post-secondary education age group, it will be even more difficult to maintain a youth population.

Northern Ireland's Political System

Northern Ireland's governance arrangements are unlike those of any other UK region. The mandatory coalition system at Stormont means that periods of political deadlock and Executive collapse are not exceptional events but features of the political landscape. Developing areas of commerce, such as research and AI, are often delayed in implementation compared to other European countries. Northern Ireland is not unique in its governance struggles; countries with mandatory coalitions, such as Belgium, often face even longer periods of governmental collapse. Many policymakers focus on potential areas of reform for the Northern Ireland Assembly, and whilst there is a wealth of salient, practical points to be made, arguments going forth will focus on the system that is currently operating. External actors, including the United States, are best positioned to work with existing institutions rather than to advocate for constitutional change at this time.

Argument and Analysis

The Case for a NI-US Technology Investment Corridor

The most immediate and high-impact intervention available is the creation of a formal NI-US Technology Investment Corridor, anchored in the four sectors where Northern Ireland already has competitive strength⁷ and where American firms are actively seeking European partners: cybersecurity, artificial intelligence and data analytics, advanced manufacturing, and fintech.

Northern Ireland's technology ecosystem is more developed than its public profile in Washington suggests. Queen's University Belfast's Centre for Secure Information Technologies (CSIT) is one of the UK's leading applied cybersecurity research institutions and has already attracted investment from private firms⁸. Ulster University's Belfast campus has established the Artificial Intelligence Collaboration Centre (AICC)⁹. A collaborative research project between Ulster and Queen's University has been funded by Invest Northern Ireland and the Department for the Economy, and is fueling the discussion on AI adoption. These are mature research clusters that are ready to scale with the right investment partnerships.

The case for US firms is equally strong. Northern Ireland offers lower operating costs than comparable technology hubs in London, Dublin, or Amsterdam; a highly educated, English-speaking workforce; and uniquely guaranteed access to both UK and EU markets under the Windsor Framework. For US technology companies evaluating European expansion, NI offers a risk-adjusted value proposition that no other region can offer.

Formalizing this through a structured Investment Corridor would allow both governments to coordinate

7 Invest Northern Ireland. "Northern Ireland's Economic Development Strategy 2021-2031," Belfast, 2021. <https://www.investni.com/economic-development-strategy>

8 Center for Secure Information Technologies, <https://www.qub.ac.uk/research-centres/csit/>

9 Artificial Intelligence Collaboration Center Webpage, <https://www.aicc.co/>

incentives, reduce friction for US investors, and signal the seriousness of the partnership in terms that the business community understands.

Northern Ireland's Dual Market Advantage

Arguably single most underappreciated asset in Northern Ireland's economic toolkit is its post-Brexit market position. Under the Windsor Framework, the agreement reached between the UK and EU in 2023, Northern Ireland retains access to the EU single market for goods while remaining part of the UK's internal market¹⁰. No other territory in the world holds this status.

A US manufacturer that establishes operations in Northern Ireland can sell goods into the EU's 450 million consumers without tariffs and into the UK's 67 million consumers from the same facility under a single regulatory framework. Post-Brexit, this cannot be achieved from any location in Great Britain. It effectively positions Northern Ireland as a transatlantic gateway, a base from which US firms can serve both markets simultaneously.

This advantage is currently almost entirely unmarketed to American businesses. Whilst Invest NI has attempted to promote the advantages of Dual Market Access¹¹, there is no official US-facing campaign that presents Northern Ireland in these terms. There has been no dedicated service to help US firms navigate the dual compliance requirements, and no systematic effort by either government to translate this legal reality into commercial flows. Whilst it is worth acknowledging that there are several key regulatory areas yet to be defined, and the skills to articulate and solve these issues are capped at the moment, establishing a Dual Market Access Office in Washington as a key recommendation, would begin to close that gap.

Research Collaboration and the Knowledge Economy

Northern Ireland's universities are its most consistently high-performing institutions. Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University both rank in the top tier of UK institutions for research quality in their respective specialisms, and both have established transatlantic relationships through study abroad programs, scholarship schemes, and formal Memoranda of Understanding with North American universities. The Washington Ireland Program and the Ulster Project have, for decades, built the personal and cultural networks that underpin business and political relationships.

These foundations are strong, but they have not yet been systematically leveraged to produce the kind of deep research collaboration that generates lasting economic value. The US-Ireland R&D Partnership, a trilateral program involving the US National Science Foundation, Science Foundation Ireland, and Invest NI, is a model that works, and that could be significantly expanded. Joint PhD programs, transatlantic research fellowships, and shared innovation sandboxes would build the long-term intellectual capital that sustains a knowledge economy, not just the

“Economic prosperity was never intended to be a byproduct of peace in Northern Ireland; it was designed to be its guarantor. However, that promise remains partially unfulfilled, as political instability and a lack of a clear, coherent economic narrative have often overshadowed the region's genuine sectoral strengths.”

10 Clifford Smyth. “The Northern Ireland Economy in the Context of Brexit”. Institute of Welsh Affairs / Economic Policy Group, Cardiff, 2019.

11 Invest NI, “Benefits of Dual Market Access,” <https://www.investni.com/support-for-business/dual-market-access/benefits-of-dual-market-access>

immediate FDI flows that short-term investment attraction produces.

The target institutions on the US side should not be restricted to prestigious names. While partnerships with MIT, Stanford, and Carnegie Mellon would carry significant reputational value, institutions with strong applied research programs in cybersecurity and life sciences, including Georgia Tech, University of Maryland, and Purdue, may offer more immediately productive partnerships given their alignment with NI's existing strengths.

Community Investment and the Post-Conflict Dividend

Economic development in Northern Ireland cannot be abstracted from its geography of conflict. Areas that bore the highest burden of the Troubles, North and West Belfast, Derry, and a number of border communities, continue to show the highest rates of deprivation, long-term unemployment, and economic inactivity in the region. These communities are central to the Department for the Economy's Regional Balance focus¹², because NI's overall productivity figures will not improve materially if the gains are concentrated in already-prosperous areas.

The United States has both a political and a moral stake in ensuring that the peace dividend of the Good Friday Agreement reaches these communities, as it is debatable whether they have had the same dividend as other areas¹³. US philanthropic institutions, including the Atlantic Philanthropies, which invested over \$500 million in Ireland and Northern Ireland before winding down, and fundraising through organizations such as the Ireland Funds, demonstrate a willingness to contribute directly to Northern Irish people. The US Government has a policy focus on internal spending, but by utilizing low-cost initiatives and acting as a centralizing power would have impact without financial burden.

Channeling US philanthropic and introducing federal development funding into skills programs tied to urban regeneration in post-conflict areas, and community-based enterprise zones would have tangible effects on those communities. It would also, practically, expand the talent pipeline from communities currently underrepresented in the knowledge economy.

This would be particularly salient, as the UK government is cutting 64% of funding for local charities, which would devastate the community and voluntary sector¹⁴.

The US Special Envoy: From Peace Process to Economic Partnership

The United States has maintained a Special Envoy to Northern Ireland since the peace process era, and the role has evolved considerably since its inception. The tenure of Joseph Kennedy III as Special Envoy, which demonstrated the value of sustained, high-level US engagement on economic and political issues, points to what a more formally structured trade role could achieve. Diplomatic infrastructure between the US and NI already exists with the US Consulate in Belfast and the Northern Ireland Bureau in Washington, D.C. providing an operational foundation on which a more ambitious economic partnership can be built.

However, the role currently constituted lacks institutional continuity, an explicit mandate, and the congressional backing needed to sustain an economic agenda. The Envoy's focus has historically been determined by the political preoccupations of each administration, meaning that the trade and investment dimension of

12 Department for the Economy, "Regional Balance," <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/topics/regional-balance>

13 Graham Browlow. "The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement at 25: has there been a peace dividend for the economy in Northern Ireland?" Northern Ireland Assembly, Belfast, 2023.

14 NICVA, "Local charities warn Westminster MPs of devastating consequences of 64% funding cut to vital services," 26 January 2026, <https://www.nicva.org/article/local-charities-warn-westminster-mps-of-devastating-consequences-of-64-funding-cut-to-vital>

the relationship is subject to interruption whenever peace process issues re-emerge. Codifying the role with a permanent trade mandate, a requirement to produce an annual economic partnership report, and a biannual NI-US Business Forum would transform it from a reactive diplomatic instrument into a proactive engine of economic relationship-building.

Policy Recommendations

The following five recommendations are designed to be actionable within the current political and institutional context. They are sequenced to reflect both urgency and feasibility, with the Investment Corridor and Dual Market Access Office representing near-term priorities and the research and community recommendations operating on a slightly longer horizon.

- **Establish a NI-US Technology Investment Corridor**

The US Department of Commerce, in partnership with Invest NI and the UK Department for Business and Trade, should establish a formal NI-US Technology Investment Corridor by the end of 2026. The Corridor should be anchored in four priority sectors: cybersecurity, artificial intelligence and data analytics, fintech, and life sciences. It should include three operational components: a co-funded US-NI R&D grant program, targeting a minimum of \$50 million in matched funding over five years; a fast-tracked regulatory and planning pathway for US firms establishing NI operations, modelled on the UK's Investment Zones framework; and a joint US-NI venture capital co-investment fund.

This Corridor should be launched with a formal announcement at a NI-US Business Forum (see Recommendation 5) and should include a public record of investment targets against which both governments report annually.

- **Create a Dual Market Certification Office**

The NI Executive, in partnership with the UK Government and the US Department of Commerce, should establish a Dual Market Access Office (DMCO) in Washington. The DMCO would provide US firms with streamlined, one-stop compliance guidance for simultaneously accessing both UK and EU markets from an American base of operations. This would help to translate the legal reality of the Windsor Framework into a commercially legible service offering.

The Office should be co-funded by the NI Executive, the UK Government, and US private-sector partners, and staffed with trade compliance experts across all three jurisdictions. Its external-facing brand, targeted at US corporate audiences, should position Northern Ireland explicitly as the 'Transatlantic Gateway Region,' a single location from which American firms can reach 500 million consumers across two distinct regulatory environments. This is Northern Ireland's strongest commercial proposition, and it is currently not being communicated effectively to American business decision-makers.

- **Launch a Transatlantic Research Partnership Program**

The US National Science Foundation, in partnership with UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and Invest NI, should significantly expand the existing US-Ireland R&D Partnership¹⁵ to establish a dedicated Transatlantic Research Fellowship program, linking Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University with a network of US partner institutions. Priority research areas should be cybersecurity, life sciences, and Agri-tech, sectors where NI universities already hold internationally recognized research strengths and where US institutional partners are actively seeking collaborative opportunities.

15 National Science Foundation. "NSF and UKRI launch \$10M quantum chemistry collaborative research effort" Washington, DC: NSF, 2025. <https://www.nsf.gov/news/nsf-ukri-launch-10m-quantum-chemistry-collaborative-research>

The program should fund a minimum of 50 joint PhD studentships annually, establish at least three co-located innovation sandboxes and physical spaces in both NI and the US, where researchers from partner institutions can work on shared projects. They should also create a competitive transatlantic research fellowship scheme for post-doctoral researchers. The NI Executive's Department for the Economy, which has already co-funded a number of PhD programs, should commit to matching any expansion in US federal funding on a pound-for-dollar basis. This investment builds long-term productivity and intellectual capital, not just FDI flows that conventional investment produces.

- **Establish Community Enterprise Zones in Post-Conflict Areas**

The US Government, in coordination with the NI Executive and US philanthropic networks, should designate a targeted program of support for community-based enterprise zones in the areas of Northern Ireland most affected by the legacy of the Troubles. This should combine three streams of activity: US federal backing for urban regeneration projects in post-conflict communities; skills programs developed in direct partnership with US firms investing in NI, ensuring that training pipelines serve the actual employment needs of the investment landscape; and a coordinated approach to mobilizing US philanthropic capital, drawing on the Irish-American diaspora networks that have historically been responsive to NI, for community enterprises.

Targeting investment at communities currently underrepresented in the knowledge economy is an economic growth strategy. Northern Ireland's headline productivity figures will not improve if the gains from US investment are concentrated in already-prosperous areas. Expanding the talent pool from which the technology and life sciences sectors can recruit is, in the long run, a condition of the Investment Corridor's success.

- **Codify the US Special Envoy to Northern Ireland as a Permanent Trade Role**

Congress should pass legislation, or the President should issue a formal executive directive, codifying the Special Envoy to Northern Ireland as a permanent, Senate-confirmed position with an explicit and primary trade and investment mandate. This would be distinct from and additional to its traditional peace-process focus. The role should be required by statute to produce an annual NI-US Economic Partnership Report, tracking progress against the investment targets established under Recommendation 1, and to convene a biannual NI-US Business Forum in Washington, DC, bringing together US investors, NI Executive Ministers, UK Government representatives, and Northern Ireland's university and business community.

The tenure of Joseph Kennedy III demonstrated that a committed, high-profile Envoy can shift the dial on US engagement with Northern Ireland's economy. But the value of that engagement should not depend on the personal commitment of an individual appointee, or on the political priorities of any given administration. Institutionalizing the role ensures that the economic partnership survives the political cycles that have historically interrupted it. The Friends of Ireland Congressional Caucus, which has long provided bipartisan support for NI-related legislation, is the natural vehicle for advancing this measure on Capitol Hill.

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The Road to Net Zero:

Infrastructure, State Capacity, and Regional Equity in a Climate-Constrained Democracy

Elisha Duddy

Executive Summary

The A5 Western Transport Corridor, an 85-mile single-carriageway road connecting Derry/Londonderry in Northern Ireland to the border with the Republic of Ireland, has become a litmus test for a challenge facing democracies on both sides of the Atlantic: how to deliver essential infrastructure under binding climate law without eroding public trust or regional equity.

Quashed in 2025 under Section 52 of the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022¹, a landmark statute that introduced legally binding carbon budgets, requiring all public bodies to demonstrate that major decisions are consistent with Northern Ireland's pathway to net zero, the A5 represents an institutional sequencing failure rather than a rejection of climate ambition. Since 2007, fifty-eight people have died on this dangerous route², which remains the primary transport artery for the Northwest, a region with no railway and limited alternatives. Promised as a peace dividend under the 2006 St. Andrews Agreement³, the political and financial settlement that helped consolidate Northern Ireland's peace process and committed both the UK and Irish governments to addressing decades of regional underinvestment, the project is a cornerstone of cross-border cooperation and economic rebalancing.

This paper argues that the A5 exposes a structural governance gap; climate frameworks were layered onto legacy planning systems without redesigning the institutions responsible for delivery. The court did not rule that the road should not be built but ruled that the state could not yet demonstrate how the project fit within its carbon pathway. Northern Ireland's infrastructure delivery has fallen into what political scientist Francis Fukuyama describes as a "vetocracy"⁴, a system where the procedural power to obstruct has overwhelmed the strategic capacity to build. Moving toward an "Abundance Agenda," this paper proposes a model of climate-aligned modernization.

By examining transatlantic and European parallels, from Appalachia to the Netherlands to the Republic of Ireland's own Accelerating Infrastructure Taskforce, this paper outlines five core reforms: appointing a Climate Commissioner, mandating native carbon integration, establishing integrated delivery units, reforming land compensation, and introducing rural safety assessments.

1 The High Court of Justice in Northern Ireland. "Application pursuant to Article 67BA of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 (as amended)." June 2025.

2 Niall McCracken and BBC. "A5 Crossroads." BBC News, n.d. Accessed February 2026. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/extra/5vdi79qvds/a5_crossroads.

3 Department of the Taoiseach. "Unprecedented Funding of over €800 Million for Shared Island Investment Priorities Including A5 Road." gov.ie. Government of Ireland, June 4, 2024. <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-the-taoiseach/press-releases/unprecedented-funding-of-over-800-million-for-shared-island-investment-priorities-including-a5-road/>.

4 Francis Fukuyama. "Vetocracy and Climate Adaptation." Persuasion.community. Persuasion, December 19, 2022. <https://www.persuasion.community/p/vetocracy-and-climate-adaptation>.



Figure 1: Map of the current A5 single-carriageway and the proposed dual-carriageway route.

(Source: BBC News, 2023).

Introduction: The Modernization Crisis

Across advanced democracies, infrastructure policy is entering a volatile phase. Legally binding carbon targets are no longer aspirational but statutory mandates. At the same time, geopolitical instability and competitiveness are reshaping economic priorities. Yet many Western nations are currently experiencing institutional paralysis. Systems have been built in which the procedural power to say no has overwhelmed the strategic capacity to say yes.⁵ The result is a system where the status quo, such as leaving dangerous, outdated infrastructure in place, becomes the only viable path. The human consequences of this institutional paralysis are best understood through the daily experience of travelers in the Northwest of the Island of Ireland. In a region without rail, this narrow road carries ambulances, haulage, and daily commuters. For these communities, infrastructure is a matter of survival. The family WhatsApp group often functions as a real-time casualty alert system, as notifications of crashes on the A5 ripple through neighborhoods with grim regularity.

The A5 Western Transport Corridor forces a confrontation with a fundamental question: can a state fulfill its climate obligations while delivering the essential infrastructure that communities depend on? The recent legal quashing of the A5 was not a declaration that roads are inherently anti-environmental. Instead, it was a finding that the state could not yet demonstrate how the project fit within its overall carbon pathway (Section 52 of the Climate Change Act 2022).⁶ This is a failure of institutional sequencing. If democracies cannot deliver essential modernization in peripheral regions while meeting climate constraints, they risk eroding public consent for the green transition. As political scientist Katherine Cramer observes in her work on the “Politics of Resentment,” when rural populations feel distant and misunderstood by urban centers and believe new regulations are being used to stall their basic modernization, the result is a breakdown of the social contract.⁷

In Northern Ireland, this breakdown is manifesting in real time. The Rural Needs Impact Assessment (RNIA),⁸ a statutory requirement under the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 that obliges public

5 Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson. *Abundance*. Simon and Schuster, 2025.

6 Northern Ireland Assembly. “Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.” Legislation.gov.uk, 2022. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2022/31/contents/enacted>.

7 Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment*. University of Chicago Press, 2016.

8 Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. “Northern Ireland Draft Climate Action Plan: Overarching Rural Needs

bodies to consider the impact of new policies on rural communities, of the draft Northern Ireland Climate Action Plan (2023-2027) explicitly warns that if climate measures disproportionately impact rural or low-income populations, they risk generating significant public resistance and undermining progress toward net zero. When climate policy is perceived as a hurdle to physical safety and regional equity, it can fuel the very anti-environmental populism and polarization currently destabilizing Western democracies.⁹

Research Context: The Peace Dividend and Veto State

To understand the A5 Western Transport Corridor, one must first recognize its historical and political significance as a peace dividend. The 2006 St. Andrews Agreement was more than a political roadmap; it was a financial commitment to rectify decades of structural underinvestment in the Northwest of Ireland¹⁰. Historically, Northern Ireland has suffered from a stark “East-West” divide, where investment and modern infrastructure are concentrated in the Greater Belfast area, leaving the Northwest isolated and economically disadvantaged. The state’s own internal analysis reveals a much deeper crisis of regional inequality. In a recently published business case from the Department for Infrastructure (DfI), released only in redacted form during the public inquiry process, government officials admitted that Derry/Londonderry and the wider Northwest region consistently underperform economically compared to every other major city on the island of Ireland.¹¹ The report identified the cause of stagnation as poor connectivity and as a legacy of underinvestment. It highlights that businesses and residents in the Northwest are constrained by unreliable journey times, with severe bottlenecks at junctions in key towns turning a primary international transport corridor into a series of local traffic jams.

The St. Andrews Promise

The upgrade of the A5 was a centerpiece of this rebalancing strategy. As a primary transport spine, it serves as the vital link between Derry/Londonderry, the region’s second city, and the border, facilitating freight, commuters, and emergency services. The project is also a hallmark of cross-border cooperation, with the Irish Government in Dublin committing €600 million (\$650 million)¹² through the Shared Island Fund to ensure connectivity to County Donegal (Republic of Ireland). Despite this high-level political and financial support, the project has remained trapped in a fragmented departmental system for nearly two decades, which is becoming increasingly vulnerable to litigation.

The Institutional Lag of the 2022 Act

The Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022¹³ introduced legally binding carbon budgets and a net-zero target, with comparable net-zero commitments adopted across the European Union and the United

Impact Assessment 2023–2027.” Belfast: DAERA, June 2025. <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/Annex%20H%20%28v%29%20-%20Overarching%20Rural%20Needs%20Impact%20Assessment.pdf>.

9 Matthew Paterson, Stanley Wilshire, and Paul Tobin. “The Rise of Anti-Net Zero Populism in the UK: Comparing Rhetorical Strategies for Climate Policy Dismantling.” *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice* 26, no. 3-4 (August 22, 2023): 332–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13876988.2023.2242799>.

10 Department of the Taoiseach, “Unprecedented Funding of over €800 Million for Shared Island Investment Priorities Including A5 Road.”

11 McCracken and BBC, “A5 Crossroads.”

12 Department of the Taoiseach, “Unprecedented Funding of over €800 Million for Shared Island Investment Priorities Including A5 Road.”

13 Northern Ireland Assembly, “Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.”

States. However, the institutions responsible for infrastructure were not redesigned to meet these new standards. When the A5 was challenged in court, it revealed that carbon modeling had been retrofitted onto a project designed under earlier governance assumptions.¹⁴ By failing to integrate climate compliance into the design phase, the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) left the project fragile. This “institutional lag” indicates a critical problem: we have updated our laws for a net-zero future but are still trying to deliver them using the planning tools of the past.

Argument and Analysis: Building the Abundance State

The challenge of the A5 illustrates a broader tension seen across Europe and the United States: the difficulty of delivering infrastructure within the very rules that governments themselves establish.

Decoupling and the Abundance Agenda

As researcher Hannah Ritchie has documented using data from Our World in Data, many advanced economies are successfully “decoupling” economic growth from carbon emissions.¹⁵ To reach net zero, we must build at a pace and scale not seen since the mid-20th century. We require new high-voltage grids, offshore wind supply chains, and modern transport corridors.¹⁶ To achieve this, we must dispel the belief that economic modernization and carbon reduction are mutually exclusive. The data for the United Kingdom is a definitive example of this trend. Since 1990, the UK has managed to increase its GDP by 59.5%, even as its CO₂ emissions have plummeted by 56.9%. The United States demonstrates a similar breakthrough, proving that the world’s largest economy can also break the link between emissions and economic growth. Over a comparable period, US GDP rose by 70.1%, while emissions fell by 29.9%.¹⁷ While the US transition is happening from a higher carbon baseline, the trajectory is clear that growth and decarbonization are moving in opposite directions. This trend of absolute decoupling is being accelerated in the United States through the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA),¹⁸ a landmark ten-year investment framework designed to catalyze a clean-energy construction boom.

“Infrastructure is not merely a technical or budgetary concern; in a post-conflict context, it is a matter of institutional trust and physical safety. For the communities of the Northwest, the A5 is not just a road—it is a vital link to economic opportunity and a necessary measure to prevent further loss of life on what remains one of Ireland’s most dangerous routes.”

Figure 2: Change in per capita CO₂ emissions and GDP, United Kingdom, and United States (1990–

14 The High Court of Justice in Northern Ireland. “Application pursuant to Article 67BA of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 (as amended).”

15 Hannah Ritchie. “Many Countries Have Decoupled Economic Growth from CO₂ Emissions, Even If We Take Offshored Production into Account.” Our World in Data, December 1, 2021. <https://ourworldindata.org/co2-gdp-decoupling>.

16 Klein and Thompson, Abundance.

17 Ritchie, “Many Countries Have Decoupled Economic Growth from CO₂ Emissions, Even If We Take Offshored Production into Account.”

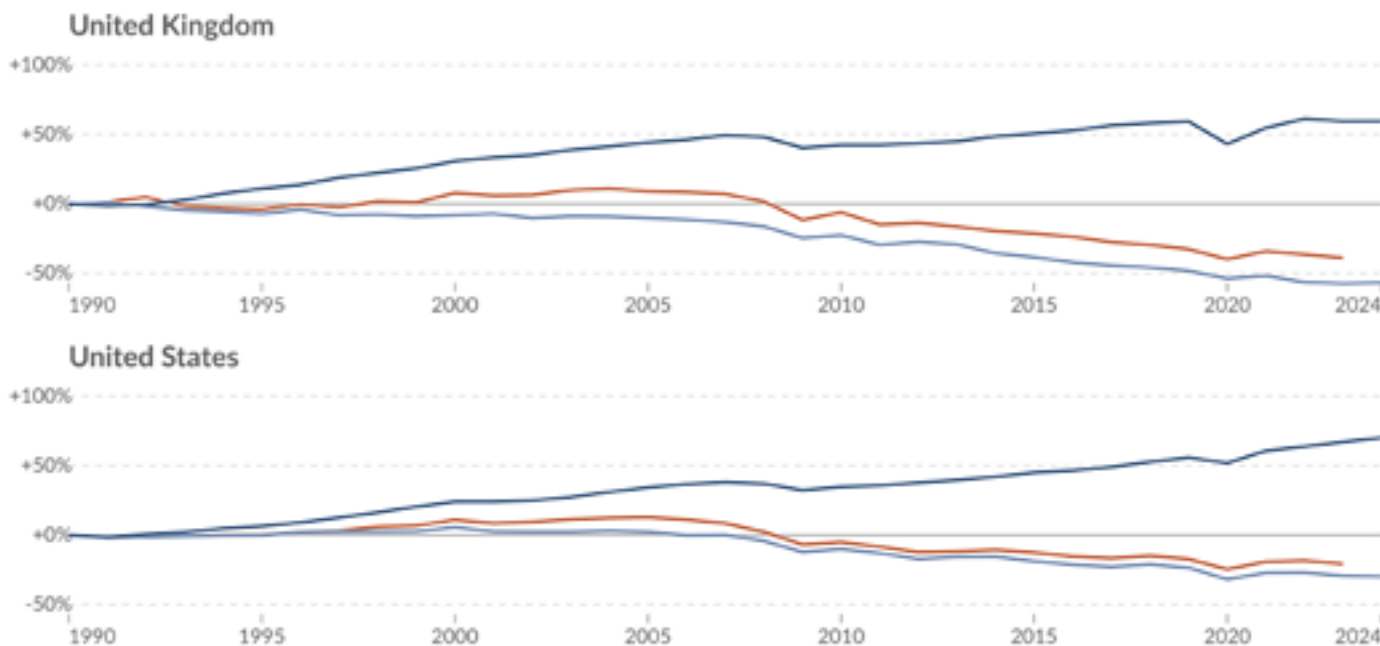
18 Department of Energy. “INFLATION REDUCTION ACT of 2022.” Energy.gov, 2022. <https://www.energy.gov/edf/inflation-reduction-act-2022>.

Change in per capita CO₂ emissions and GDP

Our World
in Data

Consumption-based emissions¹ include those from fossil fuels and industry². Land-use change emissions³ are not included. GDP per capita is adjusted for inflation and differences in living costs between countries.

■ GDP per capita ■ CO₂ emissions per capita ■ Consumption-based CO₂ emissions per capita



Data source: Eurostat, OECD, IMF, and World Bank (2026); Global Carbon Budget (2025); Population based on various sources (2024)

Note: GDP per capita is expressed in international-\$⁴ at 2021 prices.

OurWorldinData.org/co2-and-greenhouse-gas-emissions | CC BY

2024). Source: Our World in Data (Hannah Ritchie). Data compiled from Eurostat, OECD, IMF, World Bank (2026), and Global Carbon Budget (2025).

As Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson argue, the green transition is fundamentally about building;¹⁹ we cannot have a clean economy without the capacity to deliver the grids that carry it. This is why the A5 upgrade delay is a systemic risk. If a state lacks the capacity to deliver a road, it will inevitably struggle to build the high-voltage lines and EV charging networks required for 2050. A modernized A5 is the essential platform for the Northwest's electrification, providing the spine for fast-charging hubs and biodiversity greenways. Decarbonization must expand regional possibilities, not shrink them.

The Peripheral Realities of a Just Transition

Many climate strategies are designed for metropolitan areas with extensive rail and transit networks. In rural regions like the Northwest, decarbonization must happen on the road. One cannot move a trailer of perishable agri-food products from a farm in County Tyrone to a port via a non-existent rail network. In these contexts, the road is the only logistics platform. Furthermore, the region's emissions profile is unique as agriculture, specifically methane from livestock, constitutes a massive share of the carbon budget, responsible for 30.8% of emissions.²⁰ A "Just Transition," broadly defined as "ensuring that no one is left behind or pushed behind in the transition to low-

19 Klein and Thompson, *Abundance*.

20 NI Greenhouse Gas Inventory 1990-2023. Nisra.gov.uk, June 2025. <https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/daera/northern-ireland-greenhouse-gas-inventory-1990-2023-statistical-bulletin.html>.

carbon and environmentally sustainable economies and societies²¹”, must ensure that rural regions are not left with 19th-century connectivity. Peripheral regions are often the hosts of the green transition, where wind farms are built and peatlands are restored.²² Failing to provide these areas with modern infrastructure can lead to the erosion of trust in the net-zero project itself.

The Transatlantic Parallel: Appalachia and Permitting Reform

The A5’s struggle mirrors the history of the Appalachian Development Highway System (ADHS) in the United States. Established in the 1960s, the ADHS was designed to use infrastructure to break the cycle of poverty and isolation in the Appalachian Mountains²³. Like the Northwest of Ireland, Appalachia is a peripheral region where geography and isolation created structural disadvantages.

Today, the U.S. faces a similar permitting crisis. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)²⁴, originally intended to protect the environment, is now frequently used to stall the very green energy grids and electrified transport corridors needed to fight climate change. The lesson from the American experience is clear: if the state loses the “capacity to build,” it loses the ability to deliver regional equity. Whether it is a road in County Tyrone or a transmission line in West Virginia, the inability to build projects predictably is a signal of institutional inertia.

Safety and the Right to Life

Infrastructure is often discussed in abstract economic terms, but a more visceral reality defines the A5. Fifty-eight people have died on the existing road since 2007.²⁵ These deaths are not mere statistics but represent a failure of the state to protect its citizens. Currently, governance frameworks lack a mechanism to weigh carbon costs against life/safety benefits. This is a profound design gap. A democracy must be able to argue that saving lives is a primary function of the state that can coexist with, and even justify, the carbon cost of construction. Achieving net zero is not possible if individuals cannot reach home safely.

Approaches to Climate-Aligned Infrastructure Delivery

The A5’s problem is not that environmental objections exist but rather that they arrive at the end, in court, after years of planning, rather than shaping the project at the beginning. International examples show what happens when that sequence is reversed. Environmental and carbon constraints are not barriers to infrastructure but are inputs into how it is designed and delivered. Where they are integrated early, projects are not only more deliverable but technically better.

The Republic of Ireland

The first difference is institutional. Where environmental and carbon constraints are embedded at the point of decision-making, projects are designed to meet them from the outset.

The Irish Government’s Accelerating Infrastructure Taskforce,²⁶ a cross-government reform body

21 United Nations. “Just Transition* CDP Input on the 2023 ECOSOC Theme (Accelerating the Recovery from the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) and the Full Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at All Levels) Summary,” 2023. <https://policy.desa.un.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/cdp-excerpt-2023-1.pdf>.

22 Hilma Salonen. “Beyond the Numbers: How Green Transitions Can Prioritise Rural Communities to Ensure a More Just Transition.” *Energy Research & Social Science* 127 (September 2025): 104287. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2025.104287>.

23 Appalachian Regional Commission. “Appalachian Development Highway System.” Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d. <https://www.arc.gov/appalachian-development-highway-system/>.

24 National Park System. “Policy & Guidance - National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) (U.S. National Park Service).” www.nps.gov. Accessed February 2026. <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nepa/policy.htm>.

25 McCracken and BBC, “A5 Crossroads.”

26 Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation. “Accelerating Infrastructure Taskforce.” gov.ie, June 2025. <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-public-expenditure-infrastructure-public-service-reform-and-digitalisation/collections/accelerating-infrastructure-taskforce-meetings/>.

established in 2025, flags a growing recognition that existing institutional structures are not fit for the regulatory environment in which they now operate. In its initial assessment, the taskforce identified a system characterized by increasing regulatory complexity, rising judicial review, fragmented approvals and a culture of risk aversion that slows delivery across electricity, water, and transport infrastructure. Its work program points towards legal reform, regulatory simplification, prioritization, and delivery coordination as necessary responses to a system that has become better at surfacing risk than resolving it early enough to enable delivery.

The N20 Cork-Limerick Road project illustrates what this can produce at proposal stage. Comparable in scale to the A5 upgrade, it embeds carbon compliance and environmental considerations directly into engineering design, rather than retrofitting them at approval. The proposal includes intermodal transport hubs, EV charging infrastructure, active travel corridors, and integrated environmental mitigation along the route.²⁷ It is not yet built, and delivery will be its own test, but its planning process is in a fundamentally different place to the A5's. The distinction is not ambition, but sequencing - environmental constraints are shaping design, rather than being tested against it after the fact.

The Netherlands

The Netherlands demonstrates that treating environmental constraints as technical parameters leads to better engineering. The N211 “Carbon-Negative” road represents a new standard of infrastructure. Over its lifecycle, it is designed to save and offset more emissions than it produces.²⁸ It achieved this through an integrated system of engineering decisions: low-temperature asphalt, road foundations built from recycled concrete and smart energy systems like solar-powered lighting. By treating the road as a potential carbon-mitigation asset rather than a liability, the Dutch model reduces the procedural vulnerability of major projects to environmental quashing. When constraints are integrated early on, they drive better engineering outcomes.

The United Kingdom and the Devolution Gap

The United Kingdom is currently undergoing its most significant planning overhaul in decades through the Planning and Infrastructure Bill (2025).²⁹ This legislation aims to modernize the delivery of major projects by reducing procedural bottlenecks and updating national policy statements to align with net-zero targets. Northern Ireland is facing its own devolution gap. As planning is a devolved matter, Northern Ireland operates under the same legally binding climate obligations as its neighbors, but it has not yet adopted the equivalent, modernized delivery mechanisms.

The UK experience, from the London 2012 Olympics to current digital initiatives, proves that large-scale delivery is possible when institutional structures support coordination from day one. During the 2012 Games, the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA) utilized a ‘Single Point of Contact’ model to streamline dozens of agencies, making sustainability an engineering requirement rather than a legal hurdle.³⁰

27 N/M20 Project. “N/M20 Cork to Limerick Scheme.” N/M20 Cork to Limerick, 2024. <https://corklimerick.ie/>.

28 OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (OPSI). “Carbon-Negative Regional Roads - the Road to Energy Transition - Observatory of Public Sector Innovation.” Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, November 15, 2019. <https://oecd-opsi.org/innovations/carbon-negative-regional-roads-the-road-to-energy-transition/>.

29 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government. “Guide to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill.” gov.uk, March 11, 2025. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-planning-and-infrastructure-bill/guide-to-the-planning-and-infrastructure-bill>.

30 Olympic Delivery Authority. “Learning Legacy’s ‘Goldmine of Knowledge’ Kept by Cabinet Office to Help Other Major Projects.” gov.uk, September 20, 2012. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/learning-legacy-s-goldmine-of-knowledge-kept-by-cabinet->

Today, this approach is evolving through ‘digital twinning.’³¹ Organizations like National Highways use these virtual models to simulate emissions and traffic flow before construction begins. To deliver the A5, the NI Executive must move beyond simple procedural tweaks and adopt the same design-led, integrated delivery models currently being deployed by its neighbors.

Policy Recommendations: Toward a State of Delivery

To transition from paralysis to abundance, Northern Ireland must reform its institutional architecture. This paper outlines five key policy recommendations:

Expedite the appointment of the Climate Commissioner and Just Transition Commission

The 2022 Act established the roles for the Climate Commissioner and the Just Transition Commission,³² yet as of early 2026, these vital roles remain vacant. This is a critical failure of state capacity. Without an independent Commissioner providing oversight and a Commission to safeguard regional equity, infrastructure projects are left to be litigated in the courts rather than managed through strategic governance. These appointments must be made immediately. Their mandate should be to act as facilitators, ensuring that decarbonization and modernization move in tandem.

Mandate Native Carbon Integration

Move away from retrofitting carbon assessments. Carbon modeling should be a foundational part of the engineering process from day one. Planners and climate analysts should operate in integrated design teams, utilizing digital twin technology to ensure that projects are carbon-compliant by design.³³ This reflects a shift toward front-loading climate obligations, ensuring that key issues are addressed at the earliest stages of development rather than approval. This makes projects robust to judicial review and ensures that climate law serves as a framework for design, not a hurdle at the approval stage.

Establish an Integrated ‘Climate-Infrastructure Delivery Unit’

To end the departmental silos, a centralized, cross-functional unit should handle projects of regional significance. This unit would combine legal, environmental, and engineering expertise to ensure unified, climate-compliant planning. This model, similar to delivery units used in other advanced economies, reduces procedural vulnerability. Comparable delivery models are already emerging in the Republic of Ireland, providing a clear blueprint for Northern Ireland.

Introduce Rural Equity and Safety Impact Assessments

Climate-constrained infrastructure requires a more sophisticated framework to navigate competing public interests (safety, land ownership, regional balance). Alongside Environmental Impact Assessments, the state should be legally required to conduct rural equity and safety assessments. These would weigh carbon costs against the documented fatalities on dangerous routes and the lack of viable public transport alternatives for rural SMEs.

Reform Land Vesting and Compensation for Partnership

Modernization requires social consent. Current land vesting (eminent domain) and compensation structures

office-to-help-other-major-projects.

31 National Highways. “Digital Roads - National Highways.” [nationalhighways.co.uk](https://nationalhighways.co.uk/our-work/digital-data-and-technology/digital-roads/), June 28, 2021. <https://nationalhighways.co.uk/our-work/digital-data-and-technology/digital-roads/>.

32 Northern Ireland Assembly, “Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.”

33 Highways, “Digital Roads - National Highways.”

are often rigid and adversarial, treating farmers as obstacles rather than partners.³⁴ The state should move toward a partnership model of land acquisition, providing flexible compensation that reflects the true economic disruption caused by land loss and the loss of business continuity. Treating landowners as stakeholders is the fastest way to speed up delivery timelines.

Conclusion: The Road to Net Zero

The transition to a net-zero economy is the greatest infrastructure challenge of the century. However, if net zero becomes synonymous with not building anything, it will lose the public consent required to succeed. This is especially true in peripheral regions like the Northwest, where infrastructure represents safety, labor mobility, and a connection to the wider world.

The quashing of the A5 should serve as a wake-up call. It demonstrates that the institutions are not yet equipped for the legal and environmental realities of the 21st Century. The road to Net Zero is not only a technical journey but also an institutional one. We must modernize the system so that we can modernize the land. High climate ambition requires high delivery capacity. It is time to move beyond paralysis and unlock a future of abundance.

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34 Peter McCann, *The Farmers Journal*. "2,000 Acres of No Man's Land along A5 Road." *Farmersjournal.ie*. Irish Farmers Journal, September 3, 2025. <https://www.farmersjournal.ie/more/northern-ireland/2-000-acres-of-no-man-s-land-along-a5-road-883797>.

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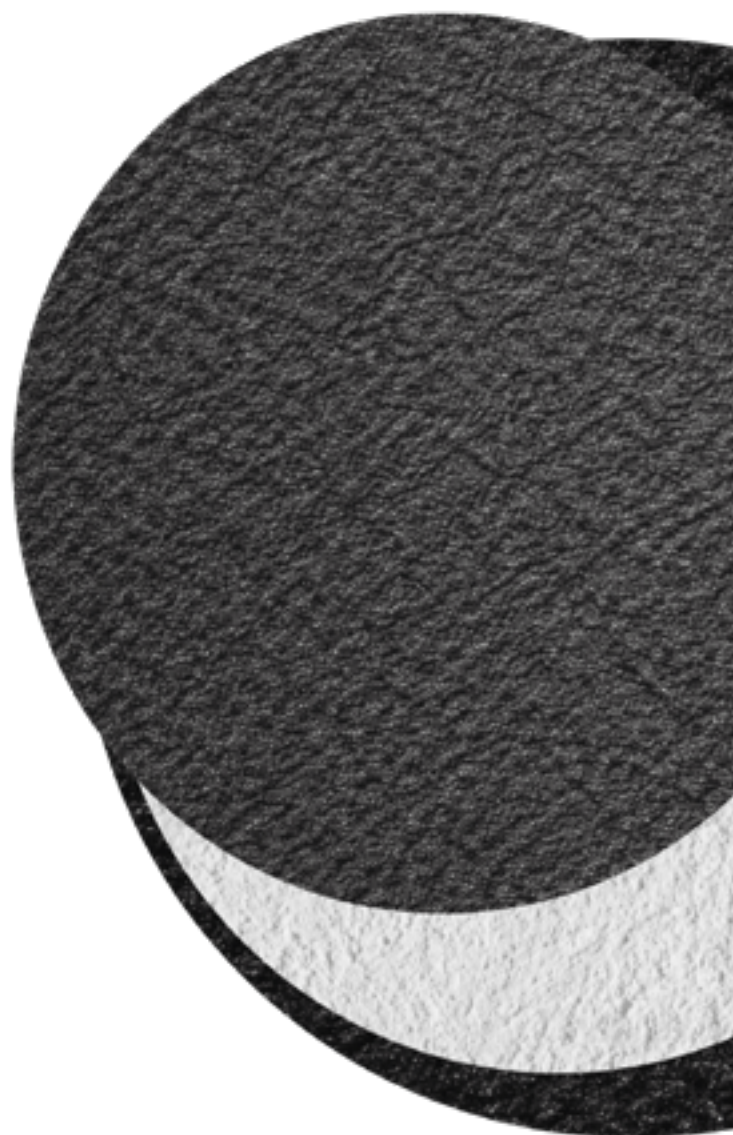
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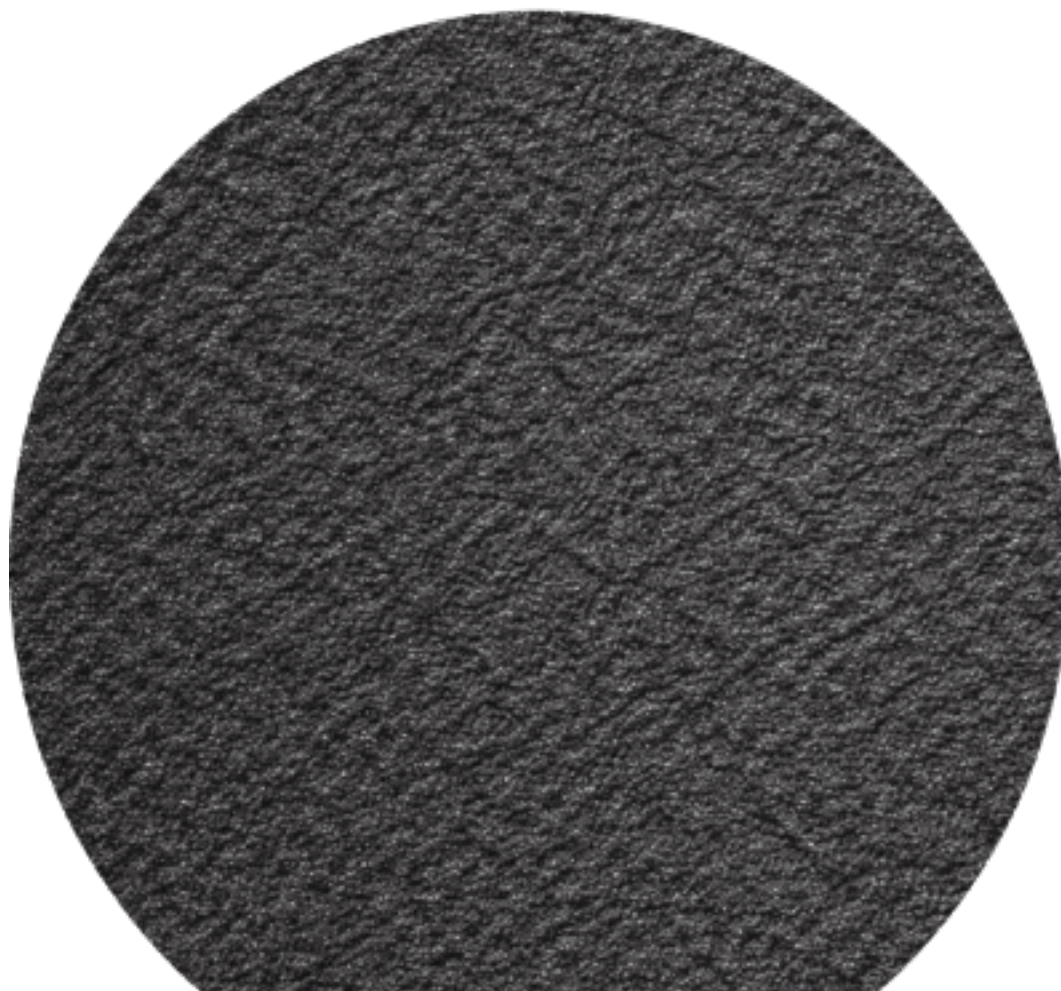
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Intervention and Prevention of Youth Paramilitarism through the Lens of Youth Work Practices

by Kathlyn Haskins

Executive Summary

Paramilitary influence continues to shape the lives of many young people in Northern Ireland, where coercion, intimidation, and community-embedded control remain persistent features of the post-conflict landscape. Young people, particularly young men in areas marked by deprivation, segregation, and intergenerational trauma, are disproportionately vulnerable to recruitment and exploitation. Existing initiatives, while valuable, are fragmented, short-term, and constrained by funding cycles that prioritize quick outputs over meaningful, sustained change.

This paper proposes a dedicated youth work strategy focused specifically on preventing paramilitary involvement and supporting disengagement. It argues for long-term, multi-year investment; practitioner-led program design; and trauma-informed practice that recognizes the centrality of safe, trusting relationships. Youth workers often operate as the only reliable adults in the lives of high-risk young people, making their protection, professional support, and autonomy essential.

Key Recommendations:

- Establish a dedicated, centralized, long-term youth work strategy focused on preventing and disrupting paramilitary involvement.
- Introduce sustainable multi-year funding models (5–10 years).
- Ensure practitioner-led program design, delivery, and evaluation.
- Embed trauma-informed practice across all youth interventions.
- Strengthen protection and professional support for youth workers and young people.
- Define clear boundaries with policing, specifically for work involving young people at high risk of paramilitary involvement.
- Require all NI departments to assess policy impacts on tackling paramilitarism and innovate across ministries to create lasting change.



Introduction

Twenty-eight years on from the ratification of the Good Friday Agreement, paramilitarism remains a feature of life in Northern Ireland¹. There are societal perceptions of paramilitaries as protectors, particularly prominent in certain communities across the province. As a result, paramilitary violence and influence are often normalized, deemed inescapable, and difficult to address in a lasting and meaningful way. The dominance of these groups can lead to the coercion of children and young people to participate in paramilitary-sanctioned activity². This report examines the prevalence of paramilitary coercion on young people in Northern Ireland, the current role of youth work in response, and ways to enhance youth work practices to combat paramilitary control further. Overall, this strategy is explicitly focused on young people at the highest risk of paramilitary involvement and is not designed as a universal youth program. The small scale is intentional, marking a strategic shift toward intensive, risk-informed engagement with the most vulnerable of our youth, rather than broad-based provision. As such, this paper prioritizes depth over breadth, advocating for programs focused on a smaller cohort of participants intentionally targeted for provision capable of disrupting cycles of coercive control.

In recent years, young people have been arrested in connection with sectarian disorder on numerous occasions³. Similarly, in the aftermath of anti-migration rioting in the summers of 2024 and 2025, 47 young people have been referred to social services under the PSNI's child criminal exploitation (CCE) procedures⁴. Evidence from the Independent Reporting Commission (IRC) suggests paramilitary actors have been involved in such incidents of racist unrest⁵. As such, paramilitary control remains a distinct issue in the post-conflict period and can manifest through the exacerbation of other societal tensions. This dynamic risks the creation of new avenues for exploitation, including the exploitation of young people, through which coercive control may be exercised by these groups.

Paramilitary involvement can be correlated with numerous risk factors: masculinity, geographical location, working-class background, disability, economic deprivation, care experience, youth offending, and educational (under-)attainment⁶. It is an insidious phenomenon requiring long-term, sustained action. This youthwork strategy is intended to play a small role in that action, while recognizing that sustained effort is required on a wider scale⁷.

1 The term 'paramilitarism' is complex and contested, with blurred boundaries between paramilitary activity and organized crime. While some individuals engage primarily in criminal activity, others are motivated by cultural, ideological, or socioeconomic factors rooted in the legacy of conflict in Northern Ireland. This connection sustains a degree of perceived legitimacy within some communities, even where activities are overtly criminal, highlighting the need for policy approaches that engage with these historical and social dynamics. Nuance is, however, required within policy frameworks; failure to acknowledge criminality risks legitimizing these actors, and over-accommodating their historical narratives may reinforce and sustain paramilitary control.

2 Henceforth, this report will use the language of 'youth' or 'young people' when referring to children, adolescents, and young adults. This terminology has been selected due to its fluidity – while the UN defines 'youth' as persons between ages 15 and 24 years for statistical purposes, it recognizes that it is a nuanced term with no universally agreed upon definition internationally.

3 See the following examples in the Shankill area of Belfast (2021), and Derry/Londonderry (2023 and 2025): Rebecca Black, "Two youths arrested after 'disgraceful' disorder following anti protocol rally", Belfast Telegraph, November 4, 2021, <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/two-youths-arrested-after-disgraceful-disorder-following-anti-protocol-rally/a/115830176.html>. Michael Hirst, "NI riots: What is behind the violence in Northern Ireland?", BBC News, April 14, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-56664378>. Vincent Kearney, "Rioters urged to 'see sense' after 11 arrested in Derry", RTE News, June 19, 2025, <https://www.rte.ie/news/ulster/2025/0618/1519127-ulster-unrest-latest/>.

4 Liam Tunney, "Almost 50 children referred under child criminal exploitation protocols following NI race riots." Belfast Telegraph, January 20, 2026.

5 Independent Reporting Commission (IRC), Eighth Report (London: House of Commons, December 2025).

6 Olivia Lucas, Brendan Sturgeon, and Neil Jarman, Barriers to Participation and Progression in Education and Employment for Those at Risk of Becoming Involved with Paramilitary Organisations in Northern Ireland (Belfast: Institute for Conflict Research, 2019).

7 The Independent Reporting Commissions (IRC) recommends that the Northern Ireland Executive should introduce a requirement across all departments and statutory bodies to actively consider how new and revised policy may impact on tackling paramilitarism.

Background

In Northern Ireland, the traditional religious identifications of ‘Protestant’ and ‘Catholic’ go beyond religious belief⁸; they act as an ethnic identity by speaking of the community one is born into and the characteristics they possess⁹. These divisions, catalyzed by systemic civil rights abuses in Northern Ireland, created the necessary conditions for the violence that erupted in the latter years of the twentieth century, often referred to as ‘the Troubles’¹⁰. The conflict spanned three decades, resulting in over 3,500 deaths and 47,000 injuries – the majority of which victimized civilians¹¹. Younger people were disproportionately killed as a result of the conflict, with more than 1,270 of those killed aged under 25 years old, and over 250 of these under the age of 18¹². Specifically, victims of the conflict were predominantly young men¹³. According to the Sutton Index, paramilitary groups caused the majority of conflict-related deaths, totaling a combined 3,085 deaths at the hands of republican and loyalist armed groups¹⁴.

The legacy of the conflict remains pervasive in Northern Irish society, with divisions between communities continuing along the lines of national identity, religion, and politics¹⁵. The most recent figures indicate that 90% of social housing is segregated in the province¹⁶. Similarly, 92% of young people attend schools that are largely segregated¹⁷. The de facto segregation makes for a fragile and negative peace, exacerbated by paramilitary groups marking communal territory. For example, in 2024/25, 94 households were reported as homeless due to paramilitary intimidation, compared with 214 households in 2023/24¹⁸. The continued presence of paramilitary groups is a legacy issue, causing physical or psychological harm to victims, coercive control within communities, and social trauma in Northern Ireland¹⁹. This includes violence towards young people, as well as recruitment of young people to these groups.

A 2025 study found that 3.4% of 18-24-year-olds had been threatened by a paramilitary, 6.8% had been injured in conflict-related violence, and 28.4% had witnessed conflict-related violence²⁰. Due to the historical

Paramilitarism must be tackled by meaningful interdepartmental collaboration. IRC, Eighth Report.

8 The communities in Northern Ireland are often denoted as Protestant/unionist/loyalist (PUL) and Catholic/nationalist/republican (CNR) as shorthand. These labels are an oversimplification of complex identities, but broadly indicate the makeup of each community.

9 Dominic Bryan, *Orange Parades* (Pluto Press, 2000), 12.

10 This report uses the language of the ‘Northern Ireland Conflict’ when referring to this period of violence in the latter decades of the twentieth century. The NI Conflict has a complex and extensive historical background, which has been briefly overviewed for the purposes of this report. Consult the recommended readings for further information.

11 Marie-Therese Fay, Mike Morrissey and Marie Smyth, *Northern Ireland’s Troubles* (Pluto Press, 1999), 163, 178. Martin Melaugh, Brendan Lynn, and F. McKenna. “Northern Ireland Society - Security and Defence”, CAIN, 2025.

12 Specifically, shootings and explosions accounted for the deaths of 93% of under-25s during the conflict. Fay, Morrissey and Smyth, *Northern Ireland’s Troubles*, 192.

13 Fay, Morrissey and Smyth, *Northern Ireland’s Troubles*, 178.

14 Based on a figure of 3,532 deaths, paramilitary actors caused 87.3% of conflict related deaths. FactCheckNI highlight the need to account for collusion in these figures, suggesting a more accurate figure of 85%. Nonetheless, a clear majority of deaths connected to the conflict were the result of paramilitary violence. FactCheckNI, “Were 90% of those who died during “the Troubles” killed by paramilitaries?”, November 30, 2019, <https://factcheckni.org/topics/peace/were-90-of-those-who-died-during-the-troubles-killed-by-paramilitaries/>.

15 Andy Hamilton, Mark Hammond, and Eliz McArdle, *A Critical Approach to Youth Sector Peacebuilding* (Policy Press, 2025), 16. See also: Duncan Morrow, “After antagonism? The British-Irish Ethnic frontier after the Agreement”, *Irish Political Studies* 26, no. 3 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1080/07907184.2011.593735>.

16 FactCheckNI, “Housing in NI: Is 90% of social housing segregated?”, April 17, 2025, <https://factcheckni.org/articles/housing-in-ni-is-90-of-social-housing-segregated/>.

17 NISRA, *Education Data Infographics 2022/23*, (Department of Education, July 2024).

18 IRC, Eighth Report.

19 Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, *The effect of paramilitary activity and organized crime on society in Northern Ireland* (2024), 5.

20 Colm Walsh, Lisa Buntin, Gavin Davidson, Nicola Doherty, Claire McCartan, Ciaran Mulholland, and Mark Shevlin. *The Prevalence and Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences in Northern Ireland* (Northern Ireland: Ending The Harm, February 2025).

significance of these groups, criminal activity is often normalized, and individuals involved in paramilitaries can wield a degree of social influence within their communities²¹.

In post-conflict settings, engaging young people is a critical component of the conflict transformation process, given their receptiveness to education²². This engagement should encompass both formal and non-formal forms of education²³. Youth work programs are a key component of peacebuilding intervention in the non-formal sector globally, with notable examples in the Balkans, Colombia, Germany, Sierra Leone, and the Philippines. Similarly, youth work has been central to peacebuilding in post-conflict Northern Ireland; however it now requires a more strategic and sustained approach to effectively support efforts to end paramilitarism.

Argument and analysis

Paramilitary influence has waned in recent years, although it remains a serious problem in post-conflict Northern Ireland. In March 2024, the risk of terrorism related to the Northern Ireland-based organizations was downgraded from ‘severe’ to ‘substantial’²⁴. Since 2016, the Northern Ireland Executive has organized the ‘Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime’ (EPPOC), which aims to tackle issues related to paramilitary activity, and is due to close in March 2027²⁵. The EPPOC represents positive, multi-departmental work to address paramilitary influence, including targeted youth provision in specific geographic areas²⁶. Its place-based approach recognizes the need for early intervention and coordinated support. Despite the program’s long-term reach overall, its year-to-year funding allocation to associated projects puts pressure on services to demonstrate short-term, quantifiable outcomes rather than sustained developmental impact²⁷. With EPPOC due to conclude in the near future, and paramilitary influence persisting and adapting, there is a clear need for sustained, longer-term intervention. This is particularly significant when considered alongside the UK

“Youth workers occupy a unique ‘third space’—they are not the police, and they are not the family. This independence is their greatest asset, allowing them to build the radical trust necessary to reach young people who have been conditioned to view formal institutions with suspicion or

21 Despite similar involvement in overt criminality, the historical and political significance of paramilitary groups differentiates them from organized crime groups which operate in the rest of the UK. NIAC, *The effect of paramilitary activity and organized crime on society in Northern Ireland* (2024), 9.

22 Nadine Lyamouri-Bajja, Nina Genneby, Ruben Markosyan, Yael Ohana, *Youth Transforming Conflict* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe and European Commission), 11-12.

23 Non-formal education can be defined as ‘planned, structured programs and processes of personal and social education for young people designed to improve a range of skills and competences, outside the formal educational curriculum’ and is generally spearheaded by non-governmental organizations. This can include youth work settings, as well as sports clubs, music clubs, or community groups. Patricia Brander, Laure De Witte, Nazila Ghanea, Rui Gomes, Ellie Keen, Anastasia Nikitina, Justin Pinkeviciute (2020), *Compass: Manual for human rights education with young people* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe), 30-31.

24 IRC, Eighth Report.

25 This followed the Fresh Start Agreement (2015), which committed the Executive, the British Government, and the Irish Government to work towards ending paramilitarism in Northern Ireland.

26 Until March 2025, this included the ENGAGE program, which provided youth services with up to 12 months of funding to engage directly with young people within communities who have been harmed by paramilitary groups, or who are most at risk of becoming involved in such activities.

27 Hamilton, Hammond, and McArdle, *A Critical Approach to Youth Sector Peacebuilding*, 55.

Government's funding cuts to the voluntary and community sector from April 2026 under the Local Growth Fund (LFG)²⁸. Similarly, recent developments in the Northern Ireland Department of Education indicate that youth clubs and centers in five council areas are only guaranteed funding until June 2026²⁹. There is both an opportunity and a need to formally implement a youth work strategy with the explicit aims of (1) preventing young people (particularly young men) from joining paramilitary groups, and (2) supporting those who have already joined to disengage³⁰. A trauma-informed, sustainably funded, and practitioner-led strategy should be implemented. In addition, this strategy should be implemented with robust protections of both youth work staff and participants, given the high-risk nature of intervention in paramilitarism.

Trauma-informed Practice

Significant numbers of young people in Northern Ireland have directly or indirectly experienced an adverse childhood experience (ACE) at the hands of paramilitary groups³¹. Consequently, the most vulnerable should be prioritized, in terms of both access to services and trauma-informed support.

Safe relational connections are key to overcoming trauma³². For young people with ACEs, youth workers are uniquely positioned to become trusted adults. In extreme cases, they may be the only trusted adults in the lives of particularly vulnerable young people³³. Consequently, programs should aim to create safe environments for young people to explore their thoughts and experiences without the fear of judgement or threats³⁴. This should include actively involving young people in co-designing activities and spaces. Moreover, many young people and communities harbor widespread distrust of policing³⁵. To ensure effective practice, protect worker safety, and maintain trust, youth workers should not be expected to act as an extension of policing. Instead, communication with policing services should be strategic and focused on safeguarding against instances of serious risk. Young people, staff, and police should be briefed on the boundaries around disclosure. If young people believe youth workers cannot be trusted with sensitive information, they are less likely to disclose vulnerabilities or coercive influences, which risks reinforcing reliance on paramilitary actors³⁶.

While this approach requires careful judgement and context-specific risk assessment, a harm-reduction model that prioritizes trust and targeted safeguarding offers a more effective pathway to disengagement for those most at risk.

Sustainable Funding Models

Paramilitary coercive control has been a long-term problem and must be combatted with long-term solutions. Paramilitaries exercise constant relational control where they thrive. Current funding models, which often

28 The planned 70-30 capital-revenue split of the LFG equates to a 64% cut to the sector, which will result in the collapse of services intended to assist vulnerable groups gaining and maintaining employment.

29 Robbie Meredith, "'Frustrating': Youth clubs only guaranteed funding until June", *BBC News*, March 19, 2026. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cwxy8qxxgwno>.

30 Despite the existence of targeted programs in specific areas, there remains no dedicated, formally established youth work initiative in Northern Ireland with the explicit aim of preventing paramilitary recruitment or supporting young people to disengage from paramilitary organizations. Duncan Morrow and Jonny Byrne, *Full Report – Countering Paramilitary and Organised Criminal Influence on Youth* (Belfast: Education Authority, 2020), 76.

31 Colm Walsh and Ken Harland, "Research Informed Youth Work Practice in Northern Ireland: Recommendations for Engaging Adolescent Boys and Young Men", *Child Care in Practice* (2019).

32 Maggie Long and Louise Lynch, *Developing Trauma Informed Systems in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, April 30, 2025).

33 YouthBorders, *Youth Work and Trusted Adults* (Berwick-upon-Tweed: YouthBorders, April 2020)

34 Walsh and Harland, "Research Informed Youth Work".

35 Duncan Morrow and Jonny Byrne, *Countering Paramilitary and Organised Criminal Influence on Youth: A Review* (Belfast: Ending The Harm, March 2020).

36 Will Mason, "Austerity youth policy: exploring the distinctions between youth work in principle and youth work in practice", *Youth and Policy* 114 (2015): 65.

see programs reset each financial year, do not allow youth services to compete with this influence. Stable funding is central to services' capacity to reduce paramilitary harm.

The Northern Ireland Department of Finance released a proposed multi-year budget, spanning 2026 to 2029/30. The Minister outlined that moving towards long-term investment would have benefits for the economy and society more broadly³⁷. Such long-term planning would be beneficial for a variety of sectors, including the community sector. A 2024 Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) report outlined issues with the current youth work funding models, often characterized by 'short-term and piecemeal' funding focused on achieving quantitative outputs³⁸. A lack of sustainable funding affects youth work provision not only at the service level, but also more broadly, particularly in terms of staffing. Employment contracts can be precarious, pay can be poor, and training opportunities can be lacking. As such, centralized funding contracts for projects should be awarded for 5-10 years, allowing for strategic planning for programs which can evolve with young service users³⁹. Similarly, dependable funding should be matched by a commitment to securing employment within the sector, allowing for longevity and rapport in relationships with young people. This would improve the intervention's impact by providing young people with consistent access to safe adults and allowing incremental positive change to grow over a longer period.

Practitioner-led Intervention

Effective intervention in the geographical areas most affected by paramilitary coercive control requires trusting practitioners as contextual experts. This should include equipping practitioners with the tools to co-design programs, measure the scale of success, and be flexible in their delivery.

Youth workers are uniquely placed to understand the complexities and specific circumstances of the young people they work with⁴⁰. Opportunities for regular supervision, peer learning, and collaborative program development spaces would enable staff to co-design programs, adapt to changing community dynamics, and learn from both success and failure. At present, youth service providers rely on measuring quantitative outputs as indicators of program success⁴¹. Further emphasis should be placed on reflective and qualitative indicators of measurement alongside quantitative indicators. Evaluation frameworks should recognize relational depth, sustained engagement, practitioner judgement, and evidence of gradual change as valid measures of impact.

Protection of Service Providers and Service Users

This strategy cannot be implemented without the full support of the Northern Ireland Assembly, local government bodies, and the UK Government. Specifically, this means ring-fenced funding for long-term interventions and formal recognition of the role of youth workers within a broader, sustained effort to combat paramilitarism. Such recognition should be mirrored by professional support (including ongoing training and line management), personal protection, and opportunities for services to evolve (that is, learning from mistakes, rather than penalization)⁴². In addition, multi-departmental action to end paramilitarism, such as the EPPOC, should be extended in time, scope, and funding. Political institutions and leaders must demonstrate a clear commitment to ending paramilitarism; without this, youth workers are left in high-risk situations as individuals, and young people are left in a cycle that perpetuates CCE.

37 John O'Dowd, "Written Ministerial Statement, Northern Ireland Assembly", January 6, 2026.

38 NICVA, *Voluntary Youth Work Sector NI, Shaping the Future: Voluntary Youth Work in Northern Ireland* (Belfast, May 2024).

39 Morrow and Byme, *Countering Paramilitary and Organised Criminal Influence*.

40 YouthBorders, *Youth Work and Trusted Adults* (Berwick-upon-Tweed: YouthBorders, April 2020).

41 NICVA, *Voluntary Youth Work Sector NI*.

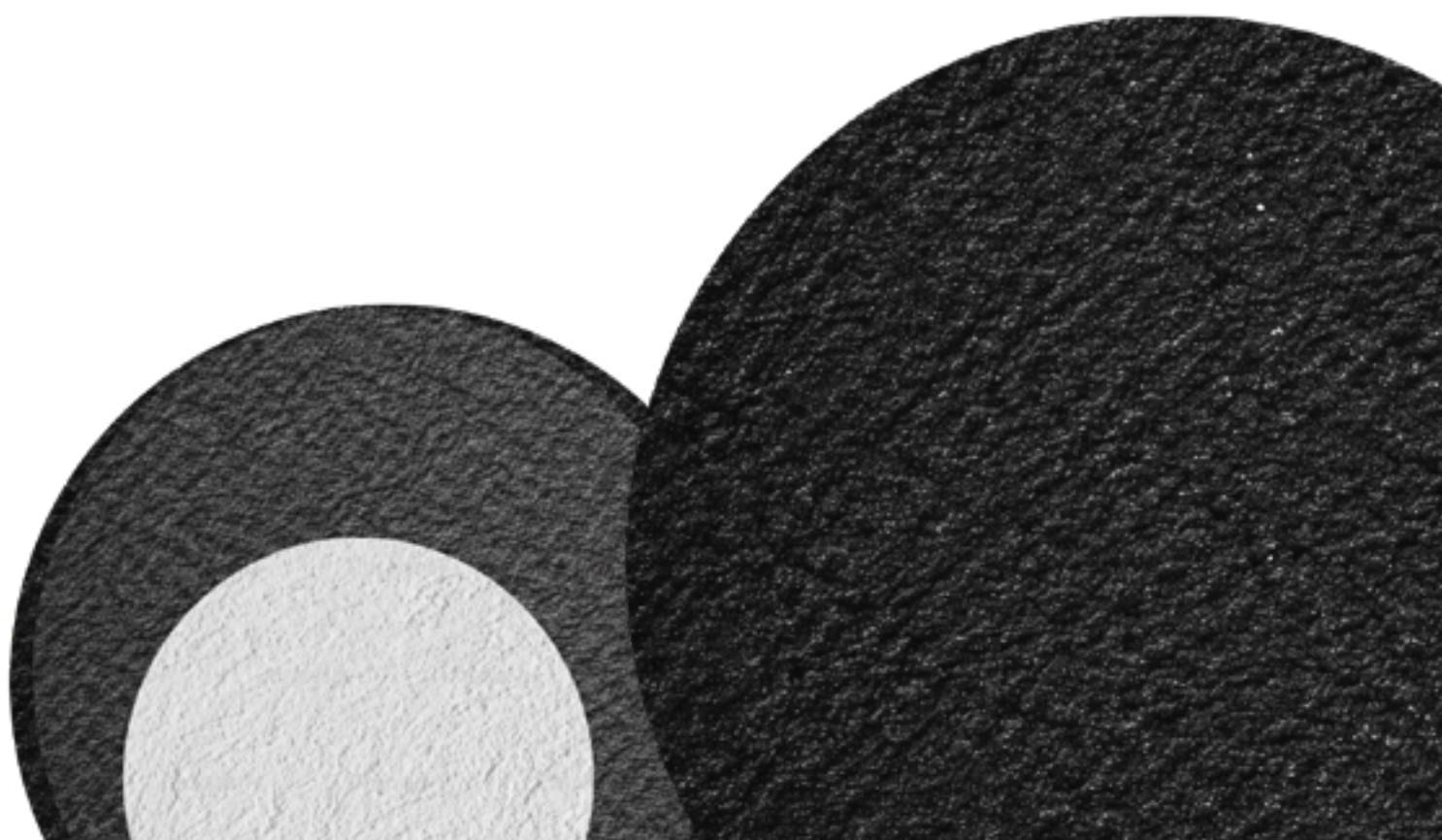
42 Morrow and Byme, *Countering Paramilitary and Organised Criminal Influence*.

Policy Recommendations

1. Establish a dedicated, centralized, long-term youth work strategy focused on preventing and disrupting paramilitary involvement.
2. Introduce sustainable multi-year funding models (5–10 years).
3. Ensure practitioner-led program design, delivery, and evaluation.
4. Embed trauma-informed practice across all youth interventions.
5. Strengthen protection and professional support for youth workers and young people.
6. Define clear boundaries with policing, specifically for work involving young people at high risk of paramilitary involvement.
7. Require all NI departments to assess policy impacts on tackling paramilitarism and innovate across ministries to create lasting change.

Conclusion

This policy paper outlines ways in which youth work practice can be used to prevent and intervene in youth paramilitarism. Northern Ireland stands almost three decades post-Good Friday Agreement, with paramilitary influence still prevalent in many communities. It is necessary to take decisive, innovative action. There is no excuse for allowing the continuation of societal exploitation due to paramilitary control. Youth services specifically targeting young people at the highest risk of paramilitary involvement, that are strategically supported and properly funded, can play a vital role in combating CCE at the hands of paramilitaries. Dedicated, practitioner-led intervention and programs can disrupt the existing cycle of harm. This must be echoed by meaningful commitments across all Stormont departments to work towards ending paramilitarism. Protecting our society, and particularly our young people, from paramilitary coercive control is a moral obligation and a necessity to build positive peace in Northern Ireland.



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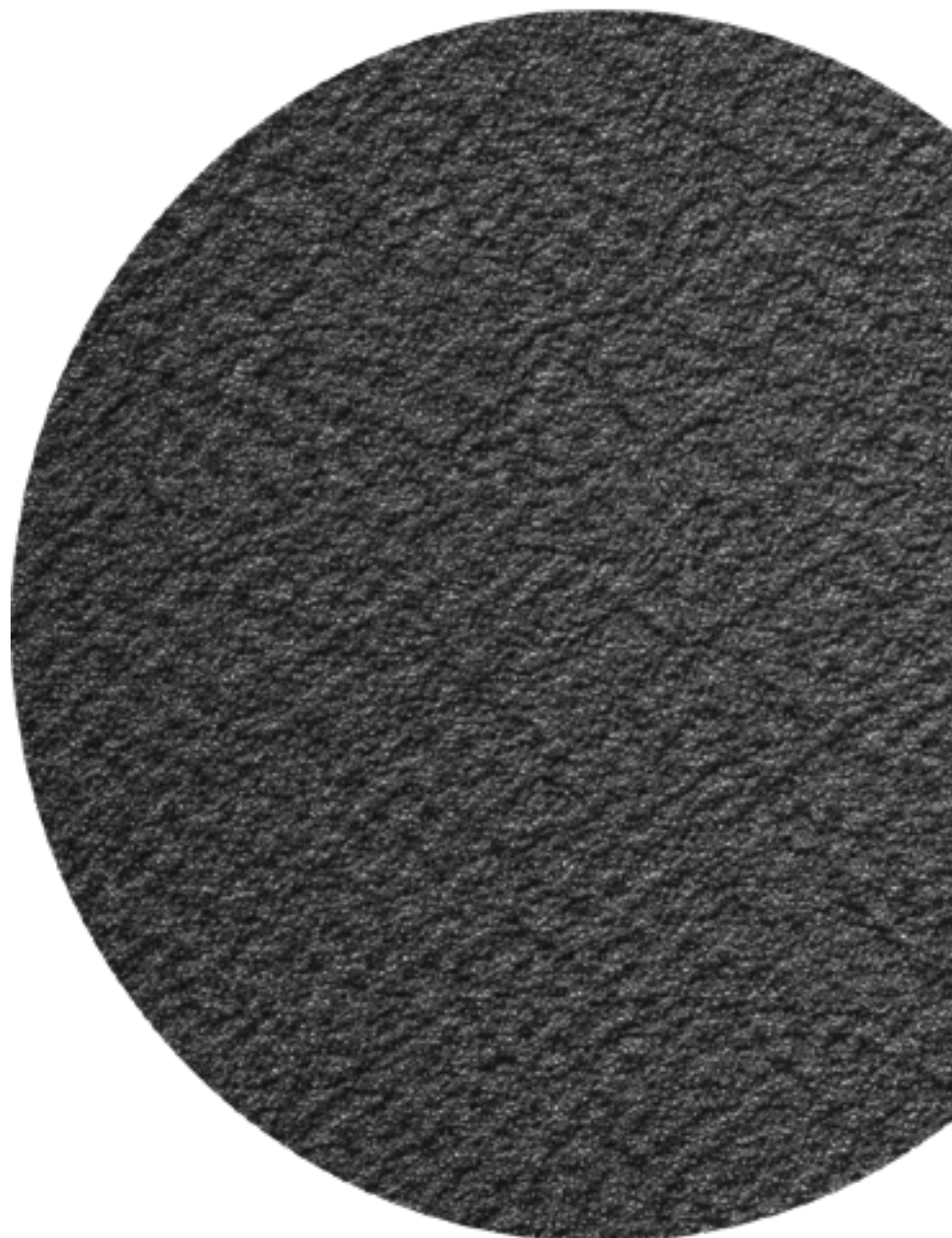
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About NCAFP and Emerging Leaders

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 2026 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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