

# SDLP MANIFESTO

### WESTMINSTER 2024





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# An Election for Change





### Leader's Message

This election is about change.

It is the clearest opportunity we have had in more than a decade to put an end to the politics of austerity, isolation and division that have driven governments for 14 brutal years.

It is a chance for Northern Ireland not just to send a message against failed policies of austerity and ever-hardening Tory nationalism, but to send MPs that will use their voice and their influence to fight for all the people of this region.

### A Change Election

For months now, SDLP representatives have been speaking to people from every background and in every community across the North.

We have heard first-hand accounts from people who've been forced to take out credit union loans to pay for private healthcare, from nurses and junior doctors, running themselves into the ground to make sure that the people in their care get the best possible outcomes, to young people who can't afford to buy their first home, pensioners struggling to keep the heat on (even in June) and others lucky enough to get on the property ladder who are at their wit's end because they can't keep up with sky high mortgage prices.

How could you not be frustrated with the way things are? After 14 years of brutal Tory governments, public services are on life support, our health service has already started to collapse, wages have stagnated and costs are through the roof. And in the middle of it all, the two local parties charged with leading devolved Government at Stormont both decided to tear it down for years at a time, leaving us unprotected from unfiltered Tory austerity.

It doesn't have to be like this.

### Using our voice

Almost five years ago people from every community came together to cast their votes for change. After two years where the only voices from here at Westminster were the DUP, who used that power to cause chaos, voters came out in huge numbers and decided to use their voice. In an election where we were all told that we couldn't make a difference, people decided to choose change. They sent more than just a message - they sent hardworking SDLP MPs who have fought for them, their family and our communities every single day.

And we have delivered.

We've secured almost £100m for university expansion in the North West.

We delivered a step change in investment from the Irish Government through the Shared Island Unit worth more than £1bn for projects like Narrow Water Bridge, the A5, Casement Park and far more.



We've brought new regeneration funds to redevelop and enhance town and city centres and we've seen investment in addiction services to help the most vulnerable people and families who need our help.

We've done all that, and more, with a Tory government - imagine what we could do with a Labour government that understands this place and listens to the views of our MPs.

SDLP MPs are best placed to deliver change because we will have the strongest relationship with a new government. Other parties have done deals with the Tories in their own self-interest or won't bother turning up to make a difference. By contrast, SDLP MPs will be there where it counts and when it counts to deliver for everyone in our communities.

### Raise your voice

SDLP MPs have made sure that our voice - and your voice - is heard. On the issues that matter to people - standing up for our health service, demanding oil and gas companies pay higher taxes on their profits to support people struggling with the cost of living, fighting for investment in public services, jobs and skills - we have been loud and clear.

And on burning international issues - we have been the most vocal champions for peace. Claire Hanna and I have been the strongest opponents of the blank cheque written by the British Prime Minister and the American President for the onslaught against the Palestinian people. We have spoken hard truths to our political rivals and our allies when they've got this wrong. And while others enjoyed parties in the White House, we stood in solidarity with people here who have always supported peace and an end to the genocide.

In Stormont, people are already seeing the impact that our constructive SDLP Opposition voice is having: holding the Executive to account on moving beyond rhetoric towards delivery of a plan to rescue public services.

That's what you get with SDLP MPs - representatives who stand their ground, stick to their principles and fight for you, whatever the political weather.

### A chance for change

After more than a decade of austerity, isolation, division and deadlock we have a chance for change. It is a chance for a new start for all of us.

On 4th July, take that chance. Vote SDLP.

### **Our Priorities for Change**

- 1 A New Start Remove this Tory Government from power
- 2 Better Public Services for All reduce hospital waiting lists with additional investment in health
- 3 Improved Funding Model for NI
- 4 Repeal the Legacy Act
- 5 A Fairer Economy for All
- 6 Recognise the State of Palestine and end arms exports to Israel
- 7 Restore nature and support a just transition

# A New Start



### **A NEW START**

### Fourteen years of Conservative government have been a disaster for people and communities in Northern Ireland.

Austerity has brought public services to the point of collapse. Cuts to social security have left vulnerable people and working families struggling to make ends meet. A pathological obsession with leaving the European Union has severed our links to one of the world's largest markets leaving people, community groups and businesses far worse off. And a government run by liars, cheats and con men has left confidence in public life shattered.

This election is the clearest opportunity we have had in more than a decade to remove the Tories from power and to make sure that what comes next is genuinely a new start for all of us.

SDLP MPs will use our voice and our influence at Westminster. Our voice has always been influential and, though we aspire to a different constitutional future, we have always used our platform at Westminster to maximum effect. As a member of the Party of European Socialists, we have strong relationships with our counterparts in the Labour Party which we will use to positive effect for all the people of the North – but we retain our own identity and will also be unafraid to hold a new Government robustly to account when necessary.

Our Westminster team will complement the vital work of the SDLP Opposition team at Stormont in delivering a step-change in accountability and delivery.

While most areas of policy and public service delivery are devolved to the Northern Ireland Executive, vital power remain with Westminster including the most fundamental power: the purse strings. We are also alive to the instability of the devolved institutions and the significant periods of collapse at the hands of the parties which are supposed to lead the Executive.

This manifesto sets out our ambition and our priorities for change using the power that people invest in us by taking our seats to make a difference.

### SDLP MPs will

- → Use our votes to ensure there is no Conservative Government;
- → Use our voice with a new government to establish immediate priorities for investment in public services in Northern Ireland;
- → Work with other parties to secure a strong fiscal framework for Northern Ireland;
- → Seek reform of the devolved institutions to prevent the veto of government and decline in public services;
- → Prioritise the repeal of the Legacy Act and deliver justice for victims and survivors.

### Fixing our Broken Politics

The politics of division and deadlock haven't been the sole preserve of the Conservative Party. The collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive for five of the last seven years has left people to face unfiltered Tory rule and an unprecedented decline in public services.

Health waiting lists are longer, housing waiting lists have grown, the number of public sector workers forced out on strike for fair pay and conditions has soared. At times of crisis, people should be able to rely on political leaders to take action to protect them and their families. Sadly, the instinctive response has been to cut and run rather than stand and fight.

It is time for the structures of devolution to change as well. The architects of the Agreement always believed that our society would evolve and that devolution would have to change with it. That is why the SDLP built review mechanisms into the Good Friday Agreement and it is why we now believe that the time is right to begin that fundamental review.

In proposals for reform, we seek to end the toxic use of veto while retaining the spirit of partnership politics and inclusion.

SDLP MPs in Westminster have attempted to advance these reforms through amendment to Northern Ireland legislation in recent years and many of our proposals were adopted by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in its most recent inquiry into the operation of the institutions.

At Stormont, the SDLP has already delivered a step change in the functioning of devolved Government by creating a constructive but robust Opposition. We have also placed reform of our dysfunctional institutions right at the top of the agenda – including making it the theme of our very first Opposition Day. Sadly, Sinn Fein and the DUP joined forces to vote down our proposal that reform be placed in the Programme for Government.

Among our proposals, we believe that simple changes to the rules for electing a Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly, returning to joint nomination of the First Ministers.

### SDLP MPs will:

- → Seek to initiate a review of the operation of devolution under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, encompassing all parties and both Governments;
- ➔ Press for reform, via both Westminster and Stormont, which prevents one party from collapsing devolution and removes the veto from one party alone while maintaining the principles of power-sharing and partnership
- Support a series of common sense measures to improve the operation of devolution including:
  - the return of the joint nomination and election of the First Ministers;
  - changing the election of the Speaker to two-thirds majority rather than double majority;
  - expanding the work of north-bodies, and removing the need for two Executive ministers to attend NSMC sectoral meetings;



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# Rescuing Our Public Services



### **Rescuing Public Services**

Public services have been under sustained attack for the last 14 years. Austerity, pay freezes and service cuts combined with an absentee Executive have left the services that all of us rely on facing collapse.

Before the devolved institutions were restored, we were told that a comprehensive financial package to address the crisis in health, education, infrastructure and across the public sector would be delivered by Ministers. Months later and we are yet to see a costed public service rescue plan - let alone a Programme for Government - from Northern Ireland's Finance Minister despite a clear commitment secured by the SDLP.

The SDLP Opposition has led the way in holding the Executive to account on first clarifying the detail of what they had agreed with the UK Government, and then on delivering a costed

We are also yet to see details of the revenue raising package that Executive parties agreed to in return for debt forgiveness with the Treasury. The future of our public finances depends on close scrutiny of the arrangements Ministers have entered into but are unable to fully explain.

SDLP MPs will advocate for an improved financial settlement that recognises decades of underfunding and begins the work of rescuing public services.

### 1. An Improved Financial Settlement

There has been some progress at securing a more workable and fair fiscal framework for Northern Ireland, which both the SDLP Opposition at Stormont and SDLP MPs have called for. But much more work is needed, particularly around transparency and accountability on how the Executive sets priorities and long-term Budgets to deliver them. SDLP MPs will work with others to press for improvements in the North's fiscal framework, and in particular a comprehensive spending review which allows Stormont to set priorities over the long term, with multi-year budgets to deliver on those priorities.

SDLP MPs, along with the SDLP Opposition at Stormont, will also press for greater accountability for the Northern Ireland public on how effectively spending is being utilised to improve public services, including via an enhanced role for the Fiscal Council – which the SDLP has pressed for in its Triple Lock proposals.

### SDLP MPs will:

- → Press for a comprehensive spending review which allows the Executive to deliver a multi-year, costed public service recovery plan
- → Press for real investment in public services to undo the impact of austerity
- → Work with other parties to advocate a clearer and fairer fiscal framework

### 2. Further fiscal devolution and taxation

The SDLP has long supported the devolution of further fiscal powers to Northern Ireland but we want to deliver this in a way that is sustainable and successful. The absence of a Programme for Government and multi-year Budget has undermined the delivery of public services for far too long. We strongly believe that a three-year Budget should be aligned with the publication of a new Programme for Government.

We support a Programme for Government target to meaningfully increase the tax varying and borrowing powers of the NI Assembly by the end of the mandate. This can only credibly happen on the basis of stable political institutions. SDLP MPs will seek the devolution of tourism and Hospitality VAT, the Apprenticeship Levy and Air Passenger Duty.

Recognising the huge burden of soaring household costs and the pressure on working families, SDLP MPs have consistently called for a windfall tax on energy company profits to be used to fund additional support schemes. SDLP MPs will support a new government's plan to levy a new windfall tax on oil and gas giants with projected annual average income of £1.2bn.

SDLP Leader Colum Eastwood introduced Private Member's Legislation in the last mandate which would have introduced a green jobs levy on large corporations to fund a just transition from carbon intensive industries to new green technology roles. SDLP MPs will press a new government to include these proposals in a new Green Prosperity Plan.

### **3. Public Sector Pay**

Public sector workers have borne the brunt of the last 14 years of austerity. Cuts to the services they operate, pay freezes and a decline in their terms have meant that the people who have kept our society going have been forced to work longer hours, more intense patterns for less money and in worse conditions.

SDLP MPs have supported the legitimate asks of nurses, teachers, transport providers and emergency service workers for a fair pay settlement recognising years of underinvestment as well as their campaigns for safe staffing levels in our public services.

### Working alongside the SDLP Opposition at Stormont, SDLP MPs will:

- → Fight for a fair deal for public sector workers, acknowledging years of underinvestment in them and the services they operate;
- Support an above inflation pay increase for teachers and school support staff;

- → Support pay parity between Further Education Lecturers and school teaching staff;
- Support health service staff in their campaign for fair pay and safe staffing levels by making representations directly to the Treasury.

### 4. Saving the Health Service

The health service in Northern Ireland is under immense strain

The Transformation agenda has stalled due to the constant collapse of government, a failure to fund strategic change and a lack of political will. Instead, local services have been pushed beyond breaking point and many communities are now experiencing core service withdrawal which has eroded confidence in the transformation programme.

Waiting lists continue to grow and those waiting for treatment continue to wait for far too long. Over half a million people are currently waiting for an appointment - more than 1 in 4 of our entire population - and more than half of those people are likely to wait for more than a year on a first outpatient session.

Our nurses, junior doctors, consultants and essential health service staff are working themselves to exhaustion for less pay and in poorer conditions than anywhere else on these islands.

It isn't good enough.

The North's Health Service needs a Marshall Plan style intervention, acknowledging the scale of underinvestment in services, the urgency of transformation to benefit patients, health service staff and communities across Northern Ireland.

### Working alongside the SDLP Opposition at Stormont, SDLP MPs will:

- Make representations directly to the Treasury for a health service transformation intervention;
- Seek dedicated resource to reduce waiting lists which have remained out of control;
- → Argue for terms and conditions for health service staff which reflect their contribution to our society and address workforce retention challenges;
- → Argue for a government backed indemnity scheme for GPs in Northern Ireland to avert the unnecessary closure of local practices;
- → Fight for the expansion of Multi-Disciplinary Teams across Northern Ireland.

### 5. Investing in our Education System

Our education system similarly requires urgent investment and reform in order to guarantee all of our young people the best possible start in life.

The SDLP was vocal throughout the Independent Review of Education and we have expressed our concerns that without significant additional resources, the review will end up being a paper exercise.

### Working alongside the SDLP Opposition at Stormont, SDLP MPs will:

- → Fair pay for teachers and school staff The SDLP believes that teachers have not been appreciated by successive Education Ministers. We argue that there should be an increase in pay above inflation for teachers and school-based support staff.
- → Support for the Irish Language Sector The SDLP strongly supports the Irish language sector, including ensuring that Irish-medium education is fully supported.
- Action to tackle Educational Underachievement We will continue to fight for proper resourcing for the delivery of plans to address educational underachievement and the implementation of the report A Fair Start.
- The transformation of Special Educational Needs provision The SDLP recognises the SEN system needs a complete overhaul. We need to build a system that supports these children and their families, including reforming post-19 Special Educational Needs provision. We made comprehensive submissions to the consultations in relation to SEN Regulations, the Code of Practice and Area Planning and our three-point plan to improve SEN provision includes a streamlined assessment process, an increase in staff to process applications and a Children's champion to act as an advocate on behalf of parents and children.
- → A cap on school uniform costs We support action to cap costs for families alongside an expansion of eligibility for financial support for students.
- Action on restraint and seclusion Statutory guidance and appropriate training for school staff and governors about the use of restrictive practices in an educational setting.
- → Progress on integrated education The SDLP has a long history of supporting integrated education, both in our words and deeds. The SDLP Opposition has led the way in opposing the decision to remove £150 million of ringfenced funding by the Executive and UK Government and continue to campaign against it. We supported the recent Integrated Education Act and will continue to promote integrated education, including holding the Executive accountable for the implementation of that legislation.
- A Review of the Education Authority The SDLP is unconvinced that the Education Authority is fit for purpose. We would support a review of the Authority remit and structures.





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# A Fairer Economy For All



### A Fair & Prosperous Economy

The SDLP advocates a strong, prosperous and balanced economy, with opportunities for all our citizens, regardless of background. Northern Ireland's economy has, however, been held back for far too long by a scarcity of ambition in our government, the chronic under-funding of the region and the refusal of the Northern Ireland Executive to take the steps that are required to drive wealth creation, expand opportunity, develop skills and end the brain drain once and for all.

We will work to build a prosperous, world-leading and regionally equitable economy that works for everyone no matter background, circumstance or geography.

### SDLP MPs will work to:

### 1. Maximise the Opportunities of Dual-Market Access

- The SDLP has long advocated the huge competitive advantages offered by the Protocol/ Windsor Framework, which places Northern Ireland uniquely at the crossroads of two of the world's most important markets.
- The SDLP supports the creation of a strategy that is tailored to the sectors that have most to gain from the Protocol/Windsor Framework and which is co-developed with buy-in and funding from both the Irish and British governments and the European Union. We have pressed for a step-change in cooperation between Invest NI and IDA Ireland. This investment strategy should be complemented by the creation of a new 'European Investment Hub' for Northern Ireland. The SDLP believes that a strong all-island economy benefits all the people of this island and creates new opportunities for NI business to trade on an all-island basis. To this end, we will also campaign to increase InterTrade Ireland funding.

### 2. Rebalance our economy for broad-based growth

The SDLP led the campaign for reform of Invest Northern Ireland and helped to secure the damning Lyons Review which found the need for "profound change" in the organisation, including on a sub-regional basis. The SDLP will hold the Economy Minister accountable for the implementation of the findings of the review of Invest NI, including the publication of a meaningful Sub-Regional Economic Action Plan, the objectives of which should relate to all government Departments.

We are also seeking to introduce binding obligations on all government departments in law, ensuring that each government department is measuring the effect of its policies, strategies and plans on regional balance and implementing changes so everyone can have a fair start in life. The SDLP will seek the devolution of the 'levelling-up' agenda to Northern Ireland with commensurate funding and appropriate governance arrangements to rebalance the oversight of the agenda and decentralise its management.

### 3. Tackling poverty

Poverty is a moral outrage and social ill that should be ended once and for all. The actions of the Conservative government over the last decade and a half have pushed struggling individuals and their families over the poverty line and into abject crisis. SDLP representatives opposed the decision to hand over welfare powers to the British government. We have seen the consequences of that decision play out in communities across Northern Ireland in recent years.

SDLP MPs, in conjunction with the SDLP Opposition at Stormont, will work with representatives at all levels of the Party to lobby for the publication and funding of a robust and cross-cutting Anti-Poverty Strategy. The SDLP placed poverty at the top of the agenda at Stormont by devoting an entire Opposition Day to the subject, including pushing for the Executive to use the revenue raised from this year's regional rate increase to pay for ending the pernicious two-child limit.

The next UK government must also ensure an Essentials Guarantee within Universal Credit, ensuring that the basic rate at least covers life's essentials and that support can never be pulled below that level.

The SDLP will also hold the Minister for Communities responsible for the failure to build the appropriate level of housing, including social homes. The costs of rent and mortgages have forced more and more people into poverty in recent years and although housing is a devolved matter, SDLP MPs will fight to ensure that the appropriate funding is made available to the Northern Ireland Executive to address the housing crisis.

We have also voted for pension justice for WASPI women and sought to protect women here in Northern Ireland. In the next parliament, the SDLP will seek to reverse this punitive decision, reduce the State Pension Age and protect pensioners who have suffered as a result of this policy.

The SDLP also supports the exploration of pilot schemes of Universal Basic Income, particularly in areas of highest disadvantage.

### 4. Support our Tourism and Hospitality Sectors

Tourism is a key sector of our economy and has gone from strength to strength since our peace agreement. It is a critical driver of economic development that is now worth more than one billion pounds every single year in Northern Ireland.

The SDLP will work to secure an ambitious and fully funded Tourism Strategy that supports our tourism operators. We will also work with the NI Executive and Irish government to ensure the Strategy extends the Wild Atlantic Way into the North along with the inclusion of Counties Armagh and Down in Ireland's Ancient East as well as the inclusion of Fermanagh and Tyrone into Ireland's 'Hidden Heartlands' programme.

### 5. Invest in Our Arts and Culture

The arts and culture are integral to a thriving economy, as well as enhancing the social wellbeing of all the people who live here, promoting community integration and helping to tackle social isolation. Arts and culture should not only be viewed as extracurricular pursuits, but as an industry which contributes tens of millions to our economy each year and deserve more investment, not less, with workers who are properly remunerated and supported.

Despite our strength in this industry, arts and culture in Northern Ireland is underfunded, with arts spending per head dramatically lower than any other part of these islands. We support a meaningful increase to arts funding to catch up with the other jurisdictions on these islands the delivery of a new Arts, Culture and Heritage Strategy without delay. SDLP MPS will also specifically lobby the Westminster government to provide additional funding to the Executive in order for the Arts Council NI to provide Artsmark accreditation in Northern Ireland.

### 6. State of Financial Services

The SDLP will push for a Westminster inquiry into the state of financial services in NI, including the cost of insurance, consumer & business banking, branch closures and crossborder challenges.

### 7. Backing Our Small Businesses

Small businesses are the backbone of our economy. The SDLP wants to make sure that we provide support to our small business sector, start-ups and entrepreneurs.

### SDLP MPs will:

- Continue to support the automatic uprating of the Employment Allowance in line with any increases to the National Living Wage, to continue to support small business employers as wages increase
- → Work to increase the VAT threshold to £100,000
- → Ensure that both Whitehall and devolved government departments and public agencies commit to and implement prompt payments for small businesses.
- Commit to reduce the use of unnecessary personal guarantees in small business lending, recognising the chilling effect the overuse of personal guarantees has on small business willingness to invest
- → A reduction in the use of unnecessary personal guarantees in small business lending
- → Establish a 'Banking Hub Setup Fund', funded by the high street banks, to assist in covering the purchase and setup costs of banking hubs on high streets or in town centres
- Ensuring that the business support provided by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund matches, or exceeds, those funds previously received under European Structural and Investment (ESI) funding, and that the UK keeps pace with similar EU funding schemes.

# Investing in Skills

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### **Investing in Skills**

Skills are the engine of our economy, but far too many people and places have been left behind by the failure of government policy here to properly invest in those skills and create a pipeline from cradle to grave. The current approach must be transformed to create pathways to skills at all levels and in all places.

The SDLP is committed to defending education at all levels as a public good and fully supports properly funding higher and further education to expand opportunity for all people, regardless of backgrounds. Using the power of our seats at Westminster, the SDLP has secured funding for the expansion of Magee and the development of the Medical School in the North West.

SDLP MPs will continue to prioritize investment in skills and opportunities. Working alongside the SDLP Opposition at Stormont, SDLP MPs will fight for:

# 1. A full-size university campus at Magee of at least 10,000 students

→ Achieving a full-size university in Derry is a critical lever to drive economic development in the region and ensuring an equitable distribution of student numbers across the North-West is critical to generating sustainable and broad-based economic development. Our record is clear. The SDLP successfully lobbied for the establishment of the Graduate Entry Medical School. Colum Eastwood secured the target of 10,000 students in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. We also secured millions of pounds of investment from the Irish government through the Shared Island Unit and have relentlessly pushed the government to finally deliver. We support an ambitious plan to reach at least 10,000 student places at Magee, as a minimum, along with comprehensive measures to ensure Derry can be supported to become a leading university city on this island. We also support specific financial incentives for students to study at the university campus at Magee. In line with the recommendations of the Royal Irish Academy, we support the establishment of a cross-border oversight body for higher education in the North West.

### 2. A Review of Higher Education funding

→ The previous Economy Minister announced a review of higher education funding, including on student fees and the appropriate level of teaching grant to higher education institutions. The current Economy Minister has rolled back on this commitment. The SDLP supports a fundamental review, including to ensure the appropriate mix of teaching and research funding for university as well as financial support for students. The review, and its implementation, must ensure that no student is disadvantaged because of costs, including at postgraduate level.

# 3. Lifting the Maximum Student Numbers cap in Northern Ireland

→ MaSN places a cap on our ambition and is a disproportionate barrier to expanding skills development across the North. The SDLP has opposed an arbitrary cap on student numbers and will fight to raise our ambition to provide opportunities in every community.

### 4. A New Approach to Further & Higher Education

→ We support a new approach to third level education that creates a skills pipeline from schools to colleges and universities, ends the cluttered landscape of skills provision through proper funding for the Skills Strategy and ensures parity of esteem between the further and higher education sectors. Further education colleges must be supported in tandem with universities to ensure a coherent skills ecosystem and the Department for the Economy must progress the reform of Further Education delivery.

# 5. Properly funding apprenticeships and reforming the Apprenticeship Levy

The SDLP is committed to properly funding apprenticeships, including through working closely with the private sector to expand the number of Higher-Level Apprenticeships, particularly in places of disadvantage and ensure that appropriate support is in place for businesses in order to take on apprentices. We will ensure that employers in Northern Ireland are no longer expected to contribute to the fund without being able to draw from it. The SDLP has also consistently supported pay parity for FE lecturers and will fight to ensure that their needs are treated as equal with their counterparts in schools.

### 6. Legislation for a Lifelong Learning Guarantee

→ We will fight to ensure age is never a barrier to learning.

### **Defending Workers' Rights**

Defending workers' rights will always be central to the growing of a strong economy and the SDLP has stood resolutely shoulder to shoulder with workers in their demands for fair pay throughout the cost-of-living crisis.

Public sector workers have been taken for granted for far too long and it is appalling that so many of the workers who keep our society running have been allowed to fall further and further behind their counterparts in Britain. While the government was quick to applaud workers during the pandemic, it has shown no such urgency in ensuring the same workers receive the fair pay and treatment that they deserve.

In the Assembly, SDLP MLAs are holding the Economy Minister accountable on worker's rights and demanding a comprehensive and ambitious Employment Bill. In Westminster, SDLP MPs have consistently stood up to the worst impulses of the Tory government. We were the only Northern Ireland party in Westminster to support a ban on the practice of firing and rehiring workers.

### SDLP MPs will:

#### → 1. Fight for a New Deal for Working People

The SDLP supports an end to zero hour contracts and will continue to campaign for an equal minimum wage to prevent discrimination against young people in pay. We also support ensuring that flexible working is a day one right and believe that we must ensure the rights of workers in Northern Ireland should not be allowed to fall behind those in other parts of these islands. The SDLP also supports expanding trade union rights including reducing the minimum number of employees needed to from a trade union branch.

### ➔ 2. Seek an economy that works for everyone

The SDLP believes in breaking down every barrier to participation in the economy. We must, therefore, ensure the implementation of legislation on gender pay gap reporting. In addition, we support reform of the full rate equivalent maternity leave which is currently one of the lowest across OECD countries and believe the real Living Wage should be used as a baseline for Statutory Maternity Pay from weeks 7-52, as well as reforms to Universal Credit regulations to ensure maternity allowance is treated as earnings rather than unearned income.

### ➔ 3. Support our Unpaid Carers

We support the introduction of at least five days of paid carers' leave. Unpaid carers throughout our society have borne the brunt of government neglect and policy failure, with many forced into poverty while undertaking this vital role. There is a particular gendered impact of this government failure, as 60% of unpaid carers are women. Without the unpaid carers that look after their loved ones each and every day, our health and social care system would simply collapse.

SDLP MPs will also support foster carers receiving the same employment status as other workers. Rather than being forced to register as self-employed, foster carers who provide an important service, should expect to receive the same entitlements as other care givers.

# A Better Future For All



### **A New Ireland for All**

The New Ireland Commission is an SDLP initiative. The New Ireland Commission is the space for new-thinking, ambition & imagination. The New Ireland Commission is the SDLP's think-tank- future direction, future policy, new relationships & testing-ground for ideas. The approach of the New Ireland Commission is innovative - citizen-led, based on principles & seeking an inclusive conversation about our constitutional future.

The New Ireland Commission aims for radical new approach to our politics: one that is about engaging citizens, innovative policymaking and setting out an inclusive and ambitious blueprint for a New Ireland.

Our work is guided by six core principles to underpin both our approach to the conversation and the basis of any New Ireland:

- 1. Reconciliation as a guiding force
- 2. Embracing diversity
- 3. No one left behind
- 4. Led by citizens
- 5. Future-focused & outward looking
- 6. Hope with honesty

We will focus on the 12 key areas for long-term policy development via the New Ireland Commission:

Climate and the Natural World	Innovation, Science & Research
Constitutional Models	Local & Global Connectivity
Culture, Identity, Heritage & Language	New British-Irish Relationship
Economy, Enterprise, Opportunity	New Ireland - The EU & Global Reconciliation
Education & Skills	
Health, Mental Health & Well-Being	<b>Rights, Diversity &amp; Inclusion</b>

### New Ireland Commission policy engagement:

**Workshops** – we have developed a workshop model for community & youth groups to encourage them to engage in policy discussion around a New Ireland

**Engagement meetings and events** will continue to be held with political parties across the island of Ireland

**Townhall series** will continue with experts in academia, politics, the arts, business and civic society to explore policy ideas for a New Ireland

Strategic plan for development of high-level policy papers





### Childcare: The Best Start in Life for Every Child

Early education and childcare is a public good and the single most impactful tool to reduce disadvantage and ensure equality of opportunity.

However, right now in Northern Ireland, the system is completely broken. Families and workers have been put under huge strain by eye-watering costs that have pushed parents, particularly mothers, out of the workforce altogether.

In response to a survey delivered by the grassroots campaign Melted Parents NI, 37% of parents said that they were likely to reduce working hours or leave the workplace in the next year due to costs. Employers for Childcare has also consistently evidenced the pressures faced by providers, with 84% of providers reporting making a loss or just breaking even in the Employers for Childcare survey in 2023.

Northern Ireland remains the only part of these islands that dos not have a Childcare Strategy.

Meanwhile, the Irish government has made significant progress in introducing a new 'Together for Better' programme, which is bringing down costs by up to 50% over the next two years. It is totally unacceptable that parents here are being left further and further behind, forced to pay much more than their mortgages each and every month and left questioning whether it even pays to work at all.

The SDLP has consistently campaigned for childcare to be recognised as a public good and part of our economic and social infrastructure. More than a year ago, we announced our proposals for immediate interventions in the sector to address costs for parents. We campaigned for immediate support for parents and some of these proposals have now finally been adopted by the Department of Education.

The SDLP wants to deliver a transformed early education and childcare system that guarantees affordability for parents, sustainability for providers and the best start in life for every child.

### Working alongside the SDLP Opposition at Stormont, SDLP MPs will:

- → Lobby a new UK government to increase the rate of tax-free childcare to 35% and lift the annual cap;
- → Push for the publication of a new, bold and ambitious Early Education and Childcare Strategy to transform early education and childcare in Northern Ireland;
- → Work towards a cap on costs for parents;
- → Advocate for a new longer-term funding scheme for providers, conditional on increased pay and qualifications for workers and support for registered childminders;
- Support the acceleration and expansion of cross-border collaboration on early education and childcare;
- → Work with the UK Treasury and NI Executive to ring-fence any Barnett consequentials that arise specifically as higher spending on childcare in Britain.
- → Lobby the Department of Health to establish a time-bound taskforce to address the issue of unregistered childminding and progress the Review of Minimum Standards.



# Addressing the Climate Emergency and Biodiversity Crisis

Dealing with the threat of unchecked global temperature increases, climate breakdown and the biodiversity crisis is an urgent necessity. The failure to take the threat posed by the climate crisis is a generational injustice that will fundamentally change the society that our children and grandchildren inherit.

Colum Eastwood tabled pioneering climate legislation in the last Westminster mandate that would have introduced tougher net zero commitments and created a new green jobs levy to force the biggest corporations to contribute to climate mitigation and a just transition to a low carbon economy.

SDLP MPs also co-sponsored the Climate & Nature Bill in Westminster. This will mandate UK Government to achieve climate and nature targets, put in place a strategy to achieve those targets and establish a 'Climate and Nature Assembly'. Claire Hanna was also the deputy chair of the All-party group on Climate Change.

### Working alongside the SDLP Opposition at Stormont, SDLP MPs will:

#### → 1. Support ambitious climate legislation in Westminster

SDLP MPs will always support ambitious climate legislation at Westminster. In the last mandate, we supported the Climate & Nature Bill aimed at rapidly reducing greenhouse gas emissions, reversing biodiversity loss and building consensus for a just transition. We will also support a 'Well-being of Future Generations Bill' to This would be aimed at improving the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of people here.

#### → 2. Campaign for an independent Environmental Protection Agency

An Independent Environmental Protection Agency must be established as recommended by the Review of Environmental Governance in 2007 and agreed by all parties in the New Decade New Approach agreement in 2020. The SDLP also secured support in the Assembly on 13th May 2024 for the establishment of an independent environmental protection agency by the end of this Assembly mandate.

#### → 3. Prioritise Water Quality

None of our rivers, lakes, transitional & coastal water bodies currently meet overall good status when ecological and chemical status are considered. The SDLP will insist that a newly established Independent Environmental Protection Agency prioritises improvement in the status of our rivers, lakes, transitional & coastal water bodies.

#### ➔ 4. Fight for a Lough Neagh Recovery Plan

A properly funded plan of action must be brought forward to address the ecological crisis in lough Neagh. Steps must be taken to upgrade the Wastewater Treatment Works around Lough Neagh, introduce unannounced sampling of water, enforce existing regulation on pollution with fines when necessary, and increase inspections of farms.

#### ➔ 5. Campaign for a 'Just Transition'

A key objective for the SDLP was that the Climate Change Act enshrined the principles of a Just Transition.

However, progress has stalled on this vital aspect of the fight against climate change. A Just Transition Fund for Agriculture has still to be set up to provide incentives and advice to the agricultural sector to help it deliver its contribution and a Just Transition Commission is still to be established, which to support all sectors of our economy in meeting the targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

The SDLP will continue to hold government at Stormont and Westminster responsible for the delivery of a Just Transition, including ensuring that it is a central tenet of all climate action plans by Executive Departments

#### → 6. Fight for Sustainable Funding for Farming

The UK's departure from the European Union led to the end of EU funding for farming through the Common Agricultural Policy.

The SDLP will work to ensure that new funding streams properly support farmers and are used to encourage the development of environmentally sustainable farming methods that encourages and supports biodiversity across the industry..

#### → 7. Seek to implement an all-island animal cruelty register

The SDLP supports the introduction of an all-island animal cruelty register to prevent known animal abusers from buying or owning animals in another part of the island. SDLP MPs will continue to lobby the next government on this issue in order to end the scandal of animal abuse across these islands.

#### ➔ 8. Support new legislation on clean air

Poor air quality contributes to 800 deaths in Northern Ireland every year. SDLP MPs will support an ambitious new Clean Air Act with clear goals to reduce particulate matter to 10 micrograms per cubic metre as soon as possible but no later than 2030 with stretch targets for further reduction in PM2.5 levels.

SDLP MPs will support the inclusion of clean air filtration guidance for the public sector to include health, education and other settings.

SDLP MPs will also advocate a joint work stream as part of the British-Irish Council on clean air frameworks given that this policy area is is a supra-territorial issue.



### **Building For Our Future - Infrastructure**

To build a prosperous, sustainable future in NI, we need to urgently invest in our infrastructure. The SDLP has been at the forefront of campaigning for more ambitious infrastructure plans to stimulate economic growth, improve people's quality of life & safety and ensure a sustainable future for all.

### Working alongside the SDLP Opposition at Stormont, SDLP MPs will:

### ➔ 1. Seek investment in public transport

Investing in our public transport network is a crucial lever to help combat the climate emergency and create sustainable communities across the North. We have a strong record of investment in public transport, including introducing the first fleet of zero-emission buses in Derry. Improving accessible transport, ensuring that public transportation infrastructure, including buses, trains, and stations, is physically accessible to individuals with mobility impairments, such as wheelchair users and those with limited mobility. We will seek to promote coordination and integration between different modes of transport to improve reliability and specifically, addressing the dearth of night-time provision which will be key in assisting economic growth.

### 2. Fight for A5 Delivery

The delivery of the A5 is long overdue. We will fight to ensure that funding invested by the Irish government is backed up with allocations from the British government.

### ➔ 3. Advocate for A6 Completion

The A6 is a critical infrastructure project and when completed will be an economic driver of opportunity across the region. This is particularly important given the additional plans for housing developments. We will work with DAERA to secure a remediation plan at Mobuoy in order to help address this environmental crime and progress the completion of the A6. We will also fight to secure funding allocation to complete Phase 2 Drumahoe to Caw as soon as possible. In addition, the SDLP will continue to raise safety concerns & signalisation of Caw Roundabout and advocate for the front-loading of these essential works.

#### ➔ 4. Deliver on the potential of all-island rail

The SDLP delivered the first All Island strategic Rail Review in a generation. We will now push for progress on delivery. We will seek an update on the Phase 3 of Derry to Coleraine Feasibility Study and ensure Derry has fair, accessible rail provision to include hourly Sunday services and stops at Derry City Airport, Strathfoyle and Ballykelly.

#### ➔ 5. Prioritise Our Water Infrastructure & Flood Alleviation

We require adequate investment to upgrade water infrastructure to prevent risk of overspill and pollution into the environment. The system is simply not fit for purpose and cannot meet the new environmental standards or public demand. The SDLP are opposed to water charges and prevented their introduction in government.

We are deeply concerned that the construction of 19,000 homes across NI is currently at risk due to lack of water/sewerage infrastructure. This has led to an investment backlog that has placed a stranglehold on the economy, building of homes, tourism, threatening ecosystems and water quality and preventing investment opportunities.

We recognise the dire position of NI Water and urgent need to address a legacy of underfunding. However, further hardship cannot be heaped on families struggling to make ends meet. The Executive must prioritise investment in critical infrastructure through means other than domestic charging.

Moreover, 45,000 properties in Northern Ireland are at risk of flooding. The consequences of climate change will increase that figure significantly in the time ahead. Many people know all too well the devastation wrought to homes and businesses as a result of flooding. The Executive has failed to get a handle on the situation, leaving Northern Ireland far behind UK and South of Ireland counterparts in terms of flood forecasting. By improving warning systems, we can ensure communities are better prepared for flooding events.

#### ➔ 6. Progress Electric Vehicle Infrastructure

In government, the SDLP established the Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Taskforce. In order to grow our EV network and ensure that these vehicles are an option for all people, the EV Infrastructure Action Plan being developed by the Taskforce must be delivered. This Action Plan must also ensure equitable access within the network.

### ➔ 7. Reform the Planning System

Planning for the future of NI, provision to prioritise and expedite large-scale housing developments and climate change adaptation/ projects/ local development plans. The SDLP will seek to streamline the planning process and address current backlogs. We want to ensure there is alignment on planning policies with broader economic, social, and environmental objectives to promote balanced and inclusive & sustainable development.

# Justice, Equality & Rights


# Justice, Legacy and Victims

## 1. Legacy

The SDLP will always stand with victims and for truth, justice and accountability. Over recent years, justice has been severely undermined by the UK government at Westminster through the corrosive impact of the toxic Legacy Act, which the SDLP opposed at every turn. This abhorrent amnesty was an act of serious bad faith that has breached obligations undertaken in all-party agreements and the international treaty further to "the Stormont House Agreement".

The SDLP has consistently maintained that we must address the past in a comprehensive and ethical way that fully supports the needs of victims in a way that upholds the highest standards of human rights. This would be one of the single greatest contributions to reconciliation and healing.

We have an over-riding priority:

In Westminster, the SDLP successfully lobbied the UK Labour Party to commit to repeal the Legacy Act in the next Parliament, SDLP MPs will hold the Labour Party to account on that commitment if elected.

# 2. Systemic Reforms

The SDLP supports substantive reforms to the criminal justice system to deliver faster, fairer justice with increased accountability.

## Working alongside the SDLP Opposition at Stormont, SDLP MPs will:

### → Change the focus to rehabilitation.

While in some instance progress has been made in the management of prisons, we believe that further structural and staff reforms of the prison service are needed in order to enhance rehabilitation as well as the safety and dignity of both prison staff and prisoners.

The SDLP continues to call for a progressive approach including support for community mediation methods and non-court approaches of dispute resolution. We support the establishment of a 12-month post-release supervision programme following international best practice models in order to help reduce re-offending.

#### → Systemic reforms must be introduced to protect the rights of victims

We support the introduction of an effective communication strategy to raise awareness of the Victim and Witnesses Charters and how information that signposts services, support providers and entitlements to services can easily be accessed.

# We support the full implementation of the remaining recommendations from the HIA Inquiry and the release of redress payments and other required support to survivors.

## 3. Policing

The SDLP will always lobby for a visible police presence in our communities, which has been hollowed out by a decade of Tory austerity. This requires a gear change in policing with the community and ensuring that no community is managed by "gatekeepers" who exercise undue influence in local areas.

#### Working alongside the SDLP Opposition at Stormont, SDLP MPs will:

#### Ensure the PSNI must be representative of the community it seeks to serve

We will continue to challenge the PSNI on the recruitment, retention and promotion policies especially with regard to underrepresented groups. The SDLP continues to believe that the recruitment, retention and promotion of officers and civilian staff from the Catholic tradition is a pressing challenge for the PSNI and requires the deployment of every measure including affirmative action.

#### Combating Cybercrime, economic crime & fraud

Every aspect of our lives from the NHS, transport systems to communication networks is vulnerable to increased cybercrime, economic crime and fraud. The SDLP will continue to work with all relevant authorities, including the PSNI's Chief Constable and the Northern Ireland Policing Board to ensure that a modern, technology advanced police service is equipped with the capacity and skills to combat online crime.

## 4. Tackling Paramilitarism

We must end paramilitarism and associated criminality in our society once and for all. We have consistently called for the escalation of the law enforcement approach to seek out and close down all involved in paramilitary criminality and the addressing of the legacy of historic assets.

#### Working alongside the SDLP Opposition at Stormont, SDLP MPs will:

- We will ensure that the Paramilitary Disbandment Strategy Panel is provided with the support and information it may require from organisations including the PSNI, An Garda Síochána and other stakeholders
- Greater cooperation between the PSNI and An Garda Síochána to deal with crime associated with the border
- → The SDLP fought hard for local oversight and robust accountability protections for the National Crime Agency. We are now calling for stronger collaboration between all relevant agencies to deliver a specific anti-corruption strategy for Northern Ireland and a significant uplift in resources.
- There should be a dedicated NI assets recovery and enforcement organisation

## 5. Ending Violence Against Women and Girls

At all levels of government, the SDLP has relentlessly campaigned for the new Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy to be fully implemented and funded. In the past, SDLP MPs supported the successful Istanbul Convention Bill on preventing and combatting domestic violence against women and girls.

### Working alongside the SDLP Opposition at Stormont, SDLP MPs will:

#### Lobby the Executive Office repeatedly to reverse the indefensible cut to Women's Aid

The current cuts leave Women's Aid NI as the only part of Women's Aid across the UK without state funding. This is totally indefensible and must be reversed by the Executive as a matter of urgency.

#### → Hold the Department of Justice responsible on its policy and legislation

In the last mandate, new legislation was introduced on a range of areas including domestic abuse and stalking. However, there has been very limited provision for the implementation, training or monitoring of these new offences. Moreover, not all recommendations from the Gillen Review have yet been implemented.

#### → Review the Family Courts System

The SDLP also believes that a review of the family courts system is required, as has been undertaken in England, and will work constructively with the Department and relevant authorities to ensure that a review is delivered urgently.



# **Equality & Rights**

The SDLP is committed to building a society where everyone can succeed, regardless of background. It is a matter of deep regret that rights have been delivered at Westminster which should rightly have been decided by locally elected representatives in the Northern Ireland Assembly, including the development of a Bill of Rights for NI.

# 1. LGBT Rights

### In order to build a more diverse and inclusive society for our LGBT+ population. Working alongside the SDLP Opposition at Stormont, SDLP MPs will:

- → Ensure a comprehensive ban on conversion practices
- → Ensuring provision of gender-affirming healthcare services
- Promoting age-appropriate and expert-guided LGBTQIA+ inclusive relationships and sexuality education for schools
- Fighting for funding for LGBTQIA+ organisations and support services, particularly in rural areas
- → Stand up for LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers and refugees who are forced to flee their homes
- → Urge the UK Government to work with international organisations and governments to ensure the advancement of LGBTQIA+ rights globally and to prevent any erosion of rights which LGBTQIA+ people fought hard to win

# 2. Disability Rights

The SDLP believes in a society where disabled people have full and equal access to public services, including through the full implementation of the UN Convention on the Right of Persons with Disabilities.

In a myriad of ways, disabled people have been hit hardest by the cost-of-living crisis and the impact of the pandemic and require intervention and investment to address that impact. Robust action is required at all levels of government to tackle the inequalities faced by people with disabilities, including by closing the disability employment gap. We must also invest in public services and the built environment of our local communities to ensure that homes, schools, leisure and sporting facilities and public transportation are fully accessible to disabled people. We believe in a welfare system that upholds the rights of all disabled people, treating them with dignity and compassion.

Alongside these important reforms, the SDLP will continue to campaign for a society that breaks down the negative attitudes and discrimination that affect disabled people, including through addressing disability hate crime. Public policy must be co-designed with disabled people and the organisations that represent them to ensure that it fully accounts for the needs of disabled people.

# 3. Rights of ethnic minorities

Ireland is home to a range of new communities from across the world and the SDLP celebrates the increasing diversity of all our communities. We are committed to working with representatives of ethnic minorities to ensure the Executive Office fully delivers on Racial Equality and Refugee Integration Strategies, as well as supporting the campaign to ensure that freedom of movement can be enjoyed by all of our residents.

The SDLP supports robust standalone hate crime legislation to end these heinous crimes once and for all, as recommended by the Marrinan Review. The Justice Minister has rowed back on a previous commitment for standalone hate crime legislation. SDLP representatives will seek to hold the Minister accountable for this commitment.

## 4. Irish language rights

The SDLP has resolutely campaigned for the rights of Gaeilgeoirí in the North. While we welcomed the introduction of the Identity and Language Act 2022, these rights should never have been delayed. We will continue to work at all levels of government to ensure that such rights are upheld, including through the First and deputy First Minister ensuring that the Commissioners provided for under this legislation are appointed and bodies established under the terms of these acts.

In 2008 and 2017, it was SDLP MLAs Dominic Bradley and Patsy McGlone who attempted to table Private Members' legislation on Irish language rights in the Assembly and SDLP MLAs were determined to place Irish language rights at the front and centre of the negotiations for the New Decade, New Approach agreement. People have waited far too long for their rights to be respected in the North. It is time for progress to finally be delivered on.

In addition, the SDLP has consistently called for a 20 Year Irish Language Strategy based on a co-design and expert panel process as promised in successive agreements include New Decade, New Approach. We also support the development of a Bill for Irish Medium Education to clarify and strengthen the current statutory duty and ensure policies and services are in place to meet the needs and growth of the Irish Medium education sector, including through supporting workforce development and recruitment. We also support the inclusion of languages as a compulsory subject for study at GCSE level to reverse the decline in pupils studying languages in school.







# **Our Place In The World**

SDLP MPs are proud to have stood for peace and justice around the world. We have tirelessly championed internationalism, solidarity and human rights and we will always make the people of the North heard on issues of global importance at Westminster.

The SDLP is a proudly internationalist party and a member of the Party of European Socialists. We strongly believe that now, more than ever, international cooperation is needed in order to stand for democracy, promote international solidarity and protect the human rights of all people.

## 1. Human Rights

The SDLP remains unwavering in its commitment to advancing and upholding human rights. We believe that every individual, regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, disability, gender, sexual orientation or belief, are entitled to the same fundamental rights which are enshrined in international law.

## SDLP MPs will:

- → Ensure compliance with Article 2 of the Windsor Framework on the non-diminution of human rights following the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union
- Reject hard-right extremism and standing against the rise of the far-right, both at home and around the world
- Work closely with international bodies and the United Nations, to ensure human rights are properly upheld
- → Support Non-Governmental Organisations that assist victims of human rights abuse
- → Ensure that current trade and aid policies are fit for purpose and provide the muchneeded humanitarian assistance in areas of conflict and famine

# 2. Gaza

We are appalled at the ongoing genocide in Gaza and outraged at the inexcusable violence being carried out by Israel on the innocent people of Palestine. We have repeatedly called for an immediate ceasefire.

Our dedication to a peace resolution in Gaza is evident. Since taking our seats in Westminster, SDLP MP's have:

- → Called for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, including through directly challenging the Prime Minister and making repeated representations to the government
- → Demanded that the Foreign Secretary ban arms sales to Israel
- Engaged with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office on the situation in Gaza
- → Boycotted the White House on St Patrick's Day in response to the continued support the US have given Israel
- → Met with the Palestinian Ambassador to the UK and Omar Barghouti, the co-founder of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement

Nominated the healthcare workers in Gaza for the Nobel Peace Prize

### SDLP MPs will continue to call for:

- → An Immediate Ceasefire in Gaza as the only legitimate and ethical path to peace
- Recognition of the state of Palestine and the establishment of a Two State Solution with internationally recognized borders
- The Release of Hostages that were taken during the despicable 7th of October attack carried out by Hamas
- → The expulsion of the Israeli Ambassador from the United Kingdom and Ireland in response to the repeated endorsement of the destruction of Gaza
- → A fully supported humanitarian intervention which allows for the deliverance of aid to those who are being devastated by this genocide
- → An end to the funding of Israeli arms by the British Government which have been used in violations of humanitarian and international law
- → The establishment of a Palestinian Visa Scheme in order to help displaced Palestinian people. The SDLP believe that this resettlement scheme is the only way Palestinians will be provided with safe passage out of the devastation in Gaza



## 3. Refugees and Asylum Seekers

The nature of Northern Ireland's society is becoming increasingly diverse and there is a growing number of new communities who have chosen to make Northern Ireland their home, enriching our communities.

However, over the last fourteen years the Tories have ramped up anti-immigration rhetoric and created a hostile environment. They have utterly broken the immigration system.

In recent months, there has been an extremely worrying rise in reports of hate crime. We believe that a shared future in Northern Ireland will only be achieved with the full inclusion of the new communities who have made their home here.

## SDLP MPs will:

Stand against hate crime and discrimination wherever it occurs, in any of our communities.

Transform our asylum system, including by repealing the anti-asylum seeker legislation introduced by the Conservative government, including the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act 2024, the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and the Illegal Migration Act 2023.

- → Advocate for the establishment of safe and legal routes for refugees to seek asylum
- → Promote equal opportunities for integration into society including access to health, education, housing and fair employment for all in our community
- → International cooperation with other countries in order to properly deal with the root causes of displacement including, conflict, climate change and persecution
- → Lobby to end the ban on asylum seekers working
- → Ensure that asylum seekers are treated with the dignity they deserve and that they are given a fair and proper opportunity to apply for refugee status
- Home Office systems and processes require an urgent overhaul so that cases can be processed quickly and effectively and the huge backlog in applications can be tackled.

# A Future Back In Europe

As a member of the Party of European Socialists, we are a proudly pro-European and internationalist party, recognising the centrality of the European Union to our peace process and the myriad of ways in which Northern Ireland benefited from EU membership. The SDLP were among the most ardent opponents of the decision by the UK to leave the European Union in 2016. Since that vote, we believe that more and more people across Northern Ireland have reflected on our shared European identity, concluding that the only viable route back into the European Union is a new and agreed Ireland.

The SDLP affirms that it is now time for a new conversation on the future of our island in Europe.

If elected, SDLP MPs will work with our colleagues and friends across Europe to build this new phase of relationships and fulfil the commitment in the Good Friday Agreement to "develop still further the unique relationship between their peoples and the close cooperation between their countries as friendly neighbours and as partners in the European Union" focusing on the following 3 priorities:

#### → 1. Seizing the opportunities of the Windsor Framework

We will urge the Executive to work with the governments in both Dublin and London to seize advantage of the unique trading advantage of Northern Ireland as a foothold in both the UK and EU markets. The SDLP will lobby for an office of the European Commission in Belfast to deepen economic and social ties between the European Union and Northern Ireland.

#### ➔ 2.Restoring our voice

SDLP MPs will also work towards the agreement for representation from elected representation from Northern Ireland in the European Union to restore our voice in Europe. We welcome the new structures for UK-EU cooperation within the Windsor Framework, including new structured expert groups to facilitate detailed UK-EU discussion of new roles. These new steps will help to rebuild the trust between the UK and EU that was undermined by the corrosive impact of Brexit and the NI Protocol Bill. However, we believe that there is a strong case for increased representation from Northern Ireland in the European Union. These should include a new dedicated European Affairs Committee in the Northern Ireland Assembly, with powers to take evidence from UK Ministers and EU officials and annual meetings in Belfast of the EU-UK parliamentary Assembly, as well as enhanced role for the North-South Ministerial Council in EU affairs. We also support the right of Irish citizens living in other countries the right to vote for Irish candidates in European elections.

Moreover, the SDLP supports the restoration of Members of the European Parliament for Northern Ireland in order to help address the democratic deficit provoked by the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union. This is a move supported by a huge majority- over 70%of the NI public.

#### ➔ 3. Planning for re-accession

The SDLP is calling for a dedicated process to be put in place by the European Union in order to plan for the North's re-accession into the European Union in the context of unification.

