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The case for Northern Ireland

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Executive Summary

Northern Ireland's constitutional position is not an inheritance to be defended passively, but a settlement to be renewed with confidence. This paper presents a positive case that reflects Northern Ireland's strengths: respecting difference, sustaining prosperity and providing security in an increasingly unstable world.

As a post-conflict society shaped by diverse traditions, Northern Ireland has a framework that allows British, Irish, Northern Irish and other identities to coexist. However, this pluralist settlement faces significant headwinds.

Political instability has eroded confidence in devolution, public services are under intolerable strain, and a volatile global environment brings heightened risks from cyber warfare, terrorism and organised crime. Meeting the challenges of the 21st century requires not only maintaining our constitutional position, but making the right policy choices to strengthen it.

This paper makes the following arguments:

- **Respecting Difference:** Pluralism is a strength of the current constitutional settlement, not a threat to it. Respecting the diversity of our society provides the essential foundation for stability and a shared sense of belonging.
- **The Promise of Devolution:** Power-sharing devolved government remains the only arrangement capable of commanding cross-community support. Modernising the institutions to prevent collapse is necessary to restore public trust and maintain local agency.
- **Strong Foundations for Growth:** A lower cost of living and doing business, combined with other key strengths, makes Northern Ireland an attractive destination for high-growth sectors. Investment in skills and infrastructure is needed to maximise our economic potential.
- **The National Health Service:** Universal care based on need is something the public continues to value strongly, but the system is under pressure and delivering poor outcomes. The new neighbourhood health model has the potential to restore the NHS the public expects.
- **Security in An Unstable World:** Integration within the UK's defence, intelligence and policing frameworks provides needed resilience against security threats. The defence industry also drives economic growth and supports thousands of well paid, highly skilled jobs.

This paper articulates a confident vision and arrives at a clear conclusion. Northern Ireland's constitutional position is not merely defensible; it is worth renewing. It is a settlement that is valuable not because it is perfect, but because it is reformable. With the right policy choices, Northern Ireland can continue to move forward towards a brighter future.

Introduction

This paper is grounded in evidence, analysis and a clear policy argument. But before any of that, it is grounded in something more fundamental: our own conviction about Northern Ireland, and why its place within the United Kingdom matters to us personally.

We come to this from different backgrounds and perspectives. Two of us were raised in England, one with Irish Catholic family roots in Donegal, while others were raised in strongly unionist communities in Northern Ireland. Our experiences are not identical, and our perspectives have been shaped by different contexts. Yet they arrive at the same conclusion: that Northern Ireland's constitutional position reflects something real about who we are.

For each of us, this is not simply a question to be assessed in technical or economic terms. It is something lived. It is bound up in family, culture and the institutions we recognise, as well as a shared inheritance that stretches across these islands.

For some, that begins with an instinctive sense of kinship between Britain and Ireland; for others, it has been shaped by growing up in a particular community or by encountering difference and realising that identity need not be diminished by it.

What we share is a belief that Britishness, at its best, provides a framework capable of holding these experiences together. It is not an identity defined narrowly or exclusively, but one that has historically drawn strength from its pluralism: a civic tradition rooted in parliamentary democracy, the rule of law and individual liberty, and broad enough to accommodate multiple identities without demanding that any be surrendered.

At the same time, we recognise that Northern Ireland's story has been marked by division, and that many people have grown weary of the tribal politics that have too often defined it. We share that frustration. Northern Ireland cannot be sustained on habit or defence alone. It must offer something positive: a sense of belonging that can support not only stability, but a shared future that is bigger than our diverse traditions.

For us, that is ultimately what the case for Northern Ireland rests upon. It is not about denying complexity or overlooking the past, but about recognising that this place, with all its differences, works best within a framework that has the capacity to respect them.

Our support for Northern Ireland's constitutional position is therefore not abstract. It is rooted in experience, in identity and in a shared belief that this arrangement remains the best one in which this society can thrive.



Respecting Difference

Why identity matters

Identity shapes how people see themselves and how they relate to the world around them. It is not simply about passports or paperwork, but about belonging. When people feel their identity is recognised and respected, they are more likely to feel secure and content.

Research across Europe shows that those who feel proud of their national identity tend to report higher levels of life satisfaction.[1] This is not surprising. Identity gives people a sense of continuity and meaning in a fast-changing world.

Traditions and cultural practices are part of this picture. A recent global study found that, in most countries, customs and traditions are considered central to national identity.[2] Whether it is language, sport or other cultural traditions, these markers of identity help people to feel rooted in their community. When they are ignored or undermined, it quickly leads to alienation. That risk is especially acute in societies emerging from conflict.

History shows that when groups believe their identity is excluded from power, they are likely to respond negatively to the status quo and signal deep dissatisfaction with existing arrangements.[3] In other words, respect for individual identity is not just a matter of courtesy. It is a foundation of stability. Northern Ireland knows this better than most places.

Decades of violence were driven by competing national affiliations. Therefore, the current settlement allows both traditions to coexist, recognising that neither can dominate the other.

Identity and culture, while often framed in negative terms, can equally be channelled into something positive and shared: a wider mosaic in which traditions sit alongside one another rather than in competition.

This chapter will explore how Northern Ireland's existing framework works in practice: how it accommodates Irish identity, sustains British identity, supports a pluralist society, and opens space for a Northern Irish identity.

The starting point is simple: identity matters because it is tied to belonging and wellbeing. Ignore it and you invite division. Respect it and you build the conditions for people to live together in peace and prosperity.

Irish identity

When Northern Ireland was established, its leaders faced a stark warning from Sir Edward Carson: "We used to say that we could not trust an Irish Parliament in Dublin to do justice to the Protestant minority. Let us take care that that reproach can no longer be made against your Parliament, and from the outset let them see that the Catholic minority have nothing to fear from a Protestant majority."[4]

For decades, that warning went largely unheeded. The government reflected a single tradition, reinforcing a sense of exclusion rather than belonging.

Today, that picture has changed dramatically with the signing of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement. It guaranteed that people born in Northern Ireland can choose to be British, Irish or both and hold the corresponding citizenship.[5] This means someone can live in Northern Ireland, be thoroughly Irish and have their identity respected in law.

However, identity goes far beyond what passport one holds. It means being able to hold that identity and have it reflected through participation in political, civic and social life. Beyond citizenship, Irish cultural life is thriving. It is an everyday part of our shared tapestry of traditions, which was demonstrated most clearly by the widely-recognised succcess of the Belfast Fleadh in August 2026.

Public funding supports cultural initiatives, from language programmes to arts and heritage projects, ensuring Irish traditions are not confined to private hobbies, but are visible, vibrant parts of Northern Irish life. Gaelic football, hurling and camogie remain among the most popular sporting activities in nationalist communities and are supported by youth participation programmes.[6] Data from the Department for Communities shows Irish music, dance and festivals attract strong participation across our society.[7]

Education further illustrates this respect for difference. Parents can choose from a diverse system that includes Catholic schools, integrated schools and Irish-medium schools, allowing families to select a learning environment aligned with their outlook. Irish language education has grown steadily, with dedicated Irish-medium schools offering full immersion for families who want it, and 41.9% of post-primary schools now offer Irish at Key Stage 3.[8]

The cumulative effect is clear: Irishness in Northern Ireland is lived through citizenship, language, sport, culture and education. All of this exists within a constitutional framework that guarantees these rights. This matters because it demonstrates that the current settlement does more than end violence. It creates space for identity to flourish. In a society once scarred by division and conflict, that is no small achievement.

British identity

The 1912 Ulster Covenant remains the foundational text of Ulster unionism. Commentators often focus on the pledge to resist a measure believed to be "subversive of civil and religious freedom," but the Covenant spoke of much more.

It talked of safeguarding "the material well-being of Ulster," of upholding "equal citizenship in the United Kingdom" and of being "loyal subjects of His Gracious Majesty." In those lines lies the essence of British identity in Northern Ireland today. Not simply a religious or cultural identity, but a constitutional arrangement through which that identity is maintained and expressed.

That vision has evolved in the last century from the foundation of the Northern Irish state, through the Troubles and to the present day. Ulster unionist political thought has developed due to events and emerging trends, but at its core is a recognition that its traditions and aspirations are only secure through Northern Ireland's constitutional links.[9]

British identity has often been expressed as a community bound by faith, but it includes those of many faiths and none. More fundamentally, it is an allegiance to British institutions. It is not merely a

cultural creed sustained by the reality of geography, but a political one guaranteed by the constitution.[10] This is why the argument that British identity can be maintained in the same way as Irish identity, regardless of the constitutional framework, misses the mark.

Britishness is not accommodated through the right to hold a British passport or celebrate the Twelfth. It is sustained by the continued living fabric of the Union: representation in Parliament, the sovereignty of the Crown, and participation in the economic and cultural life of the UK. This is what confers equal citizenship and guarantees its political expression.

Strip away that constitutional link and British identity in Northern Ireland is diminished. A UK passport without UK membership leaves unionists relegated to the position of a British expat living abroad. The shared cultural inheritance of law, literature and democratic tradition would no longer be fully theirs.

When the King arrives in Westminster for the State Opening of Parliament, he would open a Parliament in which Northern Irish voices were no longer represented. The interdependence formed through the military sacrifice of Ulstermen in the two World Wars would be severed, a connection rooted not only in culture, but in collective memory. These are the threads that weave British identity into the life of Northern Ireland. Remove them and the fabric unravels.

Supporting a pluralist society

One of the most significant achievements of Northern Ireland's current arrangements is the space they have created for plural identities. For decades, political life was defined by a binary: unionist or nationalist; British or Irish.

Today, that picture is more complex. Surveys show a growing number of people rejecting those labels and identifying as "neither." People in this group often prefer to call themselves "Northern Irish," a term seen as inclusive and less tied to historical conflict.[11]

The rise of "neither" is not marginal. In recent years, it has become the largest single category in political identity questions. Yet research suggests that this group is less politically active and shows little appetite for constitutional change.[12] Their disengagement does not mean indifference. Rather, it reflects a desire for stability and a reluctance to reopen old divides. In this sense, pluralism is not a threat to the current framework. It is a product of it.

Demographic change adds another layer. Immigration has brought new communities to Northern Ireland, many without the historical baggage of the Troubles. Census data shows that minority ethnic and migrant populations have grown significantly since 2001, with Polish, Lithuanian and Indian communities among the largest. These newcomers often find themselves excluded from debates framed around binary identities.[13]

Interestingly, Britishness tends to be a more accepted identity for immigrants in the wider UK. Studies in England show that newcomers often adopt "British" rather than "English" identity because it feels more inclusive, tied to citizenship rather than ethnicity.[14] While Northern Ireland data is limited, it is reasonable to infer a similar dynamic: Britishness, defined in civic rather than ethnic terms, offers a clear point of entry.

All of this underscores a crucial point. The current constitutional framework does not just manage two traditions. It provides room for those who identify as both, neither or something else entirely. Other conceptions of nationhood offer a more rigid identity straitjacket, one that forces people into categories they do not choose and sidelines those who do not fit. This is a suboptimal arrangement for a society that has moved beyond zero-sum thinking and is truly pluralistic.

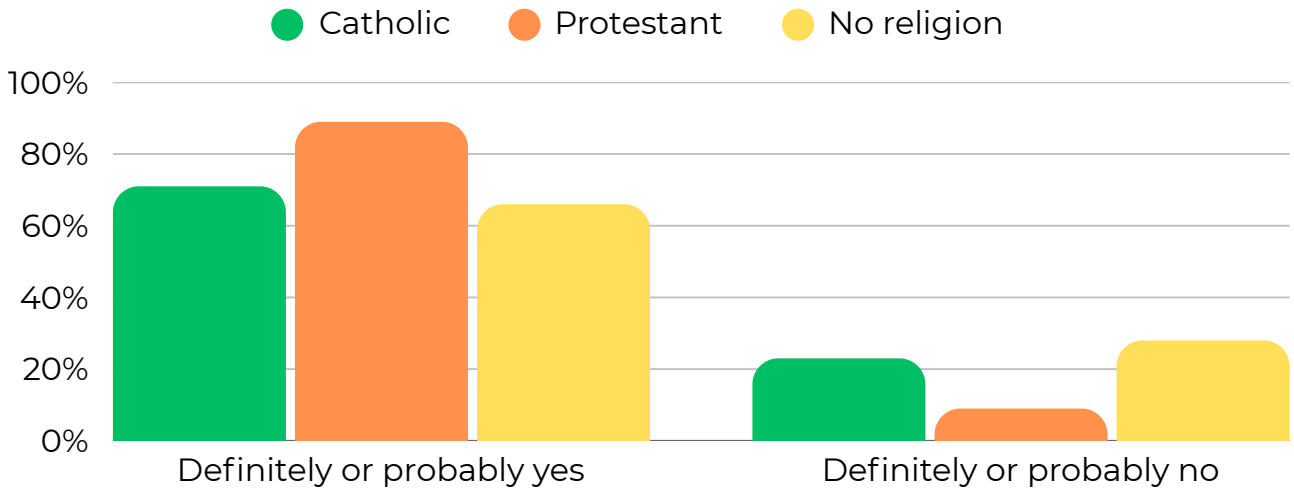
Building a Northern Irish identity

Data from the Northern Ireland Life & Times Survey shows the growth of a Northern Irish identity following the Belfast Agreement. The proportion of people who identify primarily as Northern Irish increased from 23% in 1998 to 32% in 2023.[15] In the 2025 survey, 77% of respondents said they feel a sense of belonging to Northern Ireland, and this is not confined to one community: 89% of Protestants and 71% of Catholics share this sense of belonging. Interestingly, it is those of no religion who are slightly lower at 66%.[16] While there are differences in these numbers, the overall picture is clear. Northern Irish identity is something that unites rather than divides.

Research shows this identity can be constructed in multiple ways: as a distinctive people, a political project or a banal indicator of place.[17] It can serve as a cross-community or superordinate identity, one that is viewed as more inclusive than the traditional binaries and as helping to reduce sectarian divisions.[18]

Integrated education and cross-community contact are widely recognised as key interventions that foster a shared identity. However, this often underestimates the enduring power of the identities of the two main traditions. The importance of having a shared identity, in addition to British and Irish identities, instead lies in the need for non-combative identifiers, a common identity and common story. [19]

Table 1: People who say they feel a sense of belonging to Northern Ireland



ARK. "Northern Ireland Life & Times Survey, UBELNI." 2025.

Being Northern Irish is inherently plural - a tapestry of traditions, languages, memories, migration stories and cultural inheritances that share the same physical and civic space. A place-based identity framework does not ask people to abandon Irishness or Britishness. Rather, it recognises that policy must be shaped by the goal of creating a genuinely shared and reconciled community.

The recent establishment of the Irish Language Commissioner and the Commissioner for the Ulster Scots and Ulster British tradition reflects an effort to recognise and protect cultural diversity. However, there is a risk that these offices become vehicles for factional interests rather than bridges to common ground. The true test for the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression is whether it can promote the areas of shared importance and heritage.

In the end, building a Northern Irish identity is not about erasing difference, but creating a shared sense of belonging. It means recognising the complexity of identity in this place: how it can be lived, chosen and shared. Stability depends not only on the ability to accommodate differences, but on fostering a shared story that people from all backgrounds can see themselves within. That capacity for pluralism can be one of the greatest strengths of the current settlement.


CARSON

The Promise of Devolution

The Belfast and St Andrews Agreements

The case for power-sharing rests on the simple truth that decades of experience have shown the alternatives do not work.

Attempts to govern through majoritarian devolution failed to maintain the confidence of all sections of the community. The Stormont government, solely representing unionism, collapsed in 1972 as social disorder mounted and the security forces lost control of events.

In the aftermath, unionism turned to integrationism, advocating for direct rule within the United Kingdom. Yet this approach unravelled with the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985, which introduced a consultative role for the Irish Government. For unionists, this was viewed as joint authority and provoked fierce opposition. The failure of integrationism reopened the debate on devolution, culminating in the Task Force Report in 1987, which acknowledged that majoritarianism was unrealistic and devolution would require power-sharing.[20]

By 1990, leading unionist figures, such as Peter Robinson, were articulating a pragmatic case for devolution, recognising that local governance offered greater agency and accountability than direct rule from London.[21] Most notably, David Trimble embraced power-sharing as a means to secure additional constitutional safeguards. The 1998 Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement embedded the principle of consent and rebalanced the North-South components of the Anglo-Irish Agreement with East-West institutions.[22] The 2006 St Andrews Agreement built on this by enforcing decommissioning and acceptance of the police as pre-conditions for participation in the institutions.

Other options once debated within unionism - whether majoritarian devolution, integration or even independence - were recognised to be non-starters. They failed to gain support from all sections of the community or to address the perceived democratic deficit.

Power-sharing devolved government, on the other hand, puts decisions affecting people here into their hands. While the institutions have not always lived up to their promise, it remains the best option for governing Northern Ireland and can be made to work.

The 2007-2017 Executive

While the stop-start nature of government since 2017 has eroded public confidence in the devolved institutions, revisiting the Executive from 2007 to 2017 demonstrates how devolution can work.

This period was far from perfect, yet it showed that, despite deep political differences, the parties were capable of working together and delivering the ‘boring business’ of government. The Executive passed significant legislation that reformed public service provision and enhanced protections for vulnerable sections of the population.

For example, the 2009 Health and Social Care Act restructured the administration of services and strengthened patient voice through the creation of the Patient and Client Council.

The 2014 Education Act created the Education Authority to promote shared education and equality of access; the 2016 Special Education Needs and Disability Act enhanced rights for children with additional needs; and the 2015 Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act introduced tougher penalties for modern slavery and improved support for victims.

This decade also coincided with renewed optimism about Northern Ireland and its economic prospects. The Executive adopted an investment strategy prioritising infrastructure investment and positioning Northern Ireland as an attractive destination for foreign direct investment (FDI).[23]

Landmark projects such as the Titanic Quarter development, including the Titanic Belfast attraction and new commercial space, symbolised a renewed Northern Ireland, attracting millions of visitors and international corporations. Tourism flourished, with visitor spending rising to nearly £1 billion by 2018.[24] Northern Ireland became a magnet for major film and TV productions such as Games of Thrones, boosting global visibility and screen tourism.[25]

FDI performance was exceptional. Between 2013 and 2018, Northern Ireland attracted more FDI jobs per capita than any other UK region. In 2016-17 alone, 34 inward investment projects created over 1,600 jobs, driven by sectors such as IT, financial services, aerospace and life sciences.[26] These figures underscore the Executive's success during this period in promoting Northern Ireland as an attractive investment destination and driving economic growth.

This period was not without its challenges. The flag protests, parade disputes and the ongoing threat of paramilitaries tested the stability of the institutions, while areas of poor governance damaged credibility. Yet the Executive parties were able to reach compromises that have often been lacking in the years since, such as agreement on the implementation of welfare reform.

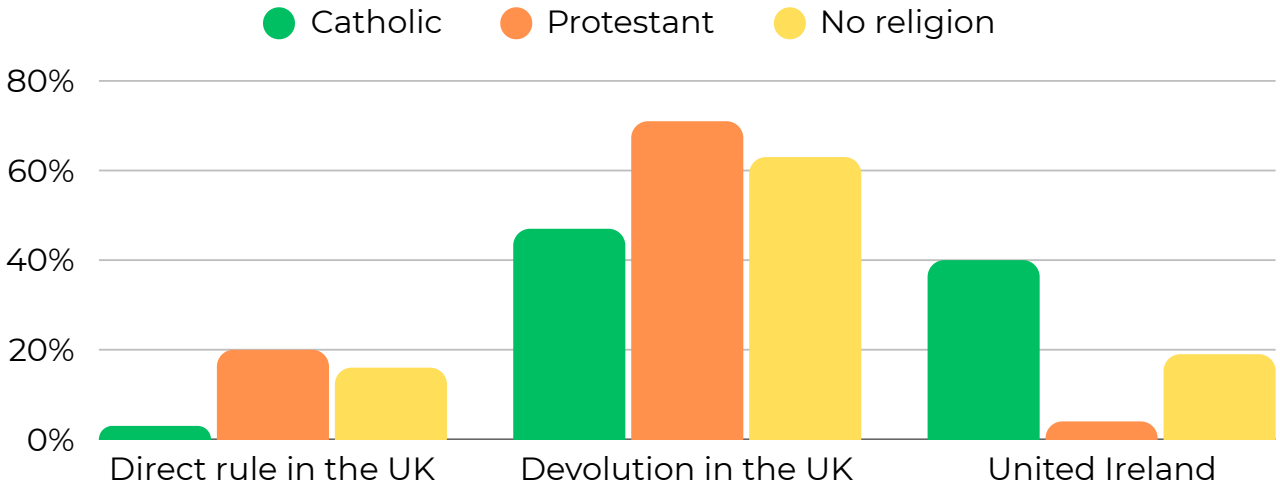
The 2007-2017 Executive demonstrated that devolved government, though imperfect, can deliver public service reform, economic renewal and political compromise. Despite the paralysis that followed, it showed that devolution can made to work.

A settlement everyone can support

Devolved government within the United Kingdom remains the only constitutional arrangement capable of commanding support from all sections of the community in Northern Ireland.

It offers a framework that respects competing identities while ensuring local accountability. In 2016, after nearly a decade of stable devolved government, the Northern Ireland Life & Times Survey showed that, excluding "don't knows," 60% of the population favoured this as the long-term policy for Northern Ireland.[27] Crucially, this preference cut across demographic lines: 71% of Protestants, 47% of Catholics and 63% of those of no religion preferred devolved government within the UK to any of the alternatives.

Table 2: Long-term policy preferences in 2016 after a decade of devolved government (excluding don't know)



ARK. "Northern Ireland Life & Times Survey, NIRELND2." 2016.

This consensus, however, has eroded during a decade marked by political instability and repeated suspensions of the institutions. Protestant support remains robust at 57%, with a further 29% favouring direct rule. Among Catholics, the picture is starkly different: only 16% now back devolution within the UK, while 70% prefer a united Ireland. Those of no religion are more evenly split.[28]

These figures underscore two truths: first, devolution within the UK is the only settlement that has ever united all communities; second, the durability of the state depends on the stability and credibility of the institutions.

Critics of Northern Ireland's place in the UK often invoke a "democratic deficit," arguing that with just 3% of the UK's population, its influence is negligible.[29] Devolution substantially weakens this claim by placing the most fundamental aspects of government, from health and education to justice and infrastructure, entirely under the control of locally elected representatives.[30] In these domains, Northern Ireland exercises more autonomy than it would under a unitary state governed from Dublin.

For those committed to maintaining Northern Ireland's constitutional position, the lesson is clear: its future is inseparable from the success of devolved institutions. A functioning Assembly and Executive are the practical means by which Northern Ireland secures both its voice and its viability within the United Kingdom. To abandon or undermine the institutions is to imperil a settlement that once commanded cross-community support and can do so again.

Building more stable institutions

Institutional reform in Northern Ireland has long been met with scepticism. Both the main parties have historically viewed the existing arrangements as essential to safeguarding their respective

communities' interests, and have resisted significant changes to the power-sharing structures. In contrast, the Alliance Party has emerged as the principal advocate for reform, championing proposals to modernise the institutions and make them more resilient. Their 2022 Assembly manifesto called for the abolition of the cross-community voting system and mandatory coalition, among other reforms, arguing this would foster a more effective, representative government.[31]

It is understandable that unionism remains wary of reform. Majoritarianism was rejected as unacceptable when unionism held a majority and now, as that majority has eroded, calls to abolish minority protections are being advanced with greater urgency.

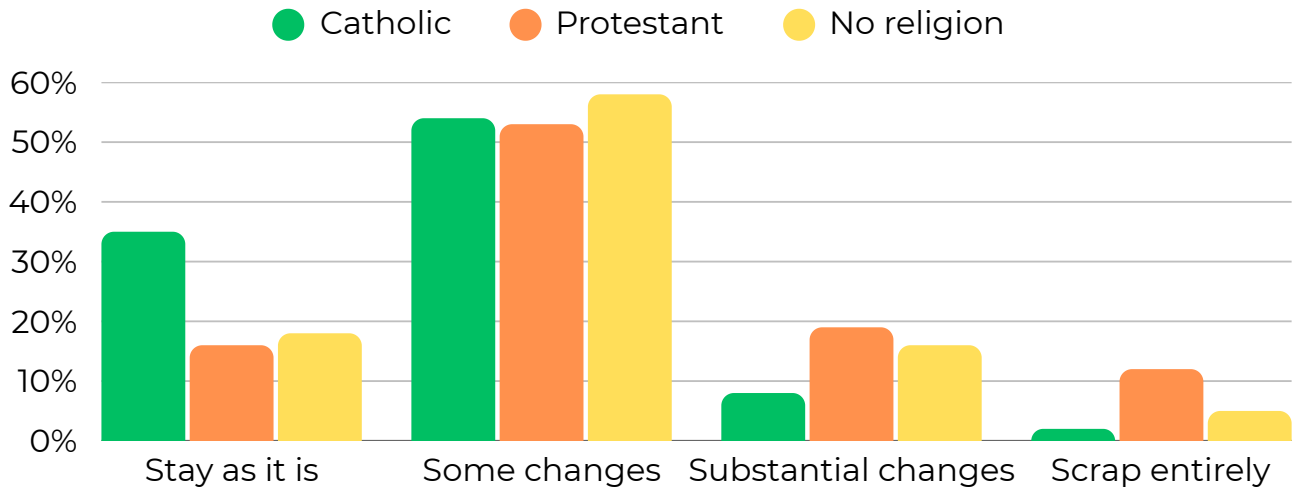
Nevertheless, unionism's role is not simply to defend its own factional interests, but to act as a custodian of the wider constitutional settlement. As this chapter has shown, the stability and success of the devolved institutions is inextricably linked to the maintenance of Northern Ireland's constitutional position. It is essential that Sinn Féin is held to its commitments at St Andrews to support the police and the rule of law. However, for unionism, collapsing the institutions undermines the very framework that has, at times, commanded cross-community support.

Public attitudes are also shifting. Recent evidence indicates that, excluding "don't knows," 55% of the public agree that the Belfast Agreement remains the best basis for governing Northern Ireland, but believe it needs some changes.[32]

This sentiment is consistent across all sections of the community, reflecting a broad consensus in favour of reform. The public continues to support power-sharing as the most appropriate form of government, recognising its benefits, but also its shortcomings.

There is a widespread view that the institutions are not working as well as they once did, and reform could enhance their stability and effectiveness.[33]

Table 3: Public opinion on the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement (excluding don't know)



ARK. "Northern Ireland Life & Times Survey, VIEWGFA3." 2025.

A recent University College London paper sets out a spectrum of possible reforms, from incremental adjustments to radical changes such as voluntary coalition.[34]

If we judge reform proposals by their capacity to improve institutional stability while maintaining community protections, one proposal stands out: allowing the transfer of nomination rights for First or deputy First Minister to the next largest party if one of the largest parties refuses to nominate.

This would prevent any single party from collapsing the institutions, a power that has been wielded by both unionist and nationalist parties in the past. As this chapter has argued, such brinkmanship is strategically undesirable for unionism, and a key advantage of this reform is it would remove Sinn Féin's ability to collapse the institutions as part of a broader push for a united Ireland.

Furthermore, a commitment to devolution reflects the changing nature of the United Kingdom, with localism being the direction of travel in England as well as in Scotland and Wales. A return to direct rule would not only put Northern Ireland out of step with the rest of the country, but it is neither politically feasible nor strategically wise.

London is highly unlikely to revert to pre-1985 arrangements. In practice, abandoning devolution would almost certainly push the UK Government towards greater cooperation with Dublin in an attempt to maintain cross-community consent. That risks moving Northern Ireland towards joint authority with the Republic of Ireland, an outcome that would be profoundly damaging to our place within the United Kingdom.

For those committed to maintaining Northern Ireland's constitutional position, supporting reforms that make the institutions work is not just prudent. It is essential. Only by living up to the promise of devolution, as sold to the electorate in 1998, can the institutions hope to regain public confidence and secure a stable future for all.


H & W
H & W

Strong Foundations for Growth

The cost of living

Economic analyses are, by their very nature, snapshots in time. They capture a moment, but rarely tell the full story of long-term trends. If we rewind to 2010, the Republic of Ireland was in economic distress, requiring a bailout from the UK and international lenders. Fast forward to today, and it ranks among the most successful economies in the EU. This remarkable turnaround is driven in large part by its status as an international tax haven, which artificially inflates its GDP figures. Yet, while GDP growth makes the headlines, it matters far less to the average person than the pounds or euros in their pocket.

Standard of living, not GDP, is the true measure of prosperity for most people. On this metric, Northern Ireland is in a more favourable position than it might first appear. Average earnings in Northern Ireland are nearly 7% below the UK average.[35] Compared to the Republic, they are almost 15% lower.[36] However, these figures miss a key factor: the cost of living.

Most notably, housing costs are significantly lower. Wales is the only UK nation that rivals Northern Ireland on housing affordability.[37] While comparisons between Belfast and Dublin are as misleading as comparing Belfast to London, rents in Northern Ireland as a whole are at least 30% cheaper than in the Republic of Ireland.[38]

This lower base cost of living disproportionately benefits those on fixed incomes or lower down the socio-economic spectrum. It translates into greater disposable income and a higher quality of life. Additionally, post-pandemic shifts towards remote work amplify this advantage. Roles that once required workers to be in Dublin or London can now be done from anywhere, enabling them to earn higher salaries while enjoying greater affordability. This dynamic positions the region as an attractive option for talent seeking a balance between income and living costs.

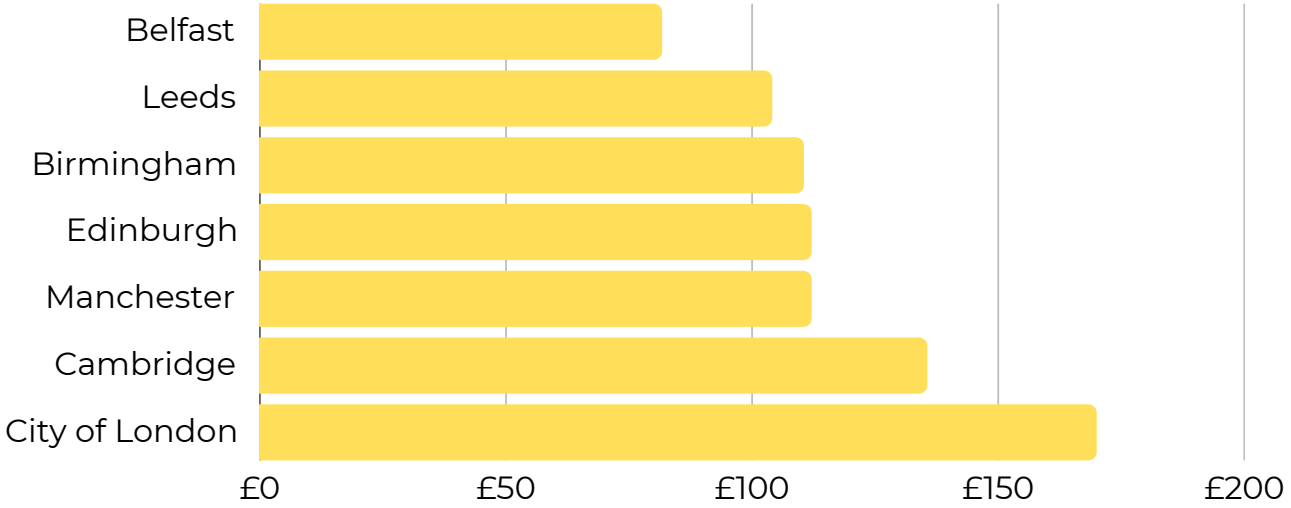
Moreover, Northern Ireland currently boasts one of the fastest rates of wage growth in the UK at 6.1%.[39] Combined with lower everyday living costs, this creates a compelling case. It shows Northern Ireland's economic narrative is not just about numbers on a spreadsheet, but real and tangible benefits in people's lives.

The cost of doing business

For most businesses, the largest components of operating costs are labour, property and energy. These factors shape competitiveness and influence decisions on where to locate operations. In Northern Ireland, the lower cost of living translates directly into a lower cost of doing business, creating a strong case to invest in the region.

As previously noted, wage costs remain below those in Great Britain and Ireland, reducing one of the most significant overheads for employers. However, labour is only part of the equation. Property costs, particularly office space, are another major determinant, and here Northern Ireland offers a clear advantage.

Table 4: Total office costs per square foot for new builds including rents, rates and maintenance



Lambert Smith Hampton. "Total Office Cost Survey 2026." 2026.

Belfast has the lowest prime office rental costs of any UK city at only £26 per square foot, compared to £43 in Leeds or £62 in Cambridge.[40] In Dublin, rents now exceed €70 per square foot.[41] When factoring in total office costs including rents, rates and maintenance, the gap is similarly stark: £82 per square foot in Belfast compared to £112 in Edinburgh and Manchester, or £170 in the City of London.[42]

Beyond cost savings, Northern Ireland enjoys an advantageous competitive position owing to its location and market access. Goods produced in Northern Ireland can move freely into Great Britain without checks, customs declarations or additional processes. By contrast, goods originating in the Republic of Ireland face physical checks and customs formalities when entering Great Britain.

This enables manufacturers in Northern Ireland to serve both GB and EU markets from a single base, an operational model that cannot be replicated elsewhere without third-country procedures.

Furthermore, firms benefit from tariff preferences on inputs through UK trade agreements while maintaining EU market access once goods are in circulation.

These factors - lower labour and property costs, and market access - position Northern Ireland as a cost-effective base for both SMEs and multinationals. In an era of global competition and supply chain complexity, the region offers not only lower overheads, but significant strategic advantages.

Key strengths

Northern Ireland's economy possesses a range of strengths that provide a solid platform for future growth. Economic output has expanded steadily, with annual growth of 3.6% in the first quarter of 2026.[43] Services dominate the regional economy, accounting for over 70% of total output, and have demonstrated remarkable resilience and dynamism in recent years.

Service sector output stands at 11.7% above pre-pandemic levels, compared to 8.7% for the UK as a whole.[44] This performance underscores Northern Ireland's ability to adapt and thrive in a changing economic landscape.

The region benefits from a diverse economic base. Financial and business services have grown significantly, combined with a robust retail sector, advanced manufacturing and engineering capabilities, and a high-quality agri-food industry. Northern Ireland has emerged as a leading European destination for US cyber security firms, reflecting its attractiveness for high-value investment. These sectors provide not only employment, but also innovation potential, reinforcing the region's competitive edge.

Research and development further strengthen Northern Ireland's position. Its two research-intensive universities, Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, drive innovation in health and life sciences, technology and the green economy. Queen's University alone contributes an estimated £747 million annually to the Northern Ireland economy, with nearly half this impact stemming from research and knowledge exchange activities.[45] This academic-industrial synergy fosters a culture of innovation that supports long-term economic resilience.

With increasing recognition of the importance of food security, Northern Ireland's agri-food industry is one of its most strategically important sectors. Around 26,000 active farms, which are largely family owned and operated, manage more than one million hectares of land, supporting an extensive supply chain of food processors, hauliers, engineers, traders, and other rural businesses.[46] Agriculture generates more than £3 billion in annual gross output, with dairying alone contributing over £1 billion, producing around 2.5 billion litres of milk each year.[47]

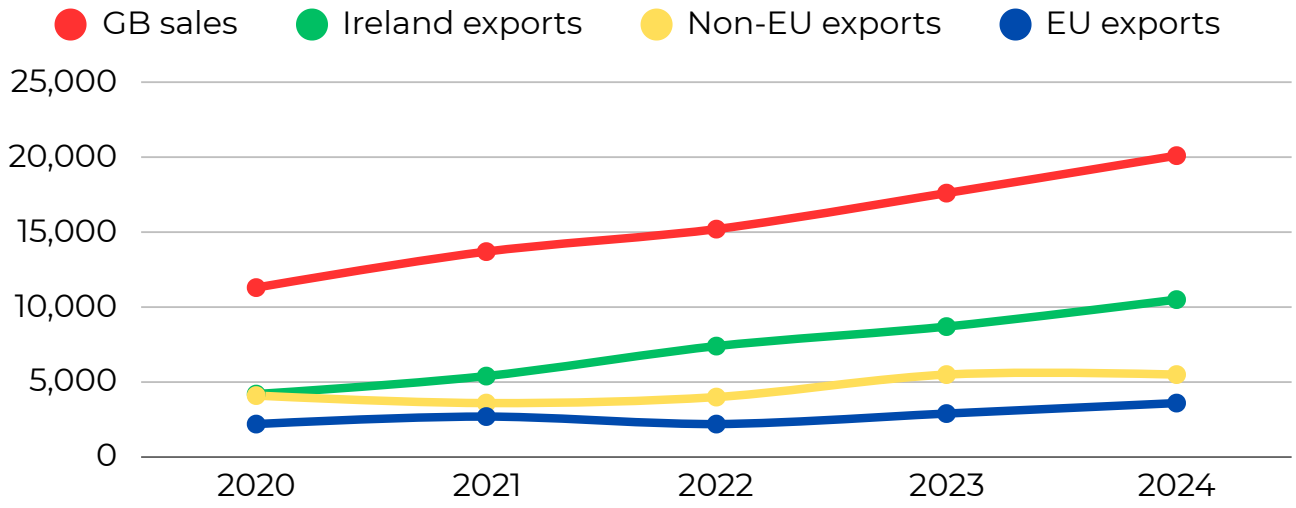
The primary production underpins the region's largest manufacturing industry, food and drink, which has an annual turnover of approximately £7.3 billion and supports an estimated 109,000 jobs, one-fifth of private sector employment. The industry produces enough food to feed around 10 million people across these islands and beyond, with the sector making a significant contribution to food supplies in Great Britain.

Northern Ireland's export performance is another key strength. In 2024, businesses exported £19.6 billion in goods and services while importing £11.2 billion, generating a large trade surplus of £8.4 billion.[48] Trade with the Republic of Ireland accounted for £6.4 billion of this surplus, with exports to Ireland rising from £4.2 billion in 2020 to £10.5 billion in 2024. Sales to Great Britain also grew significantly, from £11.3 billion to £20.1 billion over the same period.

Finally, the labour market has undergone a profound transformation. While unemployment exceeded 10% for much of the 1990s, today it stands at 2.1%.[49] Employment has risen steadily, creating a stable and increasingly skilled workforce. Although economic inactivity remains a challenge, the trajectory is positive, reinforcing the region's potential.

With robust growth, sectoral diversity, research excellence, strong trade performance and a stable labour market, Northern Ireland has a compelling case for future investment.

Table 5: Northern Ireland trade performance by market over time (£ million)



NISRA. "Northern Ireland Economic Trade Statistics 2024." 2026.

Emerging opportunities

The Northern Ireland Executive has identified priority sectors that will underpin future economic growth: agri-tech, advanced manufacturing, fintech, life and health sciences, the green economy, creative industries, and software and cybersecurity. These sectors represent high-value opportunities that build on existing strengths while positioning the region for global competitiveness.

Manufacturing remains a cornerstone of Northern Ireland's economy, accounting for 13.4% of output and nearly 100,000 jobs, more than one in ten positions.[50] It supports employment across rural and urban areas and contributes to every local council economy. The sector drives exports, representing 47% of Northern Ireland's total, and leads in foreign direct investment (FDI) with 37%, more than twice the UK average. Advanced manufacturing is particularly significant, comprising 35% of manufacturing jobs and 43% of output. The new Advanced Manufacturing Innovation Centre (AMIC) at Global Point Business Park exemplifies this ambition. Backed by £100 million in investment, AMIC is estimated to deliver £1 billion in economic impact by 2050, create over 1,500 jobs and train hundreds of apprentices.[51] Its cutting-edge facilities and academic partnerships will accelerate innovation in robotics, sustainable materials and engineering.

Northern Ireland is also a global leader in aerospace, producing the award-winning A220 composite wing, one-third of global aircraft seat demand and components for every major commercial aircraft programme.[52] Aerospace, defence and space sectors collectively generate £2.2 billion in turnover and employ 9,000 people, including 500 apprentices, reinforcing the region's reputation for advanced engineering excellence.[53]

Fintech and cybersecurity are major success stories. Northern Ireland ranks among the world's top destinations for

fintech investment, supported by a workforce of over 45,000 in financial and professional services.[54] It is the UK's second region for software investment and boasts deep expertise in AI, data analytics and software engineering. One in five financial and technology jobs are in fintech, reflecting strong specialisation.[55]

Cybersecurity contributes £237 million to the economy and employs 2,750 professionals. Belfast hosts one of the world's most concentrated cybersecurity clusters, with over 100 firms within three miles of the city centre. Northern Ireland is a leading global destination for US cybersecurity FDI and plans aim to grow the sector's workforce to 5,000 by 2030.[56]

Life and health sciences employ around 9,000 people across 250 companies, including global leaders such as Almac and Randox.[57] Investments through the Belfast Region City Deal, such as £40 million for the Health Innovation Research Centre, strengthen research and digital healthcare capabilities, and Northern Ireland's market access further enhances its attractiveness for medical exports.

Taken together, these opportunities demonstrate that Northern Ireland is not only competitive today but is aligned with global trends. These high-growth sectors have the potential to attract further inward investment, create skilled jobs and deliver sustainable growth.

Factors for success

While Northern Ireland stands on the cusp of significant economic opportunity, realising its full potential will depend on targeted policy interventions that can maximise success. The region's high-growth sectors are closely aligned with global trends, offering the prospect of skilled jobs and attracting inward investment. However, to sustain and accelerate this momentum, several critical factors must be addressed.

First, investment in STEM and digital skills is essential to attract and maintain the jobs of the future. Ensuring sufficient university places in these fields will help to build the talent pipeline needed for innovation and growth. Public-private partnerships in education and training can further enhance workforce readiness, ensuring that skills provision matches the evolving needs of high-value sectors such as advanced manufacturing.

Second, infrastructure investment remains a priority. Modern transport networks are vital for connecting people and businesses, while reliable and affordable energy is crucial for keeping business costs competitive. In Northern Ireland, wastewater infrastructure is also a pressing issue, with increased investment through a sustainable funding model needed to unlock economic development and reduce capacity constraints.[58]

Political stability is another key factor for success. A stable and predictable environment is fundamental for attracting inward investment and enabling long-term planning. The Executive has a unique opportunity to promote Northern Ireland as a cost-effective innovation hub. Its distinctive position can be a powerful draw for international investors and businesses.

Northern Ireland's strong foundations can deliver future investment and growth. By investing in skills and infrastructure, ensuring political stability and promoting its unique advantages, the region can unlock the full potential of its economy and secure long-term prosperity.


THANK YOU
NHS

The National Health Service

The principles of the NHS

"No society can legitimately call itself civilised if a sick person is denied medical aid because of lack of means."[59] Aneurin Bevan, the Labour Minister of Health who established the National Health Service, conveyed in this statement the moral foundations upon which it was built. The NHS was conceived not merely as an administrative reform, but as a defining expression of social solidarity - a system in which access to care is based on need, not on the ability to pay.

Over 70 years later, these founding principles continue to command the confidence of the public. In 2023, the NHS Confederation carried out a survey of public attitudes across Northern Ireland, England and Wales. While respondents expressed clear dissatisfaction with issues such as access and waiting times, an overwhelming majority remained supportive of the NHS's core values. 87% backed care being free at the point of delivery; the same proportion supported providing a comprehensive service to everyone; and 83% endorsed taxation as the primary means of funding.[60]

In recent years, public commentary surrounding the NHS has focused on the challenges, most notably sustained pressures on waiting lists, workforce capacity and primary care access. These difficulties are real and have shaped much of the political debate. Yet they risk obscuring another truth. Despite recognising its weaknesses, the public continues to value and trust the NHS.

Evidence from Northern Ireland reinforces this point. In 2019/20, the year before the pandemic, the Department of Health's Northern Ireland Health Survey found that 81% of those who had interacted with the health and social care system in the previous year were satisfied or very satisfied with their experience.[61]

More recent qualitative feedback tells a similar story. The Public Health Agency's 2021/22 Care Opinion report found that 72% of submissions were wholly positive, with no element of criticism.[62] In its 2023/24 Primary Care and General Practice report, 62% of stories shared were likewise entirely positive.[63]

These findings underscore an important point. While the NHS requires radical reform, the public's attachment to it remains remarkably resilient. People still have positive experiences of the service, and they remain committed to its founding principles. Quite simply, they will not accept anything less.

Current challenges

Despite the enduring public support for the founding principles of the NHS and the fact that many patients continue to report positive experiences, it would be remiss not to recognise the scale of the challenges now facing Northern Ireland's health service. It is widely recognised that Northern Ireland has the worst waiting times in the UK, even allowing for the fact that the data across the nations is not directly comparable.[64]

Nowhere is this more evident than in emergency care. The target is that 95% of patients should be admitted or discharged within four hours of arrival, and that no patient should wait longer than twelve hours. As of September 2026, 41.7% were seen within four hours, while 18.3% waited more than twelve hours.[65]

Elective care performance is equally stark. Against a target that half of all patients should wait no longer than nine weeks for a first outpatient appointment, and none should wait longer than 52 weeks, 85.2% waited longer than nine weeks as of June 2026 and 53.7% waited more than 52 weeks.[66]

These outcomes were predictable. The 2016 Bengoa report warned starkly that without structural reform, services risked continual decline. It highlighted Northern Ireland's overreliance on acute hospitals, where many beds are occupied by patients with chronic conditions that could be better managed in the community. It also criticised the system's insufficient emphasis on prevention, early intervention, and community-based care, approaches that are essential to reducing avoidable hospital admissions.[67]

The Department of Health's response set out a credible framework for change: expanding community development approaches, tackling the wider social determinants of health, increasing GP training places, scaling multidisciplinary primary care teams, and establishing Elective Care Centres, alongside the wider reconfiguration and rationalisation of services.[68] However, the collapse of the Executive in 2017 halted progress.

With no Health Minister to take decisions and no multi-year budget to support long-term planning, reform stalled. The COVID-19 pandemic then compounded these pre-existing weaknesses, accelerating the system's deterioration.

There have been promising signs since the Executive's restoration in 2024. Endoscopy waits, for example, have fallen by 62% from their June 2022 peak, a reduction of 24,410 patients, driven by two regional endoscopy centres at Lagan Valley Hospital and Omagh Hospital.[69]

Yet these are isolated successes within a system still under intolerable strain. Meaningful improvement will require sustained investment in primary and community-based care, the scaling of regional centres of excellence, and a rationalised acute hospital network capable of delivering safe, modern and sustainable services.

The integration advantage

A central structural strength of our system is that it benefits from the efficiencies of a national healthcare system. The NHS delivers care at a lower per-capita cost than many OECD countries, owing to its ability to procure at scale, negotiate nationally and standardise across a single payer system.

OECD data illustrates this clearly: total healthcare expenditure in the UK stands at $6,747 per capita, compared with $7,367 in France, $7,813 in the Republic of Ireland and $9,365 in Germany.[70] These economies of scale lower the overall cost base while retaining comprehensive universal coverage, producing a highly cost-effective model of care delivery.

Northern Ireland also possesses a structural advantage unmatched elsewhere in the UK. It is the only UK nation with an integrated health and

social care system.[71] Integration remains the clear direction of travel across the UK, as reflected by ongoing reforms in England. Therefore, Northern Ireland holds a potential head start in delivering whole-system planning, inter-professional working and genuinely integrated commissioning and delivery. This institutional architecture is especially well-suited to addressing complex, long-term conditions that require joint management across hospital, community and social care settings.

The Department of Health retains overarching responsibility for strategic planning, performance management, and quality oversight, enabling fewer organisational boundaries, more consistent provision and greater opportunities for standardisation and shared infrastructure. With the rollout of 'encompass' - Northern Ireland's single, unified Electronic Patient Record (EPR) - there is an opportunity to significantly improve the patient experience across the full cycle of care. To achieve the full potential of this, it will require forward-thinking data sharing agreements and full interoperability with primary care and voluntary and community organisations.

Northern Ireland's size can offer a unique advantage in enabling reform at pace when political consensus exists. In 'Health and Wellbeing: Delivering Together,' the then Health Minister, Michelle O'Neill, implicitly recognised that the region's scale allows whole-system change to be delivered more easily than in larger or more structurally fragmented systems.[72]

If the Executive functioned and agreed on a plan, these advantages could allow the healthcare system to deliver on service redesign rapidly and coherently. Northern Ireland is big enough to harness the economies of scale of a national health system, yet small enough to foster the relationships, coordination and agility required for transformation. This provides a strong platform for delivering system-wide reform at pace - if and when the political will exists.

A neighbourhood health service

Neighbourhood health is increasingly the direction of travel for the NHS across the UK, reflecting a shared recognition that the current hospital-centred model cannot meet rising and increasingly complex demand. The NHS England 10-year plan illustrates this shift. It outlines a move away from episodic care delivered in acute settings towards proactive, personalised support in the community.[73]

Northern Ireland's Health and Social Care (HSC) system is now beginning to embed this same model. The HSC Reset Plan set neighbourhood health at the heart of the reform agenda.

Its centrepiece is the establishment of 17 Integrated Neighbourhood Teams, each serving around 115,000 people and bringing together GP Federations, pharmacies, community services, voluntary and community organisations, local government and independent providers in formal provider alliances.[74] This represents the practical delivery mechanism for the "shift-left" ambition of providing more care in the community to reduce reliance on an overstretched acute hospital sector.

The Reset Plan also introduces stronger system-wide coordination structures to support this model, alongside new financial and governance arrangements

designed to reduce unwarranted variation and drive whole-system decision-making. The model was designed by March 2026, and its implementation began the following month.

Yet structural redesign alone will not deliver the full potential of neighbourhood care. The People to Partners report, published by the NI Confederation for Health and Social Care (NICON) shortly after the Reset Plan, makes clear that meaningful change requires a shift in how the system thinks and behaves.

It argues for a move from 'doing to' towards 'doing with,' embedding citizen voice, co-production and community insight in every stage of service design and delivery.[75] Neighbourhood working must therefore be locally shaped, rooted in deep understanding of place, and supported by cross-government alignment on addressing the social determinants of health, including insecure and poor quality housing, low educational attainment, and a lack of employment opportunities in more deprived communities.

Delivering on reform

The scale of the challenge is undeniable, but so is the strength of the foundations on which reform can be built. Public support for the NHS's core principles remains strong, the direction of travel is clear and there is now a credible reform framework in place.

The task ahead is not to abandon the system, but to deliver sustained improvements within it. With focus and political resolve, the health and social care system can be made fit for the future. Central to this will be political stability.

Meaningful health reform cannot be delivered in short bursts or under constant uncertainty. It requires continuity of leadership, a Health Minister empowered to take difficult decisions and an Executive committed to seeing reform through over successive years.

The experience since Bengoa demonstrates the cost of delay. The next mandate must therefore treat health transformation as a shared priority, with the Executive parties agreeing on the direction of travel and standing behind it collectively, even when individual decisions might be politically difficult.

Reform must also be underpinned by funding certainty. A multi-year budget is essential to move beyond crisis management and enable long-term planning. This should include ring-fenced investment to reduce waiting lists and to scale neighbourhood health services at pace, shifting resources out of hospitals and into communities. Without predictable funding, transformation efforts will stall and short-term pressures will crowd out long-term investment.

Workforce and technology are equally critical. Northern Ireland must recruit and retain skilled healthcare professionals, but also deploy them differently. More staff must be supported to work in community settings, with the right skill mix to manage chronic and terminal illnesses proactively, preventing avoidable emergency admissions.

Alongside this, digital innovation and AI offer powerful tools to support prevention, identify at-risk patients earlier and tailor support more effectively. Used well, technology can enhance, not replace, professional judgement and enable early intervention.

Finally, delivering reform requires a whole-of-government approach. Many of the pressures facing the system are rooted in wider social issues. Tackling the wider determinants is essential to improving population health and easing long-term demand. If political stability, sustained investment and system-wide reform can be aligned, there is an opportunity to build a health service that is more responsive and sustainable.

The prize is significant: a renewed NHS that embodies the shared social bonds at the heart of Northern Ireland's constitutional settlement. The current state of the health service is neither inevitable nor irreversible. Many of its greatest challenges stem from years of delayed reform, political instability, and short-term decision-making, rather than a fundamental flaw in the model itself. With the right policy choices, Northern Ireland can build a health service that delivers on its founding principles and meets the needs of future generations.



Security in An Unstable World

Terrorism and organised crime

Organised crime thrives when a country's security arrangements are weak or fragmented. Criminal groups seek to exploit gaps in policing and intelligence, undermining public confidence and destabilising societies from within.

In an increasingly volatile international environment, these threats rarely exist in isolation. Terrorist groups frequently rely on organised criminal activity to finance operations, while criminal networks benefit from the intimidation, coercion and territorial control that paramilitarism can provide. For a post-conflict society like Northern Ireland, the risks posed by these actors remain acute and enduring.

One of the most significant and enduring legacies of the Troubles is the continued existence of complex and diverse republican and loyalist paramilitary groups. While large-scale violence has receded, these organisations have not disappeared. Instead, many have adapted, engaging in sporadic acts of terrorism alongside a wide range of organised criminal activities, including drug trafficking, fuel laundering, extortion, fraud and smuggling.

Academic research has consistently highlighted the blurred lines between terrorism and organised crime in Northern Ireland, with paramilitary structures providing both the capability and intent to sustain criminal enterprises over decades.[76]

The current threat level to Northern Ireland from Northern Ireland-related terrorism remains substantial, meaning that an attack is assessed as likely.[77] Prior to March 2022, the threat level stood at severe, indicating that an attack was highly likely.

The principal driver of this assessment is the persistent threat from dissident republican groups, who continue to pose the greatest risk to security forces and have demonstrated both intent and capability to carry out attacks. In March 2023, the threat level was temporarily raised back to severe following the attempted murder of Detective Chief Inspector John Caldwell in Omagh.[78]

Alongside terrorism, organised crime presents a parallel and deeply entrenched challenge. Loyalist paramilitaries now primarily pose a threat through organised criminality and coercive control within communities.

As of March 2024, the Police Service of Northern Ireland was investigating 61 organised crime groups operating in the region.[79] These groups are rarely confined by geography: many work with criminal networks in Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland, across Europe and occasionally further afield. PSNI assessments indicate that 22% have a cross-border footprint in the Republic of Ireland, while 32% have direct links to paramilitary organisations.[80]

Terrorism and organised crime continue to pose a serious and interconnected risk to Northern Ireland's stability, prosperity and public safety. Addressing these

threats requires sophisticated intelligence, strong policing, robust legal frameworks and close cooperation across jurisdictions. The UK's integrated security architecture provides Northern Ireland with precisely these capabilities, offering the scale, expertise and resilience necessary to confront threats that remain local in impact and international in scope.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland

The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) sits at the heart of the UK's national security ecosystem. It works in close partnership with MI5, which has lead responsibility for national security intelligence, and the National Crime Agency, which tackles serious and organised crime across the UK and beyond.[81] The PSNI can also call on mutual aid from other police forces across the UK during periods of major unrest or strained resources.

For Northern Ireland, where terrorism and organised crime are often interconnected and transnational in nature, the PSNI's partnerships provide access to intelligence, expertise and capabilities that could not be replicated by a standalone policing arrangement.

This collaboration allows for real-time intelligence sharing and joint operational activity against both terrorist networks and organised crime groups. Dissident republican threats, cross-border smuggling operations and paramilitary-linked criminal enterprises are investigated through coordinated approaches that combine local knowledge with national reach. The PSNI plays a central enforcement role in disrupting paramilitary activity, working alongside UK-wide agencies to translate intelligence into arrests, seizures and convictions. This work continues despite the PSNI operating with significantly fewer officers than recommended by the Policing Board, underlining both its resilience and operational effectiveness in a demanding security environment.[82]

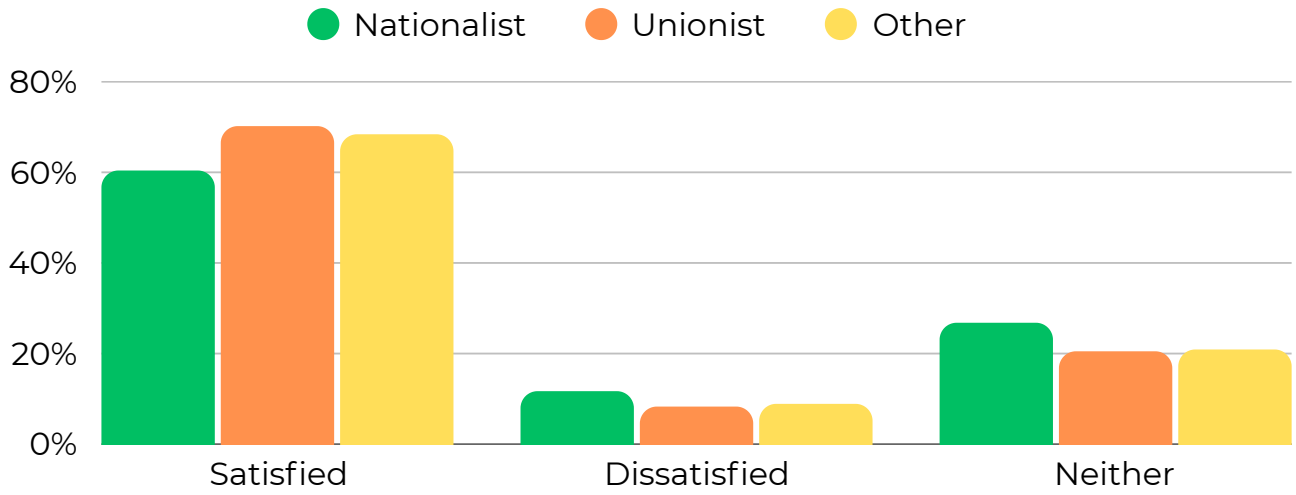
Beyond national security, the PSNI has been highly effective in reducing crime more broadly. In 2024/25, 95,968 crimes were recorded in Northern Ireland, the second lowest level since the current data series began in 1998/99.[83] The crime rate now stands at 50 offences per 1,000 population, a dramatic reduction from 81 per 1,000 in 2002/03. This compares favourably with England and Wales, where the rate is 87 per 1,000 population. These outcomes reinforce Northern Ireland's position as one of the safest regions in the UK, reflecting sustained, high-quality policing over time.

Public confidence in the police and policing accountability arrangements is correspondingly strong. Around 80% of the public express confidence in the police.[84] Survey data shows that 92% of people feel safe in their own community, 63.8% believe the PSNI is engaged or very engaged with local communities, and 67.5% are satisfied with the job it does.[85]

Given the legacy of the Troubles and historic antagonism towards policing, initially within nationalist and republican communities and more recently in some loyalist areas, this level of trust represents a remarkable achievement.

These factors contribute to the PSNI's position as a global template for policing in deeply divided societies. Its emphasis on policing with the community, strong leadership within both the service and

Table 6: Satisfaction of the public with the job the PSNI do in Northern Ireland



NISRA. "Northern Ireland Policy Plan Survey: Statistical Report 2025." NI Policing Board (2025).

civic institutions, a transformed culture focused on public service rather than security force policing, and robust, overlapping systems of independent oversight and accountability offer valuable lessons internationally.[86]

Embedded within the wider UK security framework, the PSNI demonstrates how effective, trusted policing can underpin stability, safety and confidence in a post-conflict society.

Geopolitical tensions

The international security environment has deteriorated markedly over the past decade, particularly since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. European security institutions now assess a convergence of risks driven by great power competition, regional conflict and the erosion of long-standing norms governing state behaviour.[87] Russia has emerged as a more malevolent actor, willing to use military force, coercion and hybrid tactics to reshape its strategic position. While NATO states benefit from the Alliance's collective deterrence and defence capabilities, non-NATO countries face exposure to sub-threshold activity, creating instability on Europe's periphery and along its critical access routes.

This context is compounded by uncertainty in the transatlantic relationship under President Trump. The United States has been explicit in its expectation that European states assume greater responsibility for their own defence, reinforcing the need for robust regional security architectures.

For NATO members, collective defence remains credible, but there is increased focus on vulnerabilities below the threshold of armed conflict. These include cyber operations, espionage, infrastructure sabotage and maritime and airspace probing, all of which have increased in frequency and sophistication in recent years.

Cybersecurity has become a central front in this evolving threat landscape. Since 2022, there has been a marked rise in activity from hacktivists, cybercriminals and state-aligned groups. Healthcare systems have proven especially vulnerable. The 2017 WannaCry attack severely disrupted the NHS, while the 2021 ransomware attack on Ireland's Health Service Executive paralysed hospital services and demonstrated the real-world consequences of malicious cyber activity.[88] These incidents underline how cyber operations can undermine public services, economic stability and public confidence without a single shot being fired.

Northern Ireland sits within this broader strategic exposure. The UK's north-western flank is increasingly recognised as a zone of vulnerability encompassing maritime approaches, undersea cables, airspace and digital infrastructure.[89] These risks are not new, but they have intensified.

In 2015, Russian bombers flying with transponders switched off passed through Irish-controlled airspace, forcing the diversion and delay of civilian aircraft and highlighting gaps in regional air defence arrangements.[90]

More recently, the Russian military intelligence vessel, Yantar, has been active in the Irish Sea, mapping undersea cables that carry internet traffic, energy supplies and financial data vital to Britain and Europe.[91] Senior British naval leaders have warned of a significant rise in Russian incursions into UK waters over a short period, reflecting a sustained campaign of pressure and reconnaissance.[92]

These developments point to a dangerous and complex security environment defined by multiple, interconnected threats. Geopolitical rivalry, hybrid warfare and cyber aggression are no longer abstract risks, but lived realities. For Northern Ireland, understanding this context is essential. We live in an era where security can be undermined invisibly and incrementally, and where resilience depends on the capacity to detect, deter and respond across domains. These are threats that must be taken seriously.

Defence and security framework

Northern Ireland benefits directly from the United Kingdom's collective defence posture, which provides scale, depth and resilience that no small jurisdiction could replicate alone.

As part of a major European military power, Northern Ireland is protected by integrated defence planning, standing forces, intelligence capabilities and long-term investment in deterrence. This collective approach ensures that threats are addressed well beyond the point at which they would otherwise reach the region, embedding Northern Ireland within a security architecture designed to anticipate, absorb and respond to shocks in an increasingly unstable world.

Central to this protection is NATO. The UK is a leading member of the Alliance and a key contributor to its collective defence and deterrence mission. The integrated command structures, shared intelligence and joint operational planning underpin security across the North Atlantic area.

In an era of renewed great-power competition, NATO's credibility matters not only in deterring large-scale conflict,

but in countering sub-threshold activity. Northern Ireland benefits from this collective shield, which reinforces stability across the UK's western approaches.

Maritime security has assumed growing importance as undersea cables carrying data, energy and financial flows have become critical national infrastructure. The Irish Sea and wider North Atlantic are now recognised as areas of heightened strategic vulnerability. The UK has responded by strengthening maritime domain awareness, expanding patrol and surveillance capabilities and working closely with NATO allies to monitor and protect undersea infrastructure. This includes intelligence-led tracking of hostile activity, coordination with partners and investment in specialist capabilities to deter and respond to sabotage.[93]

Air policing forms another vital layer of protection. Through NATO's Integrated Air and Missile Defence framework, the UK maintains continuous monitoring of its airspace and contributes to collective air defence across the Alliance.[94]

Quick Reaction Alert aircraft are constantly on standby to intercept unidentified or hostile aircraft, ensuring airspace violations are detected and addressed rapidly.[95] This capability protects civilian aviation, deters intimidation and reinforces sovereignty, particularly as long-range aviation activity and airspace probing have increased around Europe's periphery.

Cyber resilience is equally critical. The UK's Government Cyber Security Strategy and subsequent action plans establish a common framework to protect public services, including devolved administrations and health systems.[96] This includes mandatory security standards, regular resilience assessments, strengthened incident response arrangements and support for rapid recovery to maintain essential services.[97]

Independent scrutiny has highlighted the importance of continuous improvement and embedding cyber security as a core component of public service delivery.[98] For Northern Ireland, this means access to shared expertise, national monitoring, and coordinated response mechanisms that reduce risk and strengthen continuity, ensuring public services can withstand and recover from cyber disruption.

Economic and national security

The United Kingdom's defence and security framework delivers a dual dividend for Northern Ireland. It provides protection against terrorism, state-based threats and cyber aggression, while simultaneously acting as a powerful engine of economic growth. Security and prosperity are not competing objectives, but mutually reinforcing ones. Credible defence arrangements underpin investor confidence, while defence spending itself drives high-value employment, innovation and industrial capability. For Northern Ireland, this strengthens resilience in an unstable world and anchors long-term economic opportunity.

Defence investment already makes a substantial contribution to the regional economy. UK defence spending directly supports an estimated £271 million of economic output and sustains around 900 skilled jobs, in addition to many more in advanced manufacturing, aerospace and defence technology.[99]

Defence Growth Deals further reinforce this impact, aligning national defence priorities with local industrial strengths to stimulate regional growth.[100] These initiatives ensure defence expenditure is not abstract or distant, but rooted in communities through supply chains, jobs and apprenticeships.[101]

This alignment is particularly strong in aerospace. Northern Ireland's globally recognised aerospace cluster maps directly onto the UK's Strategic Defence Review priorities, including uncrewed systems, artificial intelligence-enabled platforms and next-generation air capabilities. Belfast is home to defence primes, such as Thales and Spirit AeroSystems, employing thousands of highly skilled workers and maintaining deep, long-standing relationships with the Ministry of Defence.[102] The maturity and relevance of this ecosystem position Northern Ireland as a natural partner in delivering future defence capabilities.

Defence spending also acts as a catalyst for innovation. Spirit AeroSystems Belfast's work on uncrewed combat air systems for the MOD illustrates Northern Ireland's role at the cutting edge of defence research and development.[103] These programmes drive technological spill-overs into civilian markets, strengthen supply chains and support skills pipelines in engineering, data and advanced manufacturing. In this way, defence investment translates directly into economic resilience, productivity and export potential.

Cyber security represents a further point of convergence between national security and economic security. Northern Ireland is an international hotspot for cyber innovation, hosting over 100 cyber security businesses and around 2,750 professionals. UK Government support for the Cyber-AI Hub and research into securing complex systems reinforces this advantage. Queen's University Belfast, recognised by the National Cyber Security Centre and the EPSRC as an Academic Centre of Excellence with Gold Award status, anchors this ecosystem in world-class research and skills development.[104]

These factors tell a compelling story. The UK's defence and security framework does more than keep Northern Ireland safe. It underwrites prosperity, innovation and high-value employment. In an era of heightened risk and competition, Northern Ireland's security is inseparable from its economic future.

Embedded within a strong UK defence posture, the region is not merely protected from instability, but positioned to thrive economically. Security is therefore not simply an important state function, but part of the wider constitutional dividend.



Conclusion

The case for Northern Ireland is a positive case: that this place works best when difference is respected, our institutions function, and our people are given the confidence to build a shared future together.

That is the argument at the heart of this paper. Northern Ireland is not a problem to be managed at the margins of these islands. It is a place with its own identities, strengths, and strategic importance, and a constitutional position that provides the only framework capable of accommodating everyone who lives here.

This matters because identity is not incidental to stability. In a society shaped by our diverse traditions, people need to know that who they are can be recognised without diminishing anyone else. Northern Ireland offers that pluralist settlement: broad enough to protect difference, while providing the democratic foundations through which a shared community can be built.

Constitutional stability cannot be separated from good government. Devolution remains the practical expression of local agency, but it can only succeed if the power-sharing institutions are made more resilient, effective and less vulnerable to collapse. Those who support Northern Ireland's place in the UK should therefore be strong advocates of reform to deliver political stability.

Political stability and good governance are the vital prerequisites for economic growth. Northern Ireland has strong foundations: a competitive cost base, rising wages, sectoral strengths, research excellence, export growth and emerging opportunities in manufacturing, cyber, fintech, life sciences and more. To convert these underlying strengths into long-term prosperity, there needs to be stable institutions capable of delivering the strategic investment required.

Good governance is equally critical to sustaining public services, particularly in health. The NHS reflects a principle people still value: care based on need, not ability to pay. Northern Ireland's Health and Social Care system has an opportunity for positive reform if political will can meet the moment. Additionally, a healthy population, supported by integrated community care, enables economic growth by reducing inactivity and building a resilient workforce.

Security underpins all of this. In an unstable world, our policing, intelligence, defence and security frameworks provide protection against cyber aggression, terrorism and organised crime. This security architecture not only protects public safety, but drives employment, innovation and investor confidence.

These interconnected arguments point to a decisive conclusion. Northern Ireland's constitutional position is not merely defensible; it is worth renewing. The task now is to move beyond the politics of maintenance and build one of confidence: confidence that this place can thrive as a shared, plural, prosperous part of the United Kingdom.

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