



## Restoring Common Sense to Government

### Introduction

Recent elections both nationally and throughout the world have observed the rise in parties campaigning against what they describe as a growing disconnect in politics between ideology and the everyday realities facing voters.

In the United Kingdom, arguments to scrap net zero, protect single-sex spaces, and end uncontrolled immigration have all been deployed with view to restoring a primary focus on the day-to-day issues affecting the lives of the vast majority of people in society. Indeed, there has been a drive to recalibrate government policy away from what is perceived as a culture of *political correctness gone mad*.

In this vein, the Democratic Unionist Party has positioned itself as an advocate for common sense over ideology in the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly. Writing in December 2025, our Party Leader Rt Hon Gavin Robinson MP said:

*“As we begin 2026, Northern Ireland stands at a junction. We can choose responsibility over rhetoric, delivery over distraction, and common sense over ideology. Or we can allow our politics to be consumed by fashionable causes that do little for the people who live and work here...”*

*There is also a growing disconnect in politics between ideology and reality. We see it in climate policy driven by conference culture rather than common sense. Northern Ireland needs practical environmental action that protects jobs and energy security, not dogmatic targets*

imposed without regard to cost. Working families should not be forced to pay higher electricity bills, fuel prices or lose livelihoods so politicians can chase applause on the international stage.

We see the same disconnect in a political culture increasingly afraid to speak plainly about basic biological facts. When leaders cannot affirm simple realities such as what a woman is without ideological caveats, they have lost their way. The people of Northern Ireland value common sense, and they are right to expect it from those who govern...''

Building on this direction of travel, the remainder of this paper outlines a series of proposals that we will seek to advance in order to ensure that policymaking, service delivery and public spending in Northern Ireland is grounded on common sense and an awareness of the issues that matter most.

### Scrapping Northern Ireland Net Zero

In our manifesto for the 2024 General Election, the DUP argued that many of our citizens perceive climate action to mean higher taxes, increased costs for basic goods and services and a threat to jobs and livelihoods. Developments in the intervening period have only served to magnify these concerns, with the provisions of the Climate Change Act 2022 found by the courts to obstruct the progression of major infrastructure projects such as the A5 Road Upgrade and A4 Enniskillen Southern Bypass. Despite our opposition, the Assembly passed 2023-2037 Carbon Budgets and a 2040 Emissions Target estimated by the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to have a net cost of £479m and £707m respectively. There is an acceptance by the Department that Northern Ireland's low-carbon capital investment will need to scale up in order to pursue these targets, with major investments needed for low-carbon power capacity, retrofit of buildings and infrastructure for electric vehicles. However, in each of these areas there is no evidence that such a revolution is remotely deliverable. Indeed, the current gridlock in terms of ammonia policy is

actually prohibiting on-farm investment in new and more sustainable buildings, and this is just one example.<sup>i</sup>

The undesirability and unsustainability for Northern Ireland net zero by 2050 has also been crystallised by the draft Climate Action Plan published by the Environment Minister Andrew Muir MLA. This Plan is a statutory requirement under Section 51 of the Climate Change Act 2022 and ‘must set out how the interim targets and the target of net zero will be achieved by the year 2050.’ In our submission to that public consultation, the DUP articulated a number of fundamental concerns:

- The impact of a significant number of policies and proposals contained in the draft Plan across the nine sectors referenced are not quantified at all.
- There is acknowledgement that the draft Plan would pose short-term financial challenges and require consideration of trade-offs. In particular, it is stated ‘*that allocating funds to support one strategic goal may reduce investment in other non-climate-related policies due to the crowding-out effect.*’ As a Party, we reiterate our concern, exemplified by the A5 legal judgement, that the main effect of the CCA 2022, if unamended, will be to compel departments to divert spending on frontline services and capital investment in our roads, schools and hospitals, in favour of programmes deemed to reduce emissions sufficiently
- Of the £718m estimated capital spend underpinning the draft CAP, almost half (47%) will be borne by transport. This is largely predicated on the phasing out of petrol and diesel vehicles. The DUP remains unconvinced that such an outcome is realistic given the ongoing challenges in terms of EV infrastructure and the fact that separate measures earmarked for the modal shift to public transport are unquantified.
- Proposals for agriculture include reducing the age at first calving, shortening calving intervals, increasing the proportion of beef cattle finished as young bulls, and reducing emissions through alternative fertilisers, methane-

suppressing feed, and phosphorus-lite diets. These measures will be of serious concern to farmers - particularly as many go beyond the existing beef sustainability package.

- It is unfair to agriculture and other industries that other major sectors are excluded in the draft CAP altogether. We would point specifically to the fact that no policies and proposals were identified for inclusion in connection with Northern Ireland Water, one of Northern Ireland's largest landowners.
- There were varying approaches in how individual departments estimated potential emissions reductions for the proposals within their remit. For example, some involved commissioning external science or stakeholders, whereas others completed their analyses in-house. That, in our view, gives rise to a question of consistency.

The DUP does not believe that public policy should place aspirational climate targets ahead of investment in, and advancement of, high-quality public services that our communities not only deserve, but require.

It remains our position that the Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs must urgently develop, and bring to the Executive, proposals to amend and replace the headline emissions targets set out in the Climate Change Act 2022, which are unworkable remain a barrier to delivery of the Programme for Government.

In pressing this case, we will:

- Seek to scrap Northern Ireland net zero, building on previous, independent and scientific evidence that this aspirational target was not consistent with, or necessary to, achieve UK net zero by 2050.
- Task the UK Climate Change Committee with providing recommendations on a refreshed pathway for Northern Ireland emissions. We would draw attention to the fact that the 2020 Climate Change Committee Balanced Pathway was

predicated on 83% reduction in local emissions at a reduced net cost of more than £300m per year than the current target enshrined in law.

- Oppose any draft Climate Action Plan brought to the Executive for approval which is predicated on the existing headline emissions reduction target.
- Repeal the current legal requirement for a minimum spend of 10% of overall transport budgets on active travel. This will enable prioritisation of proactive and reactive approach to roads maintenance.
- Continue to advocate for the abolition of the role of Climate Commissioner, which duplicates the functions of other UK bodies and represents needless and costly bureaucracy.
- Advocate for local councils to retain full authority over waste management and recycling policy, in light of the unachievable 70% recycling by 2030 target enshrined in the CCA 2022.

### Upholding sex-based rights

#### *The definition of a woman*

The safety of women and girls ought to be an overriding priority in any society. However, the emergence of radical transgender ideology has directly challenged sex-based protections, including threatening the provision of safe single-sex spaces. The 2025 Supreme Court ruling was a victory for common sense, clarifying what the vast majority of people already knew - that the definition of a 'man,' 'woman' and 'sex' in equality legislation refers to biological sex. Despite this, the response of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland has not been to encourage departments to honour this judgement in good faith but to invite them to raise concerns. The DUP believes that is disgraceful.

The suggestion that EU law should continue to dictate matters of such importance to women's rights in Northern Ireland is also entirely unacceptable. Article 2 of the Protocol is about 'no diminution of rights' yet the Equality Commission do not seem able to set out in plain terms which right was in place and has now supposedly been lost by the Supreme Court ruling.

Moving forward, the DUP will oppose any further obfuscation and inaction toward prioritising the rights and welfare of women and girls.

We will:

- Urge all departments to direct their arm's length bodies to remove, and review, transgender guidance, to ensure it is consistent with the 2025 Supreme Court ruling. This follows the precedent set by Education Minister Paul Givan MLA requesting the immediate withdrawal of the Education Authority's 2019 transgender guidance, which advised transgender pupils to access facilities, such as toilets and changing rooms, aligned with their gender identity.
- Ensure that no female police officer is asked, or expected, to, strip search a trans woman who was born a biological male, and likewise for male officers in respect of biological females.
- Change the current DoJ and NIPS policy that enables biological male inmates to be detained in Hydebank Wood College and Women's Prison in certain circumstances, and likewise in respect of biological female inmates in male prisons.
- Make it clear that teachers or other public sector workers should not be compelled to use pronouns other than those which reflect biological sex.
- Urge the Department of Health to provide greater oversight of guidance by professional bodies to health staff following reports that advice issued departs

from basic biological facts. This has included radiographers being told to ask men if they are pregnant before x-rays.

- Address the widespread loss of data on sex in government data (identified by the Independent Report on the Review of Data, Statistics and Research on Sex and Gender) by ensuring local public authorities make biological sex the default target of data capture, not gender.
  - Ensure the content and spirit of the Supreme Court ruling on the legal definition of a women is respected and upheld by all local sporting codes.
  - Place SportNI and sport governing bodies under a duty to develop, issue and keep under review, specific guidance around existing legal protections applicable to fair competition and safe participation of women and girls in sport, including the Sex Discrimination Order (NI) 1976.

### Protecting our children and young people

#### *Gender dysphoria*

The DUP believes children and young people experiencing gender dysphoria deserve care that is compassionate but firmly grounded in evidence. In our view, the landmark review conducted by Dr Hilary Cass into NHS transgender services in England demonstrates the flaws of a specialist clinics, including inadequate consent provisions, poor clinical protocols, supervision and training and a perception that approaches were ideologically driven. These mistakes must not be repeated in Northern Ireland and the DUP will continue put the safety of children and young people first.

In particular, we will:

- Press for gender dysphoria among children and young people to be treated primarily through CAMHS, with clear pathways to other health and care services for under 18s.
- Pursue an end to GP/CAMHS referrals to the Northern Ireland gender service for children as young as three.
- Ensure the separation of clinical posts for adult and paediatric gender identity services. *It is entirely inappropriate for health professionals that lack training or expertise in adolescent development or family-based approaches to care for children.*
- Require staff treating gender dysphoria among children and young people to have split posts within under 18s services in order to ensure that they do not lose perspectives on child and adolescent development. This in line with the Cass recommendations.
- Oppose reopening of the endocrine pathway, otherwise known as 'gender affirming hormone therapy' for children and young people. *This was stopped for new referrals in 2020.* We also do not support paediatric hospital services being expanded for this purpose.
- Examine the potential for tougher safeguards against private prescribing and self-directed hormone use by children and young people with gender dysphoria.
- Promote better support for parents and guardians in order to avoid premature or inappropriate social transitions among under 18s. This was referenced by Cass.
- Highlight the need for clinical staff to be properly trained in how to recognise where parental motivations are driving social transitions inappropriately.

*'No' to puberty blockers*

Children and young people must be safeguarded from becoming test subjects for medical interventions with potentially irreversible consequences. Having initially pressed for an indefinite ban on puberty blockers in December 2024 following publication of the Cass Review Report in England and Wales, the DUP successfully fought to ensure that plans afoot to enable local children to participate in the Kings College London Pathway trial were scrapped in the absence of consensus in the Executive.

Going forward, we will:

- Oppose the prescribing of puberty blockers to children.
- Oppose the participation of children and young people in related clinical trials in all circumstances.

#### *Common sense and transparency in RSE*

The DUP recognise that Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) has been a requirement of the school curriculum in Northern Ireland for many years. However, in recent times there has been growing concern in our communities, and among parents, regarding the direction of RSE, including the content of some resources. These concerns were exacerbated when the UK Government introduced provision under the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc.) Act 2019 requiring the provision of abortion and related content within RSE. In response to the 2023 consultation on the operationalisation of these changes, the DUP set out five key priorities:

1. *The Christian ethos of our schools should be protected*
2. *The rights of parents must be respected, not restricted*
3. *Abortion is a moral issue and should be treated as such*
4. *Teachers must not be forced to act against their conscience; and*
5. *The role of governors should not be undermined*

Building on this stated position, we will:

- Advocate for parents having a legal right to access, and view, learning resources used in RSE. This must also be catered for within contractual agreements with external providers. It is not enough to inform parents about the content of RSE. Schools must share teaching materials and in advance. There should be a no-surprises policy and resources should be a product of co-design with parents, pupils and teachers.
- Oppose efforts to dilute parental rights in respect of existing content taught in our schools. This reflects the 2016 Supreme Court Named Person Judgement which found an inextricable link between the protection of the family and the protection of fundamental freedoms in liberal democracies. It is also in keeping with the rights and responsibilities of parents to bring up their children under the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (UNCRC).
- Ensure RSE is appropriate to the religious background to pupils. In England, schools can teach about faith perspectives within RSE. The same safeguards must be provided in Northern Ireland.

### *Backing Christian ethos in schools*

The DUP believes a Christian ethos remains central to the character of many schools and should not, and will not, be airbrushed.

We will:

- Ensure there is no change to collective worship.

- Develop a revised RE syllabus in which Christianity remains central and through which a range of religious and non-religious worldviews are explored in addition to, and not instead of, Christian belief.
- Oppose Boards of Governors being classified as public authorities for the purposes of Section 75 of the NI Act 1998.
- Promote conscience protections for teachers. The DUP does not believe teachers should be forced to choose between acting in violation of their religious and philosophical convictions and beliefs in the delivery of RSE or facing disciplinary action, a glass ceiling on promotion or having to resign from their position altogether.

### *Safeguarding in Sport*

The DUP does not believe it is appropriate that sports coaches and volunteers who have been subject to complaints can leave one organisation in Northern Ireland and join another with no record of the complaint circumstances being made.

We will:

- Support the creation of a Northern Ireland-wide register of sports coaches
- Require sporting organisations to vet coaches and volunteers.
- Require sporting organisations to record, and publish annually, the number of safeguarding complaints they receive relating to women's and youth sports, broken down by sex.

## **Defending Free Speech**

### *Hate crime*

The Democratic Unionist Party believes the threshold for offences covered by hate crime legislation in Northern Ireland must be robust and clearly defined. The burden of proof should be substantive and should require the existence of credible evidence relating not only to the act in question but its motivation. This is critical in order to prevent unfair restriction of freedom of speech, religion or conscience.

We condemn the use of hate crime powers to unjustly infringe the rights of those with deeply held beliefs, including street preachers, or indeed to use the powers to make political statements against those who disagree with popularly held opinions. There is no right not to be offended and individuals should not be prosecuted for simply causing offence to another person. Furthermore, the state should not be policing thoughts or emotions, the most prominent example of which is silent prayer.

Moving forward, the DUP will oppose reforms which serve to further infringe the space for healthy debate and disagreement that is vital for any democracy. Specifically, we will:

- *Oppose any extension of the protected characteristics prescribed under hate crime legislation.* This is in keeping with the original aim of the legislation as a targeted deterrent. We feel that in circumstances where almost any act or form of behaviour is regarded as a hate crime, the purpose of the legislation - to deter specific forms of repugnant behaviour - would be seriously undermined. The existing protected groups included in Part III of the Public Order (Order) 1987 already exceed provision for similar offences in England and Wales. Adding gender, for example, risks swamping other hate crime offences and there have already been significant advancements in the criminal law for sexual and domestic offences in recent times. That said we are clear that all crimes against persons due to their gender or age are totally unacceptable.

- *Redefine a hate crime as a criminal act that demonstrates, or is motivated by, “malice” or “ill-will” rather than current vague motives like “hostility” or “bias.”*  
We will oppose reforms which criminalise behaviour where there is no outward visible manifestation of hostility or evidence to show the person was motivated by hostility.
- *Ensure that any stirring up hatred offences only cover “threatening” conduct. “Abusive” and “insulting” are subjective thresholds and in England and Wales, the term “insulting” was removed from Section 5 of the Public Order Act 1986 because of the problems it was causing for free speech. We are also mindful that the approach to acts ‘likely’ to stir up hatred may mean the alleged perpetrator is unaware of it. We believe this offence should relate only to deliberate intent.*
- *Require a personal decision by the Director of Public Prosecutions on whether or not to prosecute stirring up offences. This would be an extra safeguard against vexatious and frivolous allegations that come into direct conflict with freedom of expression, religion and conscience.*
- *Retain the private dwelling defence to ensure private conversations are not criminalised. We do not believe there is evidence that this defence gives undue protection to online perpetrators who should be held accountable for wrongdoing.*
- *Pursue additional protections in law to ensure that certain views are not, of themselves, interpreted as amounting to threatening or abusive behaviour or material. This would include religious views on sexuality, marriage or the definition of a woman. In particular, we support extending the paragraph 29J of the 1986 Order in place in England to Northern Ireland to help address any chilling effect on those of faith in the public space by allowing appropriate forms of defence and redress. This states:*

*“29J Protection of freedom of expression*

*Nothing in this Part shall be read or given effect in a way which prohibits or restricts discussion, criticism or expressions of antipathy, dislike, ridicule, insult or abuse of particular religions or the beliefs or practices of their adherents, or of any other belief system or the beliefs or practices of its adherents, or proselytising or urging adherents of a different religion or belief system to cease practising their religion or belief system."*

- *Oppose the creation of a Commissioner for Hate Crime*
- *Retain an enhanced sentencing model for hate crimes against a limited and prescribed number of specific categories in Northern Ireland.*
- *Support the introduction of a statutory aggravation model for all criminal offences as the core method of prosecuting hate crimes in Northern Ireland, subject to the protections above.*

### *Non-Crime Hate Incidents*

The recording of Non-Crime Hate Incidents by the PSNI has raised fundamental concerns over respect for freedom of expression, given that it is the perception of a victim or any other person, rather than evidence, that is defining factor in whether incident is deemed to be motivated by hate. In recent years, this system has enabled proponents of transgender ideology to weaponise the criminal justice system to censor or silence critical but protected views. Though they are not crimes, NCHIs can also stay on police records and can come up in background checks. The NCHI framework also diverts vital police time and resources from investigating crime.

Between 2015/16 to 2024/25, 37.3% of "hate incidents" recorded by the PSNI based on victims' race, sexual orientation, disability, religion, and transgender status did not involve a crime. Whilst the PSNI Service Instruction on Hate Crime has been updated to stipulate that allegations are not now logged automatically as hate incidents, and

that the details of the accused are not necessarily to be recorded, it remains unclear whether existing NCHI data has been deleted or whether changes to the PSNI's policy has led to a reduction in the number of new incidents where a party other than the complainant has had their details stored.

In February 2026, following initial findings of a review of NCHIs in England and Wales, the UK Government brought amendments to the Crime and Policing Bill at Lords Report Stage which would remove any power for the Home Secretary to issue a code of practice to the police on the processing of personal information about NCHIs and revoke the current code. The Government also indicated it would consider further changes to policy following the final review report by the College of Policing and National Police Chiefs' Council.

The DUP believes the NCHI system is unjust and provides a forum for campaigners and individuals to pursue grievances, rather than justice.

We will:

- Advocate for an end to investigating and recording of so-called non-crime hate incidents in Northern Ireland, drawing on the approach being developed in England and Wales.
- Push for the deletion of existing NCHI personal data except where information is pertinent to active criminal investigations or prosecutions.

### **Ending ideological spending**

In recent years, significant sums of public money have been directed towards Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives across departments and arm's-length bodies, often with limited public scrutiny and little measurable assessment of

outcomes. At a time of sustained pressure on frontline services, taxpayers are entitled to ask whether such expenditure represents the best use of scarce resources and whether it is being deployed in a politically neutral manner.

For example, the Department of Finance continues to pay £2,575 annually for Civil Service membership of the Stonewall Diversity Champions Programme, despite serious and ongoing concerns about that organisation's role in political activism and its perceived influence on public policy development. The Department has also indicated that this spending does not require Executive approval.

Meanwhile, in 2024/25 the Department for the Economy's arm's-length bodies – which include Belfast Metropolitan College, further education colleges and tourism bodies - were projected to spend over £64,000 on EDI-related activity. These programmes range from equality charters and memberships to external training and staff network events.

Worryingly, despite significant operational and financial pressures it faces, the Police Service of Northern Ireland has spent more than £1 million on EDI staffing between 2020/21 and 2024/25 - a level broadly comparable to the annual spend by Health and Social Care Trusts for the same purpose.

While equality before the law and fair treatment in the workplace are principles we strongly support, spending of this scale and nature must be subject to rigorous oversight. Where EDI initiatives risk straying into areas of political advocacy, or where their benefits are not clearly defined and measured, public trust is undermined. Going forward, there must be far greater transparency around EDI budgets, clearer lines of democratic accountability, and robust, evidence-based evaluation to ensure that every pound spent delivers tangible, non-partisan outcomes that serve the whole community.

We will:

- Commission a rapid review of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) spending across Executive departments and their arm's length bodies.
- Improve political accountability for EDI activities by requiring ministerial approval for all external EDI spend.
- Ensure that departments and their arm's length bodies to publish total spending on EDI activities and salaries as part of their annual report and accounts. This should cover spend relating to:
  - Benchmarks and accreditation schemes
  - External organisational memberships
  - Use of consultancy
  - Use of externally provided learning and development
  - Events
- Require all advice, guidance and training materials provided by external organisations to be quality assured in order to ensure they:
  - comply with equality legislation, including adhering the UKSC judgement on the legal definition of women
  - align with the principles of objectivity and impartiality that are central to the NICS Code of Ethics.

Records of such assessments should be retained.

- Require departments and arm's length bodies to record why EDI aims cannot be achieved internally before seeking external involvement.

Cutting the Cost of Prison

Northern Ireland has consistently had the highest cost per prison place of any region in the United Kingdom.

We will:

- Seek a fundamental review of the cost of prison to deliver value for money and ensure provision is in the interests of justice and the public's expectation that crime should be met with a robust response.
- Promote rehabilitation of offenders whilst on remand given the significant proportion of remand prisoners within the prison population. This can help reduce and avoid costs moving forward.

#### Protecting those who protect us

It is widely accepted that the reforms to policing ushered in twenty-five years ago made the PSNI subject to accountability arrangements that are among the most robust of any police force in the world. The DUP regrets that this has opened the door for some political parties and academia to use the mechanisms of the Policing Board to subject the police force to disproportionate levels of bureaucracy which detracts and distracts from the aim of fighting crime. This is particularly evident in how rank and file officers are now constrained in their use of technologies and powers that are not only legitimate but vital for protecting not only themselves but the wider public.

We will:

- Challenge the ongoing crusade against use of stop and search powers as a valuable deterrent for terrorism and other forms of criminality

- Ensure rank and file officers are encouraged to deploy spit and bite guards or CEDs/tasers in circumstances where it is necessary to protect themselves and others from harm without fear of disciplinary action.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.ufuni.org/ammonia-planning-blockages-work-against-daera-targets-says-ufu/>