



Democratic Renewal

A PLAN TO REFORM STORMONT AND FIX OUR BROKEN POLITICS

Alliance

MAY 2026

CONTENTS

FOREWORD	2
DELIVERING POLITICS THAT WORKS	3
INJECTING ACCOUNTABILITY BACK INTO POLITICS	7
ENDING THE INFLUENCE OF MONEY IN POLITICS	8
RENEWING DEMOCRACY AT WESTMINSTER	9



FOREWORD



The people of Northern Ireland deserve politics that works.

A generation ago, the Good Friday Agreement offered an historic opportunity to build a more peaceful, inclusive future.

Its success can be seen in the growing number of people who reject binary politics and instead embrace an open, pluralist, and diverse society. That shift was clear at the Assembly election in 2022, which returned a record number of MLAs who do not define themselves as either nationalist or unionist.

Regrettably, our political institutions have not kept pace with that transformation, and remain reliant on designations and community vetoes that have resulted in a glacial pace of reform and change, contributed to repeated collapses of devolution, and entrenched divisions rather than incentivising cooperation.

Stormont has been suspended for almost half of its existence. Even when functioning, it is too often characterised by deadlock and dysfunction, and is vulnerable to vested interests and dark money. This constant cycle of crisis and collapse, caused by the selfish few, has wasted time and energy that would have been far better invested in what truly matters: reforming public services, tackling the cost of living and healing division.

Naomi Long MLA - Leader of the Alliance Party

It is no surprise that many people feel Stormont does not improve their lives. But it does not have to be this way. The current system of up-down, stop-start government and veto politics must end. No single party should have the ability to hold decision-making within the Executive – or the Executive itself – to ransom.

It's time for Democratic Renewal.

This paper sets out Alliance's plans to reform and renew Stormont: removing vetoes that block progress, strengthening accountability, increasing transparency in party funding, and creating institutions that reflect the society we have become rather than the divisions we inherited.

Reform must not be left to local parties alone. The UK and Irish Governments have a duty to lead and drive reform through their roles as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement. Failure to do so risks condemning the institutions of the Agreement either to death by a thousand collapses, or by a slow bleed of public confidence in their ability to deliver.

Northern Ireland has never consisted of just two communities. Increasing numbers of people refuse to be defined or constrained by their backgrounds, and are demanding the same of our politics. Our institutions must evolve to reflect that reality.

Together, we can seize this opportunity to transform our broken politics into something that is stable, open, accountable, and focused on improving people's lives.

DELIVERING POLITICS THAT WORKS

In the 25+ year history of devolution in Northern Ireland, we have had just two Assembly mandates served in full and without a collapse, and these cycles of stop-start government are actively facilitated by our power-sharing architecture. With the power to withdraw the First or deputy First Minister from office and refuse to nominate a replacement, the largest unionist and nationalist parties can pull down the government and keep it in suspended animation for as long as they want.

This is much more than an academic debate, because stop-start government has had devastating consequences for every aspect of life in Northern Ireland – impeding the vital work necessary to improve public services, grow our economy, protect the environment and deliver on other priorities for local families.

To highlight just a few examples of the harm:

- A 10-year plan to transform healthcare services was published in 2016, but the Assembly has been suspended for five of those years in total. The result is that Northern Ireland continues to have some of the worst health outcomes in the UK and Ireland, 500,000 patients were on a waiting list last year,¹ and just one in five people here say they are satisfied with the healthcare in their area.²
- Cycles of stop-start government meant that, between 2017 and 2024, Northern Ireland had numerous different Economy Ministers and three separate economic strategies. The lack of a clear and long-term vision has been shown to exacerbate key economic challenges like our productivity gap.³ Across the UK, SMEs in Northern Ireland are also the most likely to identify political and policy uncertainty as one of the biggest barriers to running their business.⁴
- When toxic blue-green algae blooms appeared in Lough Neagh for the first time in half a century in 2023, there was no Executive in place to respond. The source of 40% of Northern Ireland's drinking water has faced an ecological emergency that Alliance has been working to fix ever since.
- Regular Assembly suspensions meant that Northern Ireland spent ten years without a finalised Programme for Government from 2015 – leaving us with no strategic plan to tackle the issues facing our schools, hospitals, roads and communities at large.
- Westminster created a £1 billion fund to create jobs and boost economic growth across the UK in 2023, but Northern Ireland missed out on the tens of millions of pounds we should have been entitled to because of the “absence of a working Executive”, according to the UK Minister in charge of the funding.⁵

1 Department of Health (2026). Quarterly Northern Ireland outpatient, inpatient and day case and diagnostic waiting times statistics: December 2025. <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/publication-quarterly-northern-ireland-outpatient-inpatient-and-day-case-and-diagnostic-waiting-times-statistics-position-31-december-2025>.

2 Deloitte and Re:State (2026). Delivery that matters: The state of the state 2026.

3 The Productivity Institute (2025). NI productivity 2040: Addressing Northern Ireland's productivity gap for greater prosperity.

4 Ipsos (2025). SME finance monitor: 2024 annual regional report.

5 House of Commons Statement. Levelling-up Fund: Third round. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2023-11-20/debates/23112024000018/Levelling-UpFundThirdRound>.

Political instability has even been a matter of life and death, with the independent Covid-19 Inquiry concluding that *“the structural problems in Northern Ireland, in its preparedness for the Covid-19 pandemic, were exacerbated by the suspension of the power-sharing arrangements.”*⁶

While steps to prevent the political institutions from collapsing are clearly necessary, they cannot be the limit of our ambitions. We must ensure Stormont functions effectively and delivers for everyone when the institutions are operating.

The track record here is poor. In recent years alone, the architecture of government – be that cross-community votes, the Petition of Concern, or control over Executive agendas by the two biggest parties – has been weaponised to:

- Block the creation of an Independent Environmental Protection Agency and halt progress on Northern Ireland’s net zero strategy.
- Veto plans to reform alcohol pricing that would save lives and reduce pressure on the health service and the PSNI.
- Stop the introduction of vital public health measures during the Covid-19 pandemic.⁷
- Deny marriage equality to LGBTQ+ people and reproductive rights for women.

And those are just a handful of examples from a long list.

Since 1998, people in Northern Ireland have too often been inflicted with either ineffective government or no government at all. There has to be a better alternative, and this chapter has set out the multitude of ways in which that has caused immense harm. Alliance wants to create a politics that works, where Stormont is free from delay and vetoes, and where Ministers are empowered to deliver meaningful change for those they represent.

In December 2025, for the first time in history, a majority of MLAs supported an Alliance Assembly motion calling for root and branch institutional reform,⁸ and now is the time to put that into action.

In the **IMMEDIATE** term, our priorities for this Democratic Renewal are:

- **Reforming the Northern Ireland Act so that the next largest party can nominate a First or deputy First Minister if the first eligible party refuses to do so**

The current process of nominating the First and deputy First Minister provides a constant potential blockage in establishing an Executive, as the rest of the Executive cannot be formed or operate without those positions being filled. In a scenario where either of the biggest unionist or nationalist parties refuse to nominate to the position, their entitlement should be passed to the next largest party – removing the veto over Executive formation and ensuring that those who want to govern are able to do so. This would be consistent with the current process for allocating other Executive Ministers under D’Hondt.

Stopping unilateral vetoes over the functioning of Stormont is also supported by close to two-thirds of the public.⁹

6 UK Covid-19 Inquiry (2024). Module 1: The resilience and preparedness of the United Kingdom.

7 UK Covid-19 Inquiry (2025). Modules 2, 2A, 2B, 2C: Core decision-making and political governance.

8 ‘Secretary of State must act following historic Assembly vote for reform, says Long’. https://www.allianceparty.org/secretary_of_state_must_act_following_historic_assembly_vote_for_reform_says_long.

9 LucidTalk. Track poll: Spring 2023. <https://www.lucidtalk.co.uk/news/ni-tracker-poll-spring-2023/>.

- **Implementing a weighted majority system to determine cross-community support for the election of the Speaker and other key decisions**

The Northern Ireland Act requires the Assembly Speaker to be elected under a process of cross-community support through parallel consent. This means that, regardless of how big a majority there may be overall, a vote cannot pass without the support of 50% of both the unionists and nationalists taking part.

This system perpetuates instability and grants an effective veto over the functioning of the Assembly to the largest unionist and nationalist parties. In May 2022, for example, over 70% of MLAs present and voting supported the election of a new Speaker, but cross-community support was not achieved due to DUP opposition, and the institutions remained in a deep freeze.

This distorted version of cross-community voting also applies to the nomination of the Justice Minister and the passage of certain finance bills. It therefore not only allows individual parties to hold power-sharing to ransom, but also represents a major democratic deficit when it comes to taking key decisions – with the votes of those parties not designating as unionist or nationalist disregarded, despite their MLAs having equal mandates to those of any other party.

To address these issues, cross-community support should be determined by weighted majority voting, rather than parallel consent. We envisage this being a majority of approximately two-thirds of the Assembly, with the level of weighted majority calculated after each election to ensure the inclusion of unionists, nationalists and those who are neither. This change would maintain a cross-party threshold for taking key decisions but, crucially, reduce the threat of deadlock and respect the mandates of every Assembly party.

- **Restricting cross-community votes at the Executive and the deployment of the Petition of Concern**

At present, any three Ministers can propose that an Executive vote be subject to cross-community support – operating as an effective veto for the two largest parties, with no criteria to constrain how the mechanism is deployed. This impedes Executive functioning, increases instability and grants greater power to the bigger parties at the expense of smaller Executive partners and good government. In the cases where cross-community voting was abused to block public health measures during the pandemic, as identified by the Covid-19 Inquiry,¹⁰ it likely led to additional lives being lost.

To mitigate against this abuse, cross-community votes in the Executive should be limited only to matters relating to national identity, the legacy of the Troubles or the constitutional structures established under the Good Friday Agreement. The rationale for proposing cross-community votes should be open to discussion and challenge, with disputes referred to the Attorney General for determination when necessary.

The same criteria should apply to the Petition of Concern (PoC) mechanism, which was designed to help protect minority rights, but in practice, has often been used to deny them. When a valid PoC is invoked on one of these three issues, it should trigger a cross-community vote determined on the weighted majority basis set out above.



¹⁰ *Ibid*, 7.

- **Putting the ‘three meeting rule’ on a statutory footing**

As co-chairs of the Executive, the First and deputy First Minister have unfettered control over which items/papers are included and discussed at Executive meetings. This is often deployed as another form of political veto to stop other Ministers making progress on priorities for which they have an elected mandate.

Under a commitment set out in the Fresh Start Agreement of 2015, items should not be blocked from the Executive agenda for more than three meetings, but this is a convention which can and, repeatedly, is, being disregarded. To highlight just one egregious example, the DAERA Minister first submitted his Green Growth Strategy to the Executive in 2024 and it was still being blocked more than 12 months later.

The ‘three meeting rule’ must therefore be placed on a legislative footing in order to safeguard against items being blocked from consideration and progress around the Executive table. Supplementing this with the publication of all Executive meeting agendas will flush out de facto vetoes of agenda items which are used behind closed doors.



After delivering this package of measures, our focus in the **MEDIUM** term will then turn to:

- **Scrapping the anti-democratic system of Assembly designations**

The requirement for Assembly Members to designate upon taking office embeds division and contributes to instability in the institutions through the ‘cross-community’ procedures outlined above. This is anathema to the principles of equality and partnership at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement and fails to reflect the reality of today’s Northern Ireland, where close to 40% of people hold a national identity that is not exclusively British or Irish,¹¹ and 20% of Assembly Members designate as neither unionist nor nationalist.

While moving to weighted majority as a means of determining cross-community support is important in reducing the significance of designations, we want them to be removed entirely in the longer-term.

- **Changing the First and deputy First Minister titles to Joint First Ministers**

The positions of First and deputy First Ministers were always intended to be co-equal and their joint office reflects this. One cannot so much as issue a letter without the other’s signature. However, over the years a misconception has been cemented that the First Minister is the more senior role, and this should be rectified by renaming both as ‘Joint First Ministers’, to ensure that the roles are equal not just in practice, but also in name.

We would also support the inclusion of the FM/dFM posts in the D’Hondt calculation, along with every other Ministry.

¹¹ NISRA. Census 2021: National identity. https://build.nisra.gov.uk/en/custom/data?d=PEOPLE&v=NAT_ID_BASIC.

Taken together, all of these actions will make an immeasurable difference to the functioning of Stormont and help deliver the system of good government that people here deserve. But we can't be satisfied until our politics is fully normalised. In the long term, Alliance will also push for the establishment of a statutory Commission, sponsored by the Executive and UK and Irish governments, to consult on and design a plan for implementing voluntary coalition in Stormont. Confidence-building measures will be necessary along the way, but such a system should be the ultimate ambition for everyone with an interest in stable politics in Northern Ireland in the long term.



INJECTING ACCOUNTABILITY BACK INTO POLITICS

In the relatively short history of devolution in Northern Ireland, we have witnessed countless examples of elected representatives flouting the rules they are entrusted with upholding and desecrating the high standards rightly expected in public life.

In November 2025, for example, a majority in the Assembly expressed no confidence in the Education Minister following his Israeli state-sponsored visit to illegally occupied territory in the West Bank. Just weeks later, the Communities Minister was then found in breach of the Ministerial Code after inflaming community tensions on social media during a period of race rioting in his constituency.

In any other functioning democracy, this type of wrong-doing would be met with heavy sanction, but on both occasions, Assembly voting was sectarianised to shield the offenders from all accountability. With the aid of cross-community voting mechanisms, Ministers were elevated above the rules and standards that apply to everyone else, and this has happened repeatedly since the establishment of the power-sharing institutions.

These examples don't just make a mockery of the ethical standards that are supposed to govern public life – they are also corrosive to trust and confidence in our political process. Alliance would inject proper accountability back into Stormont by:

- Conducting all cross-community votes on Ministerial sanctions on a weighted majority basis.
- Giving the Standards Commissioner the power to recommend the level of sanction that should apply for breaches of the Ministerial Code, reviewed and verified by a panel of independent lay members.

While far from a silver bullet, these reforms would mitigate against individual parties being able to stifle accountability, protect the Standards Commissioner's work from attack, and ensure that elected representatives who break the rules get the punishment they deserve. That is the treatment that everyone else in society expects when they do wrong, and the same principle should apply to those in public office.

ENDING THE INFLUENCE OF MONEY IN POLITICS

Alliance believes that politicians should serve only one interest – the people of Northern Ireland. When we're elected to office in the Assembly or Westminster, we spend every day fighting for the families who put us there, and we think every other local party should do the same.

But the truth is, private businesses and wealthy individuals have been given free rein to pump an unlimited amount of money into our system of government through political donations, with little-to-no transparency over what they are expecting in return or, in some cases, where the money has even come from.

The Brexit referendum is perhaps one of the most blatant examples of these forces at play. During the campaign, the DUP received a record-busting £435,000 donation from a shadowy UK outfit that is not registered with Companies House and with no publicly available website or list of staff.¹² To this day, the exact source of the money remains unclear, but under the UK's weak political donation rules, it was entirely legal.

While this is just one high profile example of the role of money in our politics, it is far from an isolated one. Since 2020, Sinn Féin has recorded donations totalling more than £1.8 million from a small handful of private individuals/sources, while wealthy businessman and politician Ben Habib donated £30,000 to both the TUV and DUP in 2022.¹³

And those are just the donations that meet the £11,180 reporting threshold set in legislation – a threshold that was cynically increased by the Conservative government ahead of the 2024 Westminster election. Donations under that amount are shrouded in even greater secrecy still, and this is particularly the case in Northern Ireland, where the then-Secretary of State arbitrarily decided donations only had to be published from 2017, not 2014, the year in which recording began. This created a period of secrecy which needs to be addressed.

Elsewhere, third party campaigners – those not standing for election themselves, but who seek to influence voters' choices through issue-based activity during election campaigns – are supposed to register with the Electoral Commission and follow the spending limits and other rules that it sets. In practice, there have been countless times during elections in Northern Ireland where third party groups have simply failed to register with the Electoral Commission, spent significant amounts of money and distributed posters or leaflets targeting local parties or candidates with absolutely no oversight. This abuse of third party campaigning rules is yet another avenue through which our political process is being warped by private interests and secret agendas.



12 'Did the DUP's controversial Brexit donors break the law – by refusing to reveal the secret source of their cash?' OpenDemocracy, 11.11.17. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/dark-money-investigations/did-dups-controversial-brexit-donors-break-law-by-refusing-/>.

13 Analysis of Electoral Commission register of donations to political parties in Northern Ireland – 2020–25.

Northern Ireland's democracy must be protected from vested interests. Alliance wants to shine a light on the role of money in politics and end the threat of wealthy donors unduly influencing the political process. We would do this by:

- Introducing an annual cap on the amount that single private sources can donate to political parties, with caps for both individuals and companies. This should apply to both foreign donors, as recommended by the Rycroft Review,¹⁴ and domestic ones.
- Lowering the reporting threshold for donations from £11,180 to £500.
- Publishing all donations to local political parties from 2014.
- Supporting the more rigorous donor checks set out in the UK Government's Representation of the People Bill.
- Better funding of the Electoral Commission so it is equipped to investigate and sanction breaches of third party campaigning rules.

This new approach to political donations should be coupled with a Lobbying Register in the Assembly, to ensure greater transparency around who is seeking to influence our politics and the money they may be spending as part of those efforts. The design of such a register should be informed by the mistakes made with the Westminster system – which has been assessed as among the weakest in Europe and with the least transparency around what constitutes lobbying.¹⁵

RENEWING DEMOCRACY AT WESTMINSTER

Under our devolved settlement, the Westminster government continues to wield major influence over the lives of families in Northern Ireland – not least when it comes to public finances, international relations, security and other reserved matters.

Despite this enormous role, UK politics has become increasingly detached and unaccountable to the people it is meant to serve, and this is fuelling the wider crisis in confidence in politics and politicians. Unelected, and often unqualified, Lords shape the laws of the land, the First Past the Post voting system leaves tens of thousands of people feeling unrepresented, and parliament's convention-based system is open to flagrant abuse.

It is clear that the mission to ensure democracy truly serves the people cannot begin and end in Stormont. Alliance supports a democratic renewal in Westminster through the following key policies:

- A fairer electoral system for Westminster elections – preferably the multi-member STV system used for Assembly and Council elections in Northern Ireland.
- A directly elected House of Lords, with a PR electoral system used to ensure representation from the 12 regions of the UK, and a maximum term limit to avoid politicisation of the roles.
- A UK-wide constitutional convention to develop a fully codified UK constitution.

14 The Rycroft Review: Report of the independent review into countering foreign financial influence and interference in UK politics.

15 CIPR (2025). No rules Britannia? The UK's lobbying laws exposed on the global stage.

allianceparty.org

 alliance@allianceparty.org

 [/alliancepartyni](#)

 [@allianceparty](#)

 [@alliancepartyni](#)

 028 9032 4274

7 Farmley Road, Newtownabbey, BT36 7TY.

Alliance

Published and promoted by
The Alliance Party, 7 Farmley Road, Newtownabbey, BT36 7TY.

Printed by GPS Colour Graphics Ltd, 4 Marshalls Road, Belfast BT5 6SR.