



UCL

REFORM OF STORMONT OPTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

CONOR J. KELLY, ALAN RENWICK, AND ALAN WHYSALL

The Constitution Unit

REFORM OF STORMONT

OPTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

**CONOR J. KELLY, ALAN RENWICK, AND
ALAN WHYSALL**

The Constitution Unit
University College London

MARCH 2025

The **Constitution** Unit

ISBN: 978-1-917825-01-6

Published by:

The Constitution Unit
School of Public Policy
University College London
29-31 Tavistock Square
London
WC1H 9QU
United Kingdom

Tel: 020 7679 4977

Email: constitution@ucl.ac.uk

Web: www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit

© The Constitution Unit, UCL, 2025

This report is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

First published March 2025

Front cover image: Dark Hedges, Co Antrim, In Sunlight, Portrait Format by Shaun Barr/Shutterstock

Contents

Acknowledgements.....	v
Executive Summary.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
1. Purpose and scope of the report.....	1
2. Key themes.....	2
3. Conclusion	3
Chapter 1. The History of Strand One.....	5
1. The origins and content of the 1998 Agreement	5
2. The record of power-sharing in Northern Ireland since 1998.....	8
3. The situation today	13
4. Conclusion	15
Chapter 2. Reform Proposals.....	16
1. The political parties.....	16
2. Views from Dublin and London	23
3. Northern Ireland Affairs Committee report (2023).....	25
4. Civic society, retired experts, academics, and public opinion	26
5. Conclusion	31
Chapter 3. Assessing Reform Proposals.....	32
1. Reforming the process of Executive formation	32
2. Other reforms to the Executive.....	39
3. Reforming the Assembly.....	48
4. Reforming other areas in Strand One	55
5. Conclusion	59
Chapter 4. Pathways Forward	60
1. How would reforms be agreed?	60
2. How would reform proposals be developed?	62
3. Reform packages	63
4. How to deal with any future collapses	64
5. Conclusion	65
Chapter 5. Conclusion.....	66
Bibliography.....	67

List of Tables

Table 3.1. Seats in the Assembly after the 2022 election 35

Acknowledgements

We have had many conversations with current and retired politicians, officials, and others in the course of our research on Northern Ireland's governance in recent years, and many of these have contributed to the thinking reflected in the present report. Some of those conversations were confidential, and so, in the interests of balance, we withhold all names here. But we are deeply grateful to all we have spoken with.

We especially wish to thank Jamie Pow, Jonathan Tonge, and Eoghan Kelly, with whom we discussed some specific aspects of this report in the early stages of our work. At the Constitution Unit, Dave Busfield-Birch, Rowan Hall, and Edd Rowe gave invaluable assistance in the final stages of preparing the report for publication. We offer advance thanks to Jamie Pow, John Garry, Katy Hayward, and Ann Watt who, at the time of writing, are due to contribute to a public event discussing the report to be held at Queen's University Belfast on 28 April 2025.

We are also grateful to the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust for generously supporting this project, and to Ben Williams for his encouragement and enthusiasm throughout.

All errors and other weaknesses remain, of course, our own.

Executive Summary

This report provides a technical analysis of possible reforms to Northern Ireland’s governing institutions. It covers reforms that have been or might reasonably be proposed to the institutions set out in Strand One of the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement – principally, the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly. It includes only reforms that could plausibly be said to preserve the Agreement’s underlying principles, though some would certainly amend its letter. It catalogues the options and then assesses the effects that each might have if implemented. It offers no view on whether any of these reforms would be desirable.

The **Introduction** sets out the context, explaining that reform of the Stormont institutions is a matter of live discussion, and that the report’s purpose is to provide coherent foundations for that discussion. It clarifies the scope of the analysis and then outlines the key themes used to analyse proposals: impact on the likelihood that the institutions will again collapse; equity between different groups within society; and good governance; as well as how far each proposal would fit with the Agreement and whether some would interact with each other.

Chapter 1 reviews the origins and content of the 1998 Agreement and the record of power-sharing in Northern Ireland since 1998. It then gives an overview of the situation today: the state of the institutions, and the concerns that have been raised in relation to their operation. **Much of this material will be familiar to readers who follow politics in Northern Ireland closely, but the chapter also shows the lens through which the rest of the analysis is developed.**

Chapter 2 sets out key actors’ views towards possible changes to the operation of Strand One, covering all of Northern Ireland’s major political parties, the British and Irish governments, as well as academics, civic society organisations, and voices such as retired civil servants and politicians. It summarises the perspectives of each actor in turn, without analysis or evaluation.

Chapter 3 examines each of the possible reforms. It groups them in four categories, relating to the process of Executive formation, other aspects of the Executive, the Assembly, and other parts of Strand One. Each of the proposals is analysed in terms of the themes set out in the Introduction. No judgement on the proposals is offered.

Chapter 4 considers how any reforms would come about, looking first at how they might be agreed, then working back to how detailed proposals might be developed. It sets out considerations that would need to be borne in mind in developing any overall reform packages. Finally, it explores what might happen if the institutions did collapse again – including whether there could be a case for temporary reforms to allow some form of democratic government to continue.

Finally, **Chapter 5** briefly concludes.

Introduction

Over a quarter century on from the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (‘the Agreement’) in 1998, Northern Ireland is a transformed society. After decades of conflict, the level of violence has dramatically fallen and a concerted effort has been made to reduce sectarian division within Northern Ireland, improve relationships across the island of Ireland, and normalise relations between Great Britain and Ireland. The Agreement and the process that led to it are rightly celebrated around the world as a model on which to build a lasting peace. Local politicians in Northern Ireland have been at the forefront of delivering these successes, working in collaboration with one another in ways that for many years people did not think was possible.

The institutions established by the Agreement to govern Northern Ireland have had mixed success, however. For much of the period since 1998 the institutions governing Northern Ireland – the Assembly and the Executive (known collectively as ‘Strand One’ of the Agreement) – have not functioned. Indeed, in recent years there have been long collapses of devolution between 2017 and 2020, and again between 2022 and early 2024. As more electors have moved to parties identifying as neither nationalist nor unionist, some have come to view the institutions as operating inequitably. The fact, remarkable though it is in a historical context, that unionist and nationalist politicians have governed in cooperation with one another in a power-sharing system, has distracted attention from a limited record of delivery: Northern Ireland faces a mounting list of problems in healthcare, public finance, and other aspects of good governance.

The system established in 1998 has been altered in the years since in a number of ways – none amounting to radical change to the architecture of the Agreement, but sometimes with significant results. Many other reforms have been proposed, and advocacy for change has been growing in recent years. Much thinking on possible reforms was gathered as a result of an inquiry conducted in 2022/23 by the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (NIAC): the evidence submissions made to the inquiry often make detailed proposals, and some of these were adopted by the committee itself in its majority report.¹ Inquiries conducted by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly (AERC) a few years ago also elicited thinking on potential reform.² The AERC has recently decided to examine reform options again.³

1. Purpose and scope of the report

Despite this activity, there is at present no systematic listing and assessment of reform proposals. This report aims to fill that gap by providing a technical analysis of the possibilities. It attempts to judge what effects such reforms might have on the problems identified, but it makes no recommendations. The objective is to offer a more coherent foundation for public and private

¹ [House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2022](#): Inquiry Page.

² See documentation from the AERC’s 2011–16 mandate, when the committee was particularly productive: [Assembly and Executive Review Committee, 2011–16](#). Its report of 2013 on d’Hondt, designation and provision for opposition in particular elicited a great deal of reflection: [Assembly and Executive Review Committee, 2013](#).

³ See the minutes and videos of the committee’s meetings on 4 February and 11 March 2025 ([Assembly and Executive review Committee, 2025a](#) (minutes); [Assembly and Executive review Committee, 2025b](#) (videos)). Minutes for the latter meeting were not yet available at the time of writing.

discussion, and further investigation of particular proposals, that may ultimately lead to discussion at a political level.

The report focuses on the institutions established through ‘Strand One’ of the Agreement, by which devolved government within Northern Ireland is conducted. As set out more fully in the next chapter, the Agreement has two further strands that establish sets of institutions, covering ‘north–south’ relations on the island of Ireland (Strand Two), and ‘east–west’ relations between the London and Dublin governments and among all the governing authorities on these islands (Strand Three). The strands are interlinked, and Northern Ireland’s affairs progress most effectively when all three strands are functioning well. It is in relation to Strand One, however, that most proposals for institutional reform arise.

Not all the reforms discussed here may be at present within the realm of political possibility. But they have all been proposed or fall logically to be considered; and discussion of them may lead to developments at some point. The reforms discussed are ones that could plausibly be argued to be consistent with the basic principles of the Agreement. Of course, they may involve a departure from the exact text of the Agreement, or its existing statutory reflection: that is the nature of reforms, and adaptations necessary to changing circumstances. Indeed, in some cases, there will certainly be a debate whether a particular reform would be a legitimate adaptation consistent with the ‘spirit of the Agreement’ or a departure from it. This is a very imprecise concept, on which reasonable people can disagree.

The discussion of institutional changes in this report is not intended to suggest that they are the only, or even the principal, answer to many of the possible problems identified. Bringing about change in political attitudes and culture may have a much more important role in some cases. But institutional change may still have an important part to play, if a supporting one. Although the report, in the interests of intelligibility, analyses reform proposals individually, in many cases particular reforms might be most effective as part of a package. We attempt to bring out some of the interactions and potential packages of reform ideas, but given the complexities, the analysis here is by no means comprehensive.

2. Key themes

Calls for institutional reform have arisen in Northern Ireland for three main reasons. These give rise to three principal themes in our analysis of proposed reforms:

- *The susceptibility of the existing structures to collapse.* The current institutions are prone to collapse because the arrangements are such that, if the largest parties do not wish to participate, the institutions fall. One of the main aspirations of many reform proposals has therefore been to limit these veto powers in a range of ways. Nevertheless, vetoes – or at least constraints on any majority – are to some degree an inevitable concomitant of any power-sharing system. The advantages and disadvantages of these arrangements and of possible alternatives to them thus need to be weighed carefully.
- *The need to ensure equity across different groups within society.* The Agreement was designed to ensure that Northern Ireland’s unionist and nationalist communities are treated equitably. But advocates of reform argue that the system embodies several forms of inequity. Most notably, those who identify as neither unionist nor nationalist – whom we refer to

inelegantly, but in conformity with the legislation, as ‘others’ in this report, and whose numbers have risen noticeably since 1998 – feel disadvantaged by current arrangements, often for understandable reasons. There can also be inequities between groups within the communities.

- *The uneven quality of governance.* Quite apart from the issue of institutional collapse noted above, Northern Ireland’s governing system has sometimes struggled to deliver effective governance. That has most obviously been the case in periods when the institutions have not been functioning: during recent suspensions, civil servants have been left exercising such limited powers that action to deal with even grave problems has been impossible. But even when the institutions have been in place, their response to policy issues has often been limited – sometimes because of political disagreement, which has reduced them to a degree of paralysis; and at other times because of the absence of any political drive to bring about change, particularly where it would involve uncomfortable decisions. And Executives have in recent years had no overall plan – the Programme for Government envisaged by the Agreement – for what they should be doing.

These themes provide the framework for our analysis of reform proposals in chapter 3. We will also look at two other aspects of reform proposals: their fit with the 1998 Agreement; and the ways in which they may interact with each other, potentially producing unintended effects. In addition, we will in places allude to other challenges, such as concerns about standards of ethical behaviour in public office, and questions over whether the institutions can be obligated to operate in conformity with the law.

3. Conclusion

A recurring issue raised about reform, and the way politics is conducted in Northern Ireland more generally, is that the system will only work if there is more of a sense of *common purpose* amongst the key actors. Similarly, power-sharing, almost by definition, requires a level of *compromise* and *cooperation* that is not typically needed in other majoritarian systems of government.

The politicians who negotiated the 1998 Agreement are admired by many who study divided societies for having created a system that endeavours to harness a spirit of common purpose from traditionally rival groups in the aftermath of a brutally violent period in Irish and British history. This has required great imagination, often great political courage. But while they generally pursue reconciliation, key political players have remained diametrically opposed to one another, that being the nature of Northern Ireland politics, and the different constitutional aspirations that dominate it. The reality of power-sharing since 1998 has often been one of ‘silo’ government, and a ‘something in it for everybody’ carve up of resources.

There are some profound tensions here. The power-sharing system is necessary in Northern Ireland because politics is unusually divisive; yet that system will only function well if politicians display an unusual level of commitment to respecting and incorporating the views of their political rivals. There is also much to be optimistic about: the progress that has taken place since 1998 points to a future where the divisions and animosity amongst political groups can continue to dissipate over time. But there are also considerable challenges.

The report has four main chapters. The first outlines the history and content of Strand One, including an account of how and why this unique system of government in Northern Ireland was created and how it has evolved since 1998. Chapter 2 sets out what key contributors to the debate so far think about institutional proposals, including the views of the main political parties in Northern Ireland, the governments in London and Dublin, and other key actors including academics, civic leaders, and retired civil servants. Chapter 3 then examines those various reform proposals, assessing them in the light of the themes outlined above. Chapter 4 examines processes through which reform might come about, and also considers what temporary reform measures might need to be considered if there is another collapse of the power sharing institutions. Chapter 5 offers brief conclusions.

Chapter 1. The History of Strand One

The aim of this report is to examine proposals on reforming how politics in Northern Ireland is conducted. Before delving into various proposals for changing the system and analysing what the different effects of those changes might be, it may be helpful to look at the system as it is now, how it came to be, and how it functions today.

This chapter explains how and why the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement came about, what institutional arrangements the Agreement contained, and how these arrangements have performed and evolved over time. The final section highlights the challenges that remain today.⁴ Much of this material will be familiar to readers who follow politics in Northern Ireland closely, but the chapter also shows the lens through which we will develop our analysis in the rest of the report.

1. The origins and content of the 1998 Agreement

1.1. The history of devolved government before the Troubles

Ireland was partitioned and Northern Ireland was created during the Irish War of Independence in the early 1920s.⁵ A Parliament of Northern Ireland was established, located from the 1930s at Stormont, an estate outside Belfast. A cabinet government was headed by a Prime Minister of Northern Ireland. Sovereignty was retained by Westminster; though the term was not in regular use at the time, the system of government resembled the ‘devolution’ settlement that exists today, with most matters of domestic public policy decided by local politicians.

Northern Ireland was not, however, a cohesive society. Its political life was dominated from the start by the constitutional issue. The predominantly Protestant unionist/loyalist⁶ majority community strongly favoured retaining the Union with Britain and continuously backed the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) at elections. The UUP dominated politics for the first 50 years after partition, winning every election and constituting the Northern Ireland government. This left the nationalist/republican⁷ minority community – which was predominantly Catholic – with little effective input into decision-making. Many in this community resented being cut off from their co-nationals in the new Irish Free State (now Ireland, also known as the Republic of Ireland). The political system was also frequently criticised by nationalists for being sectarian and discriminatory against them. Aspects of these grievances were the subject of peaceful protest in the late 1960s. This period also saw a growth in republican and loyalist paramilitary activity, and the deployment of the British Army. There followed between the late 1960s and late 1990s a prolonged period of

⁴ Readers seeking more detail may wish to consult other recent Constitution Unit reports: [Whysall, 2022a; 2023; 2024](#); and [Renwick and Kelly, 2023](#).

⁵ [Government of Ireland Act, 1920](#) and [the Anglo-Irish Treaty, 1921](#).

⁶ Unionists are generally understood to be those in Northern Ireland who favour the maintenance of the Union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Loyalists are generally understood as a subsection of that community, and the term is sometimes associated with paramilitaries pursuing that aim. There are also class and social dimensions to those labels, which we cannot discuss here.

⁷ As with unionism and loyalism, nationalists are generally understood to be those in Northern Ireland who favour leaving the Union and joining a united Ireland; republicans are a subsection of that community, and the term is sometimes associated with paramilitaries pursuing that aim. Again, there are other dimensions to those labels that we cannot discuss here.

political instability and violent conflict involving the state and various paramilitary movements, known as ‘the Troubles’. Over 3,500 people lost their lives and some 40,000 were injured.⁸

In 1972, a particularly bloody point in the Troubles, the UK parliament suspended Stormont, and Northern Ireland was governed from Westminster – a system known as ‘direct rule’. Various attempts were made by the UK government, increasingly in partnership with its Irish counterpart in Dublin, to restore devolution to Northern Ireland; it became accepted by both governments that a model of power-sharing between political representatives from the two communities was the only approach that could offer a viable foundation for such devolution. For many years, these initiatives fell short of success. From the late 1980s onwards, however, political discussions started to offer some cause for hope, and various channels (including some secret negotiations⁹) opened pathways that eventually produced ceasefires from the Provisional IRA and loyalist paramilitary groups in the mid-1990s.¹⁰ This opened the way for a renewed effort to secure a more durable settlement. Negotiations were constituted in 1996; an Agreement finally emerged on 10 April 1998.

1.2. The 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement

The 1998 Agreement attempted to address the issues that had led to the Troubles. The British and Irish governments recognised the right of people in Northern Ireland to be British, Irish, or both. Ireland would drop its territorial claim over Northern Ireland. So long as Northern Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom, the UK government would exercise its authority there with ‘rigorous impartiality’.¹¹ All those who endorsed the Agreement – the two governments and most of Northern Ireland’s political parties – accepted both that Northern Ireland would not be removed from the UK without the consent of a majority of its people; and that, if a majority ever did democratically opt to leave the UK and join the Republic of Ireland, that would happen, provided there were consent also in the South. The UK government committed to holding a referendum on constitutional change if it ever ‘appears likely’ that a majority of the people in Northern Ireland wanted a united Ireland.¹² And all who endorsed the Agreement, including parties with ties to paramilitary movements, committed to pursuing their political objectives through exclusively peaceful and democratic means. A scheme for releasing paramilitary prisoners convicted during the Troubles was also agreed.

The Agreement established three ‘strands’ of institutions to deal with the different political relationships across these islands. The first strand focused on restoring devolved government to Northern Ireland via a power-sharing system involving both unionists and nationalists. Its primary institutions are the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Northern Ireland Executive. As Strand One is the focus of this report, it is explained in much more detail in the next section. Strand Two dealt with cross-border relationships on the island of Ireland. Its primary institution is the North South Ministerial Council, bringing together ministers from the new power-sharing Executive at Stormont and the Irish government in Dublin. Strand Three dealt with the relationship between Ireland and Great Britain. Its two primary institutions are the British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference, bringing together the London and Dublin governments, and the British–Irish

⁸ [McKittrick and McVea, 2012.](#)

⁹ [Taylor, 2023.](#)

¹⁰ [Taylor, 1998; Taylor, 2000.](#)

¹¹ [Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, 1998:](#) Constitutional Issues.

¹² [Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, 1998:](#) Constitutional Issues.

Council, bringing together the two governments, the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, and representatives from the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man.

All but one of the major parties in Northern Ireland supported the Agreement at the end of the talks process on the morning of Good Friday, April 1998. The exception was the DUP, whose representatives had walked out of the talks after the inclusion of Sinn Féin, which was widely taken to be closely associated with the Provisional IRA. In referendums in May 1998, just a few weeks after the conclusion of the talks, voters overwhelmingly endorsed the Agreement on both sides of the border. In Northern Ireland, the referendum passed with the support of 71% of those voting (which probably included a slim majority of unionists), while in the Republic it passed with 94% support.¹³ This public endorsement allowed elections to the new Northern Ireland Assembly to be held in June 1998.

1.3. Northern Ireland's power-sharing institutions (Strand One)

Strand One of the Agreement set out new institutional arrangements designed to ensure that no single party or community could dominate decision-making. Instead, the principle of power-sharing between communities was to be applied.

In pursuit of this end, the electoral system for the Assembly was (and remains) the Single Transferable Vote (STV) form of proportional representation; in its original form, 108 members (MLAs) were to be elected from 18 constituencies. This system ensured that a broad range of parties representing unionists, nationalists, and those identifying as neither would be elected. Powers were formally devolved from Westminster in December 1999, giving the Assembly legislative authority over most matters of economic and social policy, including the economy, healthcare, education, transport, and other infrastructure.

The Agreement provided for the Northern Ireland Executive to be headed by a First Minister and a deputy First Minister (FM and dFM) elected by a cross-community vote in the Assembly (see more below). At the first election, this resulted in a unionist and nationalist respectively holding the two positions. Though the names would imply otherwise, the powers of the two officeholders were joint and equal. Other ministerial positions were to be allocated among the parties via the 'd'Hondt' process, distributing offices approximately in proportion to the number of seats won by each party in the Assembly.¹⁴ Parties could opt out of this process and remain outside the Executive if they wished.

These power-sharing arrangements, while they have a clear rationale in the context of Northern Ireland's divided society, were obviously liable to cause challenges for good governance. The Executive would be formed not by a single party elected on a manifesto or by a coalition of parties that had agreed to work together in pursuit of shared goals, but according to the application of a mathematical formula. There was therefore a risk that it would lack cohesion or common purpose. In an effort to temper these dangers, the Agreement provided that the Executive would 'seek to agree each year, and review as necessary, a programme incorporating an agreed budget linked to

¹³ [Melaugh and McKenna, 1998](#); [Elliott, 1999](#): 143.

¹⁴ For more information on how d'Hondt works, see [Northern Ireland Assembly, n.d.\(a\)](#).

policies and programmes’, which would be ‘subject to approval by the Assembly, after scrutiny in Assembly Committees, on a cross-community basis’.¹⁵

The power-sharing principle was to be carried into the functioning of the Assembly as well. MLAs would be asked to designate as nationalists or unionists at its first meeting. Those who did not wish to designate this way would be identified as ‘others’. The designation system was designed to enable cross-community voting for sensitive decisions. In such cases, a proposal would pass only if supported either by majorities of both unionists and nationalists as well as of the Assembly as a whole, or by 40% of both unionists and nationalists and 60% of the Assembly as a whole (for a few decisions, only the first route was open). Those who did not designate and so were categorised as ‘other’ had no such special protection. Matters decided through these cross-community voting procedures included the election of the Speaker and (until 2007 – see section 2.2, below) the appointment of the FM and dFM.¹⁶ In addition, a cross-community vote would be held on any matter if a ‘petition of concern’ was signed by 30 MLAs.

Strand One of the Agreement included several further provisions. It stated that the institutions must function within the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and ‘any Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland’ that may be introduced to supplement it.¹⁷ It provided for the creation of an Equality Commission ‘to monitor a statutory obligation to promote equality of opportunity in specified areas and parity of esteem between the two main communities, and to investigate individual complaints against public bodies’.¹⁸ And it provided for a consultative Civic Forum, comprising representatives of business, the trade unions, the voluntary sector, and others.¹⁹

2. The record of power-sharing in Northern Ireland since 1998

2.1. Early years (1998–2003)

The creation of power-sharing government was a landmark achievement. For the first time in the history of Northern Ireland, unionist and nationalist politicians shared power for a sustained period of time. Notwithstanding this feat, the institutions’ early years were plagued by frequent periods of instability and suspension.

The first Executive was led by UUP leader David Trimble as First Minister, and Seamus Mallon from the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) as deputy First Minister. Sinn Féin and the DUP also had seats on the first Executive, though the DUP refused to attend meetings alongside their Sinn Féin counterparts and frequently rotated their ministers as a reflection of their disapproval. Trimble and the UUP came under intense pressure from their political rivals during these years to withdraw from the institutions in protest of the Provisional

¹⁵ [Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, 1998](#): Strand One, para. 20.

¹⁶ [Whysall, 2002](#): 65.

¹⁷ [Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, 1998](#): Strand One, para. 5. The UK government agreed to the incorporation into Northern Ireland law of the ECHR: see the Agreement’s Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity section, para. 2.

¹⁸ [Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, 1998](#): Strand One, para. 5.

¹⁹ [Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, 1998](#): Strand One, para. 34.

IRA's failure to decommission its arsenal of weapons, despite Sinn Féin's participation in government.²⁰

The institutions did not take up power for a year and a half after the Agreement, and then collapsed several times between 1999 and 2002: there was much disagreement over the unresolved question of IRA decommissioning and other issues related to the end of the Troubles. Notwithstanding this, many significant steps were taken towards normalising Northern Ireland's politics in this period, and the first Executive had some policy successes, including in its response to the 2001 foot and mouth health crisis.²¹ The Civic Forum was convened and, at Westminster, the Human Rights Act (1998) brought the ECHR into domestic law for the whole of the UK, fulfilling the Agreement commitment.

The institutions were suspended again in 2002 by the UK Secretary of State after the UUP withdrew from the Executive in response to an alleged 'spy ring' being uncovered in Sinn Féin's Assembly team.²² The Assembly and Executive would not return for five years. The 2003 Assembly election saw the DUP and Sinn Féin become the largest parties of unionism and nationalism respectively, eclipsing the more moderate UUP and SDLP.²³ The DUP refused to support any nominations for FM and dFM in the second Assembly.

2.2. St Andrews Agreement (2006)

Power-sharing government was finally restored in 2007. This followed negotiations at St Andrews the previous year – led by the UK and Irish governments and involving the main Northern Ireland parties – and subsequent discussions.²⁴ Much of what was agreed was embodied in a text agreed by the British and Irish governments, generally called the St Andrews Agreement. On the basis of the changes made, the DUP agreed to re-enter the Executive and govern alongside Sinn Féin, while Sinn Féin agreed to recognise the newly formed Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI).²⁵ The St Andrews Agreement looked forward to justice issues, which had not been devolved to Northern Ireland in 1998, being transferred to the Executive and Assembly.

A significant change was also made to how the Executive would be formed. The FM and dFM positions would now be filled by the application of rules relating to party size, rather than through a cross-community vote as stipulated in 1998. In the text that was originally agreed at St Andrews, the First Minister was to be nominated by the largest party in the largest designation in the Assembly, and the deputy First Minister by the largest party in the next largest designation. But, in continuing discussion, the plan changed further. As enacted, the new arrangement provided that the nominee of the largest party overall automatically became First Minister, while the largest party from the largest designation that did not hold the First Minister position automatically nominated the deputy First Minister.²⁶ Practically, the latter change had little effect on who was appointed for many years: a unionist occupied the First Minister position while a nationalist held the deputy role.

²⁰ [Cochrane, 2013](#), chapter 7.

²¹ [Clarke, 2002](#).

²² [Irish Times, 2005](#).

²³ [Farrington, 2004](#).

²⁴ [St Andrews Agreement, 2006](#).

²⁵ The PSNI was created following the Patten Review of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), which was an organisation that many nationalists had been deeply opposed to.

²⁶ [Northern Ireland Act, 1998 \(as amended\)](#), sections 16A(4)–(5) and 16C(6).

Following the Assembly elections in 2022, however, Sinn Féin became entitled to the First Minister position, as it was the single largest party, despite there being more unionists than nationalists in the Assembly.

The changes agreed at St Andrews and subsequently allowed Dr Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness to ascend to the positions of FM and dFM without DUP and Sinn Féin MLAs having to vote for their previously sworn enemies. They also created a new dynamic at election time where the parties competed for votes by appealing to their respective communities to help them become the largest single party, thus securing the nominally top position.

2.3. Resumed power-sharing (2007–17)

Following the restoration of devolution at St Andrews, the DUP and Sinn Féin led government in Northern Ireland for 10 years. The fact that the institutions managed to remain operational under the stewardship of two parties that had been diametrically opposed to one another was, again, a remarkable achievement and a real sign of the peace process bedding in. The images of Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness (as FM and dFM) smiling and working alongside one another in government were seen positively around the world.²⁷ In many ways, this spirit of cooperation was a reflection of the changes that were occurring in Northern Ireland societally as the peace process took root in the 2000s and 2010s, resulting in a dramatically improved security situation.²⁸ Peter Robinson replaced Dr Paisley as leader of the DUP and FM in 2008. Robinson was, in turn, replaced by Arlene Foster in 2016.

Yet disputes between the main parties did continue. These sometimes required interventions from Westminster, acting in partnership with Dublin as in the peace process before 1998.²⁹ Devolution of policing and justice seriously shook the stability of the institutions: Sinn Féin was strongly in favour, but the DUP found grave difficulty with the proposition. Such devolution eventually came about in 2010 through the Hillsborough Castle Agreement, which allowed for a new Justice Minister to be elected by a cross-community vote in the Assembly (rather than as part of the d'Hondt process) to ensure the position was filled by someone whom the major parties did not object to.³⁰

Further disputes arose between the main parties. The Stormont House Agreement (2014),³¹ and the *Fresh Start* Agreement (2015),³² staved off another collapse of devolution.

One part of the Strand One framework – the consultative Civic Forum – was left in abeyance throughout these years. The Stormont House Agreement of 2014 provided instead for the establishment of a ‘compact civic advisory panel’ – a commitment reiterated (with differences in detail) in the *New Decade, New Approach* agreement of 2020 (see the following section). The panel appears to have met a few times in 2016, though with no obvious outputs, but not since.³³

²⁷ [Graham, 2017.](#)

²⁸ [Lindow and McBride, 2024](#) and [Mitchell 2023.](#)

²⁹ [Kelly and Tannam, 2023:](#) 2277–2283.

³⁰ [Hillsborough Castle Agreement, 2010.](#)

³¹ [Stormont House Agreement, 2014.](#)

³² [A Fresh Start for Northern Ireland, 2015.](#)

³³ The history is recounted in the judgment of the Northern Ireland High Court in litigation seeking to compel the re-establishment of the Civic Forum: [Wilson \(Eileen\) Application for Judicial Review \[2023\] NIKB 10.](#)

The petition of concern also became a point of contention in this period.³⁴ The mechanism had been included in the Agreement to prevent one community overriding the other on matters related to human rights and constitutional issues; but it had become a tool that could be used to block changes on any issue. Multiple parties employed it in this way, but perhaps the most contentious instance came in 2015, when the DUP used it to block same-sex marriage legalisation, despite a majority of the Assembly voting in favour.³⁵

The potency of the petition of concern mechanism was diminished from 2017 onwards, however, when a reduction in the number of MLAs from 108 to 90 (five rather than six members per constituency) came into effect. The change, passed in 2016 with the agreement of the largest parties,³⁶ was defended as a response to budget cuts, and also involved a reduction in the number of Executive ministers and government departments. One side effect was that the 30-member threshold for petitions of concern became harder to meet, requiring support from a third of Assembly members, rather than 28%, as before.

A further institutional reform was enacted in the same year through a private member's bill brought by independent unionist MLA John McCallister. This provided for formal recognition of an opposition within the Assembly and gave that opposition rights designed to help it in holding the Executive to account.³⁷ The UUP and SDLP opted for opposition status under the new provisions, rather than take up ministerial posts to which they were entitled, after the 2016 Assembly elections; Alliance also entered opposition at that time, though it was too small to have official status.

The institutions were severely shaken in 2016 over the issue of the Renewal Heat Incentive (RHI), also known as the 'cash for ash' episode,³⁸ which for some encapsulated the failures of good governance at Stormont. Large amounts of public money were wasted by a renewable energy scheme that could be easily gamed, with liabilities going forward that created serious dangers for Northern Ireland's public finances. In January 2017, at the height of the fallout from the scandal, Martin McGuinness resigned as deputy First Minister after Arlene Foster, by then DUP leader and First Minister, refused to do so herself.³⁹ The institutions therefore collapsed again.

2.4. Brexit and the Covid years (2017–24)

The collapse of the devolved institutions in early 2017 led to an absence of effective government in Northern Ireland that lasted three years. The lingering issues around the RHI scandal and disputes related to an Irish Language Act were, on the face of it, the causes of the inability to revive Stormont during this period. Increasingly, however, the major political issue in the background was Brexit – and especially, the terms on which goods would travel between Northern Ireland and Ireland and between Northern Ireland and Great Britain after the UK's withdrawal. These issues were the subject of a Protocol to the UK's Withdrawal Agreement from the EU.⁴⁰ The Protocol essentially established the border in the Irish Sea, leaving Northern Ireland with access to the EU Single Market for goods, as well as the UK single market – arrangements that were opposed by

³⁴ [Mikhael, 2020.](#)

³⁵ [Torrance, 2019.](#)

³⁶ [Assembly Members \(Reduction of Numbers\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2016.](#)

³⁷ [Assembly and Executive Reform \(Assembly Opposition\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2016.](#)

³⁸ [McBride, 2019.](#)

³⁹ [Logue and Cullen, 2017.](#)

⁴⁰ [Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, 2019.](#)

the DUP and many others within unionism.⁴¹ More broadly, Brexit divided communities in Northern Ireland along familiar lines, with a clear majority of nationalists (and others) voting to Remain in the EU, while a more narrow but also clear majority of unionists favoured leaving.⁴² Those Brexit tensions are not our focus here, but they continue to fuel division and grievance in Northern Ireland politics today.

During the three years after the 2017 collapse, Northern Ireland had very limited government. Fresh Assembly elections were held in March 2017, but it proved impossible to find agreement on the way forward. No Executive was formed, and no Assembly Speaker was elected. Direct rule was not established, however, as had been the case in the past. Instead, Northern Ireland civil servants discharged day-to-day government functions, but within very tight limits, albeit ultimately underpinned by statute. Westminster intervened where there was no alternative, for example to pass budget legislation. No new policy initiatives could be taken.

In January 2020, the month in which the UK formally left the EU, the two governments brokered a deal with the Northern Ireland political parties that allowed for the restoration of the Strand One institutions. The *New Decade, New Approach* plan included commitments to deliver an Irish Language Act and other legislative measures to protect Ulster Scots culture.⁴³ The parties also agreed to reform the petition of concern mechanism to prevent future abuse. The most significant change was that the MLAs supporting such a petition would need to come from at least two political parties for it to pass. This change, coupled with the earlier reduction of the Assembly's size (see section 2.3, above), significantly raised the bar for triggering a successful petition. The *New Decade, New Approach* deal continued to leave the Civic Forum in abeyance; but it proposed to renew the Compact Civic Advisory Panel that had been agreed in the Stormont House Agreement. It also provided for annual citizens' assemblies on selected issues, comprising randomly selected members of the public.⁴⁴ Finally, the deal set out an agenda for action by the institutions on economic, social and public service issues, and it pledged the creation of a Fiscal Council to assess the Executive's spending and revenue plans. The package was supported by extra funding from London.

The institutions were restored just before Covid-19 struck.⁴⁵ During the pandemic, the Executive – particularly the health minister – received some praise for its response, and the parties appeared to work well together at times. At other points, however, they were divided, and the effectiveness of their actions was criticised – notably, in the Covid-19 public inquiry.⁴⁶

After *New Decade, New Approach* and the UK's withdrawal from the EU, the DUP continued to criticise the particular post-Brexit arrangements that had been agreed for Northern Ireland.⁴⁷ The fraught atmosphere that this generated played into instability at Stormont, culminating in yet another suspension of the institutions in early 2022, when the new DUP leader, Jeffrey Donaldson, asked his ministers, including First Minister Paul Givan, to withdraw from the Executive.⁴⁸ The 2022 Assembly election, which followed several months later, saw two key dynamics emerge. First,

⁴¹ [Doyle and Connolly, 2017.](#)

⁴² [Garry, 2016–17](#): 2.

⁴³ [New Decade, New Approach, 2020.](#)

⁴⁴ [New Decade, New Approach, 2020](#), para. 3.8 and 3.9.

⁴⁵ [Northern Ireland Assembly, n.d.\(b\).](#)

⁴⁶ [BBC News, 2024a.](#)

⁴⁷ [Pogatchnik, 2021.](#)

⁴⁸ [Edgar and Flanagan 2022.](#)

a splintering of the unionist vote saw the DUP fall back to second place overall, allowing Sinn Féin to become the largest single party and gain the right to nominate the First Minister. Second, the non-aligned Alliance Party significantly increased its support, rising from eight seats to 17. After the election, the DUP continued to boycott the Executive. It also prevented the election of an Assembly Speaker by refusing to support any candidate in the cross-community vote, which prevented the Assembly from functioning.⁴⁹ There was once again limited civil service government, with occasional Westminster interventions.

Several rounds of further work on the post-Brexit arrangements ensued, including negotiation of the Windsor Framework, which modified the operation of the Protocol in certain respects.⁵⁰ Eventually, following the publication of a new UK government command paper entitled *Safeguarding the Union* in early 2024, the DUP agreed to a restoration of power-sharing.⁵¹ The party nominated Emma-Little Pengelly to be deputy First Minister. This meant that Sinn Féin's Michelle O'Neill could become the first ever nationalist First Minister of Northern Ireland.⁵²

3. The situation today

Northern Ireland's power-sharing institutions continue to be defined largely by the rules set out in 1998. The Assembly is elected by proportional representation and uses cross-community voting on sensitive issues. The Executive encompasses multiple parties from across the communities and likewise makes major decisions on a cross-community basis. The institutions function subject to the limits of the ECHR.

On the other hand, aspects of Strand One have been changed, supplemented, or set aside. The most significant change has been in the rules for appointing the FM and dFM – though the basic power-sharing principle has remained. Among other shifts, the opposition has been strengthened, while the provision relating to petitions of concern has waxed and waned. Formal mechanisms for wider civic and public engagement have withered: the Civic Forum has not been convened since 2002; though the *New Decade, New Approach* deal proposed annual citizens' assemblies, none have been held. The process towards creating a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland became bogged down in disagreement, and no such Bill has been enacted.

The institutions established in 1999 are widely acknowledged to have struggled to meet a number of serious policy and public service challenges that confront Northern Ireland. This weakness is most obviously seen in the present state of the health service, which seriously underperforms that in England on a number of counts; but it is also evident in deficiencies in infrastructure, which have inhibited housebuilding and other construction, in generally low productivity, and in a range of other ills.⁵³ This was highlighted by the failure of the institutions to develop a Programme for Government for almost a decade after 2016: there was no wider plan to which the institutions were working. A Programme was finally agreed in March 2025.⁵⁴ but this was more than a year after the current Executive had been formed.

⁴⁹ [BBC News, 2022a.](#)

⁵⁰ [Windsor Framework, 2023.](#)

⁵¹ [Northern Ireland Office, 2024.](#)

⁵² [Hughes and Fox, 2024.](#)

⁵³ [Pivotal, 2025.](#)

⁵⁴ [Northern Ireland Executive, 2025.](#)

There have also been issues throughout the existence of the institutions relating to propriety and legality. The RHI affair brought many of these to light. Ministers have been found by the courts to be in breach of their statutory duties – for example, in failing to make nominations for North South Ministerial Council meetings⁵⁵ or to set up the Civic Forum⁵⁶ – but have continued to ignore them. Key appointments in the propriety field have sometimes not been made: notably, there has been no Northern Ireland Commissioner for Public Appointments since the term of the last Commissioner expired in May 2021.⁵⁷

Under the leadership of O’Neill and Little-Pengelly, the institutions look somewhat more stable than they might have been, given the complex political backdrop. But some argue that the Executive merely standing is not cause for much celebration nearly 27 years on from the Agreement, and that weaknesses in governance remain severe.

In the Assembly, the petition of concern reforms appear to have successfully reduced the abuse of that mechanism. But the Alliance Party continues to criticise the designation system and the cross-community vote on the grounds that they disadvantage the ‘others’ as compared to unionist and nationalist MLAs.⁵⁸ The SDLP currently leads an official opposition.⁵⁹ Both it and the Alliance Party have been keen to discuss reform of the institutions, but the largest parties have not.

Looking across the board, many people in politics and in the general public are frustrated by the way government works in Northern Ireland.⁶⁰ Three concerns are most prominent, corresponding to the three core themes that we set out in the introduction to this report.

- First, the repeated collapse of the institutions has caused widespread public dismay. Constitution Unit research conducted in 2022 found that people from all communities were critical of the ability of one political party to pull the institutions down.⁶¹ Trust in Northern Ireland’s politicians has fallen extremely low.
- Second, there are concerns that equity across Northern Ireland’s communities is not adequately achieved. This perceived unfairness is perhaps felt particularly among non-aligned people, who do not enjoy the same protections in the Agreement as do unionists and nationalists. But many in the latter groups too have felt unjustly treated by the institutions in recent years.
- Third, good governance appears to many to be sorely lacking. Northern Ireland continues to face a series of severe problems in healthcare and infrastructure, and serious issues to do with public finances are likely to recur. The current political climate and institutional set-up appears unable to address these problems, and proposals for reforming how politics works are growing more prominent. This may be largely a question of political culture and behaviour, but there may also be room for institutional change.

⁵⁵ [Napier \(Sean\) Application for Judicial Review \[2021\] NIOB 120.](#)

⁵⁶ [Wilson \(Eileen\) Application for Judicial Review \[2023\] NIKB 10.](#)

⁵⁷ [Hughes, 2024.](#)

⁵⁸ [Alliance Party, 2022](#), p. 91.

⁵⁹ [RTÉ, 2024.](#)

⁶⁰ [Ainsworth, 2024.](#)

⁶¹ [Renwick and Kelly 2023](#), chapter 4.

So discussion of institutional reform is expected to go on, and is welcome. The Assembly and Executive Review Committee of the Assembly has agreed to look at certain proposals.⁶²

4. Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the Strand One institutions and their functioning since 1998. It has also identified key challenges that those institutions face.

The remainder of this report sets out and explores options for reforming how Strand One operates. The next chapter outlines what options different actors have already put forward.

⁶² [Assembly and Executive Review Committee, 2025a](#); [Assembly and Executive Review Committee, 2025b](#).

Chapter 2. Reform Proposals

This chapter sets out the views of key actors in Northern Ireland towards possible changes to the operation of Strand One of the 1998 Agreement. It covers all of Northern Ireland’s major political parties, the British and Irish governments, as well as academics, civic society organisations, and voices such as retired civil servants and politicians. These actors’ most recent detailed statements of their views on these matters often come from submissions to the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (NIAC) inquiry conducted in 2022/23,⁶³ but we also draw on manifestos, policy documents, and articles. In addition, we briefly examine views of the general public in Northern Ireland, looking at quantitative and qualitative evidence.

The chapter summarises the perspectives of each actor in turn, without evaluation.⁶⁴ We leave the grouping of proposals by theme for the next chapter. We mostly focus on views expressed in recent years, but we also draw attention to earlier proposals where pertinent.

We find a widespread sense that some changes are required to enable a fair and stable political system that delivers effective government. However, there are many points of considerable disagreement on what changes would be appropriate, or indeed tolerated by different stakeholders. The chapter conclusion reflects on the overall patterns.

1. The political parties

This section examines the expressed views of Northern Ireland’s political parties. All parties that currently hold a significant number of seats in the Northern Ireland Assembly or receive a significant amount of the popular vote share at elections are included.

1.1. Sinn Féin

Sinn Féin’s acceptance of the 1998 Agreement and its decision to participate in the Strand One institutions required a considerable shift from previous republican doctrine. The party publicly committed to taking its position in devolved government, recognising the legitimacy of Northern Ireland’s political institutions for the first time in its party manifestos and public statements.⁶⁵

Since the devolution of policing and justice in 2010, Sinn Féin has had limited public engagement in reform debates. Martin McGuinness expressed support for changing the titles of the First and deputy First Ministers (FM and dFM) to ‘joint first minister’ in 2015,⁶⁶ though the current Sinn Féin leader Mary Lou McDonald said in 2022 she was not proposing to change the names of the positions.⁶⁷ In a submission to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) of the Assembly in 2013, the party said it was in favour of retaining the d’Hondt ministerial allocation process, the use of community designations, and the right for parties to opt out of the Executive

⁶³ [House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2022](#): Inquiry Page.

⁶⁴ We set out party views in the order of their current number of seats in the Assembly.

⁶⁵ [Sinn Féin, 1998](#); [Renwick and Kelly, 2023](#), p. 43.

⁶⁶ [Hughes, 2015](#).

⁶⁷ [Flanagan, 2022](#).

and join the opposition.⁶⁸ A few years later, in its 2019 Westminster manifesto, it did single out the petition of concern as an ‘outstanding issue’ that ‘must be dealt with’.⁶⁹ It has also called for more powers to be devolved to the Assembly from Westminster, including fiscal powers.⁷⁰

But it has rarely pushed actively for reform since 2010. In an anonymous interview with the Constitution Unit conducted in 2022, a Sinn Féin representative indicated that it was the party’s view that the issues around Executive formation were not caused by inadequate rules or procedures at Stormont, and were instead the result of political unionism’s failure to embrace the power-sharing ethos of the Agreement.⁷¹ In early 2024, just a few weeks after the publication of the NIAC report on reforming the institutions (which the party did not submit evidence to), Sinn Féin President Mary Lou McDonald stated that, while Sinn Féin was open to a conversation about reforming the powers held by the two largest parties in light of the then-ongoing blocking of the Assembly and Executive by the DUP, it was against fundamental reform of the veto power.⁷² On the other hand, the party agreed in February 2025 that the AERC should look into reform proposals.⁷³

1.2. Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)

The DUP opposed the Agreement in 1998, walking out of the all-party talks after Sinn Féin was included. In the years immediately after the 1998 Agreement, the DUP denounced the settlement and the unionists who had negotiated it:

In the Belfast Agreement the Ulster Unionist Party not only created a form of devolution which placed Sinn Féin/IRA in the heart of government but they also created a system in which the Assembly was unable to control Sinn Féin/IRA Ministers.⁷⁴

In 2007, the DUP agreed to enter the Executive with Sinn Féin following the St Andrews reforms, including ones to the process of appointing the FM and dFM and to procedures within the Executive (see chapter 1). It eventually agreed to the devolution of policing and justice in 2010. In the years that followed, the DUP’s manifestos became noticeably quieter in terms of setting out its opposition to the 1998 Agreement’s power sharing structures, as the party became accustomed to co-governing alongside Sinn Féin.⁷⁵ However, the DUP’s 2011 Assembly manifesto and a submission to the AERC in 2013 indicated that many of its older criticisms of the power-sharing system remained party policy, albeit couched in more moderate language than before:

We believe that in the long-term, the best means of governing Northern Ireland would involve a voluntary coalition Executive and weighted majority voting of around 65% in the Assembly, resulting in an end to Community Designation. This system could provide for both an Executive and an official Opposition which would be consistent with normal democratic institutions while accepting the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland. This should be the long-term goal of all of the Parties in Northern Ireland. However, we must be realistic about the ability to achieve

⁶⁸ [Assembly and Executive Review Committee, 2013](#), pp. 169–70.

⁶⁹ [Sinn Féin, 2019](#): 13; [Renwick and Kelly 2023](#), p. 45.

⁷⁰ [Sinn Féin, 2022](#): 7; [Sinn Féin, 2024](#), p. 7.

⁷¹ [Renwick and Kelly, 2023](#), p. 55.

⁷² [Breslin, 2024](#).

⁷³ [Manley, 2025](#); [Assembly and Executive Review Committee, 2025a](#); [Assembly and Executive Review Committee, 2025b](#).

⁷⁴ [DUP, 2003](#), p. 12.

⁷⁵ [Renwick and Kelly, 2023](#), pp. 34–44.

it in the short-term. While voluntary coalition would undoubtedly improve the performance of devolution in Northern Ireland, it would be a mistake to assume it is a panacea to all of the problems that we face.⁷⁶

Delivering a lecture in Dublin in 2012, then DUP leader and First Minister Peter Robinson noted how Northern Ireland's troubled and divided past shaped actors' views towards reform in the 21st century:

For countless years there was a real fear on the part of unionists that nationalists would use their place in government to act as fifth columnists to bring the State down. And some nationalists still fear that given half a chance unionists would seek to set up an Executive and Assembly that would exclude and act prejudicially to them. That unionist fear in the last century prevented modest reform in the early decades after partition just as it is probably true today that nationalist fears are inhibiting significant reforms at Stormont. If people want change then we must work to address those concerns.⁷⁷

The party has not set out its view on these issues more recently, but appears to have shifted further towards embracing the mutual vetoes held by the largest parties in the two main designations. The two DUP MPs on NIAC opposed the recommendations in the committee's final report on the institutions of the Agreement (see section 4, below) and submitted a minority report, which contained the following statement on reform:

‘1) Reform should be about ensuring locally accountable government in Northern Ireland is secured for our children and grandchildren. It should not be used as a short-term tool to punish, or embolden, one party or community.

2) The appropriate context for considering changes to the institutional arrangements is during a period of stable devolution. It is not a coincidence, but by design (on the basis of agreement and legislative change made at St Andrews) that the mechanisms for review – including the Assembly and Executive Review Committee – are built into Strand 1. The DUP insisted on these safeguards, so as two DUP MPs we certainly are not against review.

3) In line with the three stranded principle at the heart of the various Agreements, there can be no role for the Irish Government in the internal affairs of Northern Ireland. Consequently, any review must recognise that there can be no role for the Irish Government in determining the internal affairs of Northern Ireland and must seek to bring the governance of Northern Ireland fully into line with this.⁷⁸

Elsewhere on Strand One, the party's 2024 Westminster election manifesto called for an overhaul of civil service training, recruitment, and work practices, including proposals for skills sharing between the Northern Ireland Civil Service and Whitehall.⁷⁹

1.3. Alliance Party

Of the parties in Northern Ireland, Alliance has been the most consistent in criticising how the Strand One institutions function, and in calling for their reform. This began at the time of the Agreement itself. Alliance has always supported the power-sharing ethos of Strand One and the

⁷⁶ [Assembly and Executive Review Committee, 2013](#): 155; [DUP, 2011](#), p. 23.

⁷⁷ [Robinson, 2012](#).

⁷⁸ [House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2023a](#), p. 82.

⁷⁹ [DUP, 2024](#), p. 19.

Agreement's wider provisions, but has maintained that some features of Strand One are 'sectarian'.⁸⁰ Indeed, in every Westminster and Assembly election manifesto since 1998, Alliance has called for an end to the Assembly's designation system, which requires MLAs to designate as a unionist, nationalist, or (by default) 'other'.⁸¹

Alliance has also offered more detailed reform proposals than any other party, releasing several policy documents on the matter.⁸² Its submission to NIAC (put forward while the institutions were in a state of collapse) brought many of these proposals together and made the following points:

- In the short term, where a party entitled to nominate the FM or dFM fails to do so, the right to nominate should pass to the next largest party. Such a party would thus not be able to prevent the establishment of an Executive, and could enter opposition.
- In the longer term, the Executive should be formed through a voluntary, rather than 'mandatory' coalition, not necessarily including all substantial parties – subject to a vote of approval in the Assembly, presumably by weighted majority.
- The FM and dFM positions should be renamed 'Joint First Ministers', and should count against parties' entitlement to ministerial positions under the d'Hondt system (at present, the fact that a party holds the FM or dFM post does not enter into the d'Hondt equation – as holding the Justice Minister post does; thus the parties occupying those posts have a disproportionately large presence in the Executive).
- Designation should be removed, and cross-community voting in the Assembly by the existing thresholds (which the party calls 'parallel consent') should be replaced with 'weighted majority' (also known as 'supermajority') voting. The exact threshold for passing legislation would be determined after each election so as to include a sufficient number of unionists, nationalists, and others. Alliance suggested it should be around a two-thirds majority.
- The petition of concern should be restricted to three key areas: national identity; the conflict in Northern Ireland; and the constitutional structure and institutions of the 1998 Agreement.
- Cross-community voting in the Executive should be restricted in line with the petition of concern measures above. Disputes would be mediated by the Attorney General.
- The effective veto the FM and dFM hold over items appearing on the Executive's agenda should be limited by putting on a statutory footing an existing convention – which Alliance says is not being observed – that three ministers can jointly request that an agenda item not be delayed for more than three meetings.
- A 'cross-party review' of the 1998 Agreement should take place, involving all local parties and facilitated by the British and Irish governments. If unanimous agreement on reform is not possible, the two governments should proceed with options that command a broad consensus among the parties and wider society. In the absence of agreement, direct rule with a role for the British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC) would remain an option.⁸³

⁸⁰ [Alliance Party, 2003](#): 2; [Renwick and Kelly, 2023](#), p. 29.

⁸¹ [Renwick and Kelly, 2023](#), p. 44.

⁸² [Alliance Party, 2022a](#).

⁸³ [Alliance, 2022b](#).

If all of these proposals were all implemented, they would mark a significant change in the approach to cross-community power-sharing set out in the 1998 Agreement and the St Andrews adjustments. Alliance is frank on this point, and argues both that the flaws of the current system and the evolution in Northern Ireland's society since 1998 necessitate change:

Northern Ireland has never consisted of only two communities. It's time we had a political system that reflects today's open, progressive and diverse society. A system whereby the two largest parties can veto the creation of a cross-community government further reinforces the need for reform to permit a voluntary coalition to be established. In the years since the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland has not been able to reach its full potential as an economy and a society.⁸⁴

Alliance has continued to urge reform: in her speech at the party's 2025 conference, the party leader, Naomi Long, pressed hard for changes to avoid 'stop-start government', and urged the British and Irish governments to 'show leadership' by making engagement with parties and the public on reform a priority.⁸⁵

1.4. Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)

The UUP supported the Strand One institutions – which it had been instrumental in negotiating – in the years immediately after 1998, despite much political disagreement within the party and wider unionism about participation in government with Sinn Féin before full IRA de-commissioning had taken place. The party used early manifestos to praise the record of the new Executive and Assembly, while also calling for greater 'collective decision-making'.⁸⁶

But subsequently, the party became more critical of how Strand One functioned under the leadership of the DUP and Sinn Féin, and in particular of the St Andrews changes to the method of appointing the FM and dFM, which it considers has seriously disadvantaged it, to the benefit of the DUP. In a 2013 AERC submission, the UUP called for fairer allocation of committee chair positions, and reform of the process for appointing the FM and dFM. On the latter, it said the St Andrews changes gave a disproportionate share of Executive seats to the two largest parties.⁸⁷ In addition, it called for changes to how the Assembly operates:

The Ulster Unionist Party position is that the Assembly should be seeking to move away from community designation and towards weighted majority voting to reflect the normalisation of politics here. The Petition of Concern mechanism is being used on an increasingly frequent basis and we would welcome a review of the occasions it has been used and the reasons why, with particular reference to the original intent of providing this mechanism.⁸⁸

The same 2013 submission also called for a well-resourced 'official opposition'. The party did enter opposition in 2016, once provision had been made for it, but opted not to return there after the restoration of power-sharing in 2020.⁸⁹ More recently, the UUP's manifestos have been fairly muted in terms of specific reform proposals. The party did not make a written submission to NIAC in 2022, but then leader Doug Beattie gave oral evidence in July 2023. There, he outlined

⁸⁴ [Alliance, 2022c](#), pp. 90–91.

⁸⁵ [Long, 2025](#).

⁸⁶ [UUP, 2001](#): 7; [Renwick and Kelly, 2003](#), pp. 43–44.

⁸⁷ [Assembly and Executive Review Committee, 2013](#), pp. 181–82.

⁸⁸ [Assembly and Executive Review Committee, 2013](#), p. 182.

⁸⁹ [Assembly and Executive Review Committee, 2013](#), pp. 182–84.

his support for a reform process, particularly the need to address the stop/start nature of power-sharing in recent years, which he argued was partially the result of changes made to the Agreement since 1998:

The problem with all these [later] agreements is that they are sticking-plaster agreements. They are not agreements where we have got everybody together and come up with a true outworking of what we wanted, like we did in 1998. 1998 was transparent. It involved all the parties and those who were opposed to it were very vocal in their opposition to it, and quite within their rights to be very vocal. Other agreements that followed were agreements that were not done by consensus and were not transparent. The people who voted, overwhelmingly, for the Belfast/Good Friday agreement in 1998 suddenly realised that what they voted for was being slowly undermined over time.⁹⁰

1.5. Social Democratic & Labour Party (SDLP)

The SDLP co-led the first Executive, with first Seamus Mallon and then Mark Durkan serving as deputy First Minister. It subsequently suffered a period of electoral decline, as Sinn Féin became the larger nationalist party. During the early years, the party frequently championed the power-sharing system at Stormont, and highlighted its own key role in negotiating it.⁹¹ It has however, become critical of how Stormont operates in recent years, including the changes made at St Andrews. Durkan also famously called for the ‘ugly scaffolding’ of the power-sharing system to be reconsidered over time.⁹²

The party’s submission to the NIAC inquiry in 2022 called for the principles in the Agreement’s ‘Declaration of Support’ section – which include mutual consent and partnership – to better inform politics in Northern Ireland. It argued that these principles have been stymied by poor faith, political cynicism, and politically expedient (but damaging) changes to the architecture of the Agreement, as well as by recent events related to Brexit. It supported reforms, whilst maintaining that technical changes alone would not be sufficient in the absence of a recommitment to the Agreement’s core values.⁹³

More specifically, the SDLP’s submission to NIAC, called for:

- renaming the titles of the FM and dFM to reflect their equal status
- a return to the original system by which the Assembly elected the First Ministers on a joint ticket – but subject to an alternative ‘third threshold’, where the endorsement of two thirds of MLAs would be sufficient for election
- a similar two-thirds majority for the election of the Speaker, and a move away from designations in this process.⁹⁴

The SDLP also called for the Assembly’s practices, including the petition of concern, to be reviewed to enhance accountability and inclusion. It acknowledged the changing demographic and voting realities in Northern Ireland, which it said were reflected in its ‘two thirds’ proposals; but it stopped short of endorsing a move away from designations towards weighted majority more

⁹⁰ [House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2023b](#).

⁹¹ [Renwick and Kelly, 2023](#), p. 43.

⁹² [Durkan, 2008](#); [Millar, 2008](#).

⁹³ [SDLP, 2023a](#).

⁹⁴ [SDLP, 2023a](#).

generally. Finally, in the absence of a functioning Assembly, the SDLP called for an enhanced role for the BIIGC in governing Northern Ireland.⁹⁵

Recent SDLP manifestos reflect many of these same proposals. They also call for more powers to be devolved from London, accompanied by more structured budgeting and decision-making processes at Stormont:

The SDLP has long supported the devolution of further fiscal powers to Northern Ireland but we want to deliver this in a way that is sustainable and successful. The absence of a Programme for Government and multi-year Budget has undermined the delivery of public services for far too long. We strongly believe that a three-year Budget should be aligned with the publication of a new Programme for Government. We support a Programme for Government target to meaningfully increase the tax varying and borrowing powers of the NI Assembly by the end of the mandate.⁹⁶

The SDLP as the opposition in the newly restored Assembly has pushed heavily for reform, particularly as regards the ability of one party to bring down the institutions: this was the subject of its first motion in the Assembly in March 2024.⁹⁷ It regularly criticised the long-lasting failure of the Executive to adopt a Programme for Government, and it has been instrumental in putting reforms on the current agenda of the AERC.⁹⁸

1.6. Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV)

The TUV was founded in 2007 by Jim Allister KC, who had served as a DUP MEP, but left after that party entered the Executive with Sinn Féin. Though it has rarely had a great many elected representatives, the TUV has exercised a substantial influence on unionist politics. In the 2022 Assembly election, however, the party won 7.6% of the first preference vote.⁹⁹ Allister, long its sole MLA, was elected the MP for North Antrim in the 2024 Westminster election, unseating the long-term DUP MP Ian Paisley Jr.¹⁰⁰

Alone among the parties examined here, the TUV continues to reject the 1998 Agreement settlement in its entirety. In evidence submitted to the AERC at Stormont in 2013, the party was explicit in setting out its opposition to a government that involved Sinn Féin:

The present arrangements are a reward for terrorism. Hence the absurd mechanism of mandatory coalition, whereby IRA/Sinn Féin is guaranteed a place in government for as long as it takes them to achieve their all Ireland Republic. Because of mandatory coalition, Northern Ireland is the only region in the EU where the voter is prohibited by law from voting a Party out of office. This undemocratic absurdity must be ended.¹⁰¹

The party did not submit evidence to the 2022–23 NIAC enquiry, but its recent manifestos have outlined several areas where it would like to see changes. Its 2022 Assembly manifesto set out two alternative reform packages. Under ‘Plan A’, a voluntary ‘coalition of the willing’ would be formed

⁹⁵ [SDLP, 2023a](#).

⁹⁶ [SDLP, 2024](#), p. 15.

⁹⁷ [McBride, 2024](#).

⁹⁸ [Assembly and Executive Review Committee, 2025a](#); [Assembly and Executive Review Committee, 2025b](#).

⁹⁹ [BBC News, 2022b](#).

¹⁰⁰ [BBC News, 2024b](#).

¹⁰¹ [Assembly and Executive Review Committee, 2013](#), p. 173.

alongside an official opposition. There would be ‘strategic’ use of weighted majority voting mechanisms, though gradual ‘normalisation’ towards a 50% voting threshold was the party’s aim.¹⁰² Alternatively, under ‘Plan B’, Northern Ireland would move to a system of ‘legislative devolution’ only, with ministers from Westminster carrying out executive functions; failing that, direct rule from London would be reintroduced.¹⁰³ The party opposes further devolution of powers to Northern Ireland.¹⁰⁴

2. Views from Dublin and London

In early 2024, the then Irish Tánaiste (Deputy Prime Minister), Minister for Foreign Affairs, and leader of Fianna Fáil, Micheál Martin – now once again Taoiseach – made several notable interventions on the subject of Strand One reform.

First, in a Dáil debate in February 2024, he advocated inclusive all-party discussions about reforming politics in Northern Ireland. While highlighting progress since 1998, he conceded ‘few would argue that the institutions have operated as effectively as we might have hoped’.¹⁰⁵ He argued there was scope to address some issues through a review process, which would recommit the parties to the fundamental ethos of the peace process as well as delivering institutional change:

structural change is needed. The people of Northern Ireland should not be expected to tolerate further cycles of instability and suspension of the institutions.¹⁰⁶

Second, addressing an Alliance Party conference in March 2024, he pressed again for a more detailed and structured conversation about reform of Strand One:

Every time I was asked in the last couple of years about reform, I always made the point that it would be better to address these issues against the background of functioning institutions.... Well, that is now in place and with it in place, I feel that the opportunity to begin a meaningful conversation about reform presents itself.¹⁰⁷

He cited a number of possible reforms that ‘deserved to be engaged with’, including whether it was right that a single party should be able to block the operation of the institutions, or particular policy decisions; whether the system for nominating the FM and dFM was fit for purpose; whether having different names for the FM and dFM positions had any logic; whether the use of cross-community voting, as compared to a ‘more equitable weighted majority system’ was any longer right; whether the mooted Bill of Rights could finally be advanced; and how a wider range of civic voices could be heard.¹⁰⁸

A few days before Martin’s address to the Alliance conference, the then Conservative government in London issued its official response to the NIAC report, which took a markedly different tone. Though it welcomed the report and stated the UK government ‘remains unshakable in its

¹⁰² [TUV, 2022](#), pp. 9–10.

¹⁰³ [TUV, 2022](#), p. 11.

¹⁰⁴ [TUV, 2022](#), pp. 14–15.

¹⁰⁵ Statement on ‘Recent Developments in Northern Ireland’, [Dáil Éireann debate, 14 February 2024, vol. 1049, no. 5](#).

¹⁰⁶ Statement on ‘Recent Developments in Northern Ireland’, [Dáil Éireann debate, 14 February 2024, vol. 1049, no. 5](#).

¹⁰⁷ [Micheál Martin, 2024a](#).

¹⁰⁸ [Micheál Martin, 2024a](#).

commitment to the Agreement’, it accepted none of the committee’s concrete recommendations (see the next section). It pointed out that NIAC’s inquiry had occurred against the backdrop of Executive and Assembly suspension, which had thankfully now been resolved.¹⁰⁹ It argued that a proposal to elect the Speaker by weighted majority vote would ‘represent a significant departure from the original cross-community protections of the Agreement’, and would also fail in its stated objective of preventing a single party from blocking a Speaker nomination, based on current party numbers.¹¹⁰ It said that reform to the Strand One institutions would require much broader consultations and consensus than NIAC could offer. Controversially, it suggested that the role envisaged by NIAC for the Dublin government in discussing Strand One issues was uncalled for and went beyond the precedents set during the peace process.¹¹¹

Since coming to office, the Labour government has not generally pushed for reforms. The Northern Ireland Office minister Fleur Anderson, in a Westminster Hall debate on the Northern Ireland institutions on 21 January 2025, suggested that, while continuing discussion of the question was needed, consensus was also essential. She acknowledged that such consensus did not currently exist, and so argued that the focus should be on supporting the Executive to deliver on public service improvements.¹¹² The Secretary of State took the same line in a speech at Ulster University on 4 February, arguing that agreement between the parties to reform the current arrangements would be required, and the key task for now was to make the existing institutions work. Much of the speech was given over to encouraging the Executive to deliver public services more effectively, without waiting for extra money from London.¹¹³

The new government in London has clearly also invested its energies in repairing the relationship with Dublin, which had been noticeably damaged by the Brexit issue amongst others in recent years. For its part, Dublin has warmly received these overtures from the Labour government.¹¹⁴ It has generally not publicly pressed the need for further debate or conversation on reform of Northern Ireland’s governance structures, though Martin did call for ‘honest conversations about the practical functioning and management of the institutions’ at the British–Irish Association conference held in Oxford in September 2024.¹¹⁵ Both governments have met in recent months through the 1998 Agreement’s Strand Three institutions: the British–Irish Council and the British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC).¹¹⁶ They have also committed to hosting annual summits on ‘trade and cooperation’.¹¹⁷

The Programme for Government of the new Irish government established in January 2025 majors on strengthening relations between London and Dublin. It says little about reform of the Strand

¹⁰⁹ The UK Government’s response to the NIAC report is available at [House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2024](#), p. 7.

¹¹⁰ [Ibid.](#), p. 3.

¹¹¹ As we have set out elsewhere ([Kelly and Whysall, 2024](#), pp. 3–5), while it is true the Irish government was not directly involved in the Strand One negotiations in 1998, it was key to the negotiation of the overall Agreement, and governments led by both the Labour and the Conservative parties have relied on Dublin to help deliver political stability to Northern Ireland since the very early years of the peace process.

¹¹² Debate on ‘Northern Ireland’s Political Institutions’ (Westminster Hall), [House of Commons Hansard, vol. 760 \(21 January, 2025\)](#).

¹¹³ [Benn, 2025](#).

¹¹⁴ [Harris and Starmer, 2024](#).

¹¹⁵ [Martin, 2024b](#).

¹¹⁶ [UK and Irish Governments, 2024](#).

¹¹⁷ [Evans and Mitchell, 2024](#).

One institutions, except for a commitment to ‘advocate for the re-establishment and full operation of a Northern Ireland Civic Forum as envisaged in the Good Friday Agreement’.¹¹⁸

3. Northern Ireland Affairs Committee report (2023)

The research conducted here began with the work undertaken by the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (NIAC) in 2022–23 through its inquiry into *The Effectiveness of the Institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement*.¹¹⁹ The sections above draw heavily on the evidence submitted to this inquiry. While the committee’s report, published in December 2023, examined all institutions of the 1998 Agreement across its three strands, it devoted most attention to the operation of the Assembly and Executive at Stormont. The report was prepared and published while the institutions remained in abeyance and some of the recommendations were clearly directed to securing their early return to operation.

While stressing the need for ‘support [from] the Irish Government and the consent of the Northern Ireland parties’ for implementing its recommendations,¹²⁰ it set out a range of reforms the committee thought the UK government and parliament should consider, and in some cases implement, immediately. It proposed that:

- the Northern Ireland Act 1998 should be amended ‘as soon as possible’ so that the Speaker of the Assembly would be elected by MLAs by a two-thirds majority, rather than the cross-community vote method as is the case now¹²¹
- the positions of FM and dFM should be renamed ‘Joint First Ministers’¹²²
- the Northern Ireland Act 1998 should be amended so that, from the next Assembly election, the ‘two holders of the office of Joint First Minister are elected by the Assembly on a supermajority basis of two-thirds, with nominations open to any two MLAs of any two parties who run on a joint slate’.¹²³

While acknowledging that these proposals were no panacea, the committee hoped that the first and third recommendations would end the ability of one party to stop the functioning of Strand One in its entirety.

NIAC also called for the parties and the two governments to instigate a ‘review’ of other aspects of Strand One. Areas it highlighted as requiring more attention included:

- ‘a full evaluation of how the present system of Executive formation might be reformed to increase coalition cohesiveness while maintaining cross-community representation’¹²⁴
- ‘a full evaluation of the effect of community designation in facilitating effective, stable and – in the broadest sense – cross-community governance in Northern Ireland’¹²⁵

¹¹⁸ [Irish Government, 2025](#), p. 143.

¹¹⁹ [House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2022](#): Inquiry Page.

¹²⁰ [House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2023a](#), p. 33.

¹²¹ [Ibid.](#), pp. 34–35.

¹²² [Ibid.](#), p. 36.

¹²³ [Ibid.](#), p. 38.

¹²⁴ [Ibid.](#), p. 40.

¹²⁵ [Ibid.](#), p. 40.

- ‘a module on how the behaviours and working practices of the Strand One institutions could be improved, with a view to developing a programme dedicated to upholding the Agreement’s core principles of good faith, trust and mutual respect and delivering good government in the best interests of all in Northern Ireland’.¹²⁶

The report did not recommend that the UK government make these changes or conduct these evaluations unilaterally, but instead ‘urged’ London to commission an ‘independently led’ review of the institutions in consultation with the Irish government and the local parties. It also recommended that citizens’ assemblies be used to gather insights from the public on what reform could look like.

The composition of NIAC should be noted. The committee was chaired during the period of its inquiry successively by two Conservative MPs. It included additional Conservative and Labour MPs, and four members from Northern Ireland. Two of these – Stephen Farry of the Alliance Party and Claire Hanna of the SDLP – endorsed the report and publicly defended it after its publication.¹²⁷ But the two DUP MPs on the committee, Carla Lockhart and Jim Shannon, did not support the final report, and instead submitted a minority report rejecting many of the core findings (see section 1.2, on the DUP, above). Sinn Féin, of course, does not take its seats at Westminster and was therefore unrepresented on the committee. It also declined to make a submission to the inquiry.

4. Civic society, retired experts, academics, and public opinion

4.1. Civic society

Civic society and non-party actors played a significant role in the peace process.¹²⁸ Twenty-seven years later, many across civic society have been concerned about the paralysis, instability and lack of delivery of Stormont, as demonstrated in many submissions to the NIAC inquiry in 2022–23 and in arguments advanced elsewhere.

The think tank Pivotal has stressed the need to create a Programme for Government at the formation of each Executive. It has also made other suggestions aimed at delivering good governance, including more long-term budgeting and greater powers for independent bodies like the Fiscal Council.¹²⁹ Stratagem and the John and Pat Hume Foundation made similar proposals for improving the quality of government in a joint submission to NIAC, including new skills training opportunities for civil servants, MLAs, and local councillors.¹³⁰ Retail NI called for greater input from civic society, including in the process of negotiating the Programme for Government.¹³¹

The writer and activist Emma DeSouza argues that the petition of concern has been misused, beyond the intentions of the 1998 Agreement, and draws attention to the continuing absence of a

¹²⁶ [Ibid.](#), p. 44.

¹²⁷ [Ibid.](#), p. 40; [SDLP, 2023b](#); [Alliance Party, 2023](#).

¹²⁸ [Renwick and Kelly, 2023](#), pp. 20–21.

¹²⁹ [Pivotal, 2022](#). In February 2024, Pivotal called for three-year budgeting ([Pivotal, 2024](#)).

¹³⁰ [Stratagem and the John and Pat Hume Foundation, 2022](#).

¹³¹ [Retail NI, 2022](#).

Civic Forum and Bill of Rights, as envisaged by the Agreement.¹³² The Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) made similar recommendations around the petition of concern, arguing for a greater role for the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the creation of a Bill of Rights to help manage petition issues.¹³³

The Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland (also known as ‘the Orange Order’) opposed the Agreement in 1998.¹³⁴ Its NIAC submission called for undoing some of the changes made at St Andrews.¹³⁵ In another submission to NIAC, the Centre for Cross Border Studies stressed the need for debates around reform to keep in mind the interdependence of the various elements of the 1998 Agreement.¹³⁶

4.2. Retired experts (senior politicians and officials)

Several politicians who were directly involved in the negotiations in 1998 and the immediate aftermath gave oral evidence to the NIAC inquiry, including former Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, former UK Prime Minister John Major, and former party leaders Lord (John) Alderdice (Alliance), Mark Durkan (SDLP), and Baroness (Arlene) Foster of Aghadrumsee (DUP). Each of these set out how the institutions have in some ways failed to reach their full potential. Many highlighted a lack of political goodwill from key actors to make the system work, though they disagreed on where responsibility for this lay. Mark Durkan warned of a ‘moral hazard’, where the ‘peace process’ can continue to operate even as the Stormont institutions continuously collapse, risking the wider settlement over time.¹³⁷ Lord Alderdice suggested the two governments needed to re-engage more substantially in the political process in Northern Ireland to help bring stability.¹³⁸ Baroness Foster recommended that the processes for agreeing the budget and the Programme for Government be brought together.¹³⁹ John Cushnahan (a former leader of the Alliance Party and former Fine Gael MEP) argued that unaddressed issues from the peace process, including the continued prevalence of single-community schools and glorification of paramilitary violence, fed political instability.¹⁴⁰

Former journalists, civil servants, and other experts on the politics of Northern Ireland who are no longer working also made noteworthy contributions to the NIAC inquiry. Tom Kelly – former BBC journalist and official in the Northern Ireland Office and Downing Street – argued that the two governments need to re-engage in politics in Northern Ireland more substantially, and that the reform agenda should broaden the definition of ‘sufficient consensus’ to deal with the new reality of three minority communities in Northern Ireland.¹⁴¹ Sir Malcolm McKibbin, Sir David Sterling, and Andrew McCormick (all former officials of the Northern Ireland Civil Service) jointly made a submission in which they warned those contemplating reform that:

¹³² [De Souza, 2023](#).

¹³³ [Committee on the Administration of Justice \(CAJ\), 2022](#).

¹³⁴ [McAuley and Tonge, 2008](#).

¹³⁵ [Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland, 2022](#).

¹³⁶ [Centre for Cross Border Studies, 2022](#).

¹³⁷ [House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2023c](#).

¹³⁸ [Ibid.](#)

¹³⁹ [Ibid.](#)

¹⁴⁰ [Cushnahan, 2022](#).

¹⁴¹ [Kelly, 2022](#).

it would in practice be impossible to create a formula that would guarantee that the institutions would function, if one or other of the biggest parties chose to withdraw or abstain. A government without their participation would have limited legitimacy. Furthermore, in realpolitik, it would be politically difficult for the smaller party on either side of the divide to enter government with the larger party on the other side, as that would provide their opponents with a ‘betrayal’ narrative.¹⁴²

Writing on his own for the Constitution Society in 2024 (just before the restoration of power sharing), McCormick argued that ‘it is not possible in practice to establish stable governance arrangements for Northern Ireland without positive unionist participation, which cannot be forced or commanded by so-called “reform” of the institutions’.¹⁴³

Alan Whysall’s reports for the Constitution Unit – notably those of 2022 and 2024 – have discussed reform issues at length.¹⁴⁴ The 2022 paper examined the range of reform proposals, suggesting that all needed more public discussion in order to be sure they were robust. It also drew attention to the risks to the 1998 settlement if the institutions could not be prevented from collapsing. It suggested that, while permanent reform would need a substantial measure of consensus to be legitimate, where the institutions had collapsed (as was the case at the time), temporary measures with less wide support might be justified to restore the institutions, while the pursuit of a fully agreed resolution continued. The author’s written submission¹⁴⁵ and oral evidence¹⁴⁶ to the NIAC, and the 2024 report, picked up these themes.

Whysall’s reports and evidence also raised the relatively little discussed question of possible institutional steps that might help fill the ‘good government deficit’. They acknowledged that the problems, and solutions, were largely about political culture rather than institutions; nevertheless, there might be institutional reforms that would help, and perhaps contribute to cultural change. The 2022 report stressed the importance of concluding a serious Programme for Government – more than a set of commitments, but including a meaningful timetable and machinery to ensure implementation.

That report also made the argument for a body insulated from short-term political pressure to foster debate on key public policy options, somewhat as the Fiscal Council has done. Such a body might also produce draft Programmes for Government for consideration by the institutions, and monitor implementation.¹⁴⁷ The following chapter (section 2.6) calls this institution a ‘Public Policy Council’. This proposal has some similarities with a recommendation for ‘buttressing institutions’ made by the Institute for Government in 2019.¹⁴⁸

4.3. Academia

In the political science literature, the system of government for Northern Ireland outlined in the 1998 Agreement is frequently referred to as ‘consociational’.¹⁴⁹ Consociational systems combine

¹⁴² [McKibbin, Sterling, and McCormick, 2022](#).

¹⁴³ [McCormick, 2024](#), pp. 29–30.

¹⁴⁴ [Whysall, 2022a](#): see especially chapter 9 on reform generally; and chapter 8 on good government, which includes institutional proposals to foster better government; [Whysall, 2024](#): see especially pp. 20–22 on reform generally, and pp. 18–20 on proposals to foster better government.

¹⁴⁵ [Whysall, 2022b](#).

¹⁴⁶ [House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2023d](#).

¹⁴⁷ An idea floated by the author the previous year in Fortnight magazine: [Whysall, 2021](#).

¹⁴⁸ [Rutter and Sargeant, 2019](#), p. 53.

¹⁴⁹ [Lijphart, 1969](#); [McGarry and O’Leary, 2015](#).

power-sharing and proportional representation across different sections of society with veto points and community protections designed to ensure that no one community can dominate. They have been used in a range of deeply divided societies that are experiencing ethnic or religious conflict.

Consociationalism is not the only remedy for such divisions to have been advocated by academics. Its critics fear that it merely manages divisions, rather than seeking to overcome them. Instead, some scholars recommend a ‘centripetal’ system of government, where moderates are encouraged to cooperate with one another. Central to this scheme is an electoral system that rewards parties that reach out across community lines. Since the signing of the Agreement in 1998, several academics have criticised Northern Ireland’s consociational system for entrenching existing sectarian divisions and have offered similar remedies to centripetalism.¹⁵⁰ Replacing power-sharing with a centripetal system in Northern Ireland would require various changes to the operation of Strand One. Community designations and cross-community voting in the Assembly (including the petition of concern) would probably give way to weighted majority voting. ‘Mandatory’ Executive coalitions would likely be replaced by ‘coalitions of the willing’.

Some academics working directly on Northern Ireland have also set out specific reform ideas. Dr Joanne McEvoy at the University of Aberdeen and Professor Allison McCulloch at Brandon University in Canada argue in a submission to the NIAC inquiry that the changes made at St Andrews around the appointment of the FM and dFM contributed to instability by fostering increased electoral pressures between and within communities at election time. The relative success of the d’Hondt process for other posts, they argue, suggests that it should be used for all ministerial positions.¹⁵¹

Meanwhile, Professor Jon Tonge at the University of Liverpool argues that reform measures need to recognise that Northern Ireland now has three, not two, minority communities, as demonstrated in recent electoral success for Alliance and the growing number of people who identify as ‘neither unionist nor nationalist’ at the societal level. A ‘qualified voluntary coalition’ could replace the current system, allowing two of these three minorities to form a coalition that omits the other if it is unwilling to take part.¹⁵²

Dr Lisa Claire Whitten, writing in 2023 for the Institute for Government and the Bennett Institute, identifies a similar issue but offers a different solution for accommodating the ‘neither’ group:

In keeping with the principle of power-sharing government, the established third designation – ‘neither’ – could be granted equal democratic weight by amending the definition of ‘cross-community’ consent such that, to pass, qualifying votes would be required to meet a threshold of either a majority of members present and voting that included a multiplicity of the three designations (reformed parallel consent) or a 60% majority of members present and voting that included 20% designated unionist, 20% designated nationalist and 20% designated ‘neither’ representatives (reformed weighted consent).¹⁵³

Professor Colin Murray at Newcastle University and Anurag Deb, a PhD candidate at Queen’s University Belfast, argue that asking the civil service to ‘keep the lights on’ when the Executive is

¹⁵⁰ [Wilford and Wilson, 2003](#); [Taylor, 2006](#).

¹⁵¹ [McEvoy and McCulloch, 2022](#).

¹⁵² [Tonge, 2022](#).

¹⁵³ [Whitten, 2023](#), p. 26.

suspended lacks accountability.¹⁵⁴ Deb has elsewhere suggested that the courts should change their approach in order to help stabilise Strand One, arguing for less judicial restraint in the face of ‘intransigent and arguably bad faith behaviour’ by Executive ministers.¹⁵⁵

A NIAC submission from four PhD candidates at Queen’s University Belfast pointed out that businesses are most trusted in Northern Ireland on issues related to the implementation of the Protocol, and as such there should be greater input on policy from them, alongside other civic society organisations including trade unions. The Civic Forum outlined in the 1998 Agreement would be one vehicle for delivering this input, they said.¹⁵⁶

Finally, a few months after the NIAC inquiry, the journalist and academic Dr David McCann proposed reforms to the system for replacing MLAs who depart midterm. Rather than allowing parties to co-opt new members at will, as at present, he proposed that candidates should specify pre-election who would replace them if they vacated their position early.¹⁵⁷

4.4. Public opinion

Direct evidence on the public’s views on reform issues is quite limited. This is probably, at least in part, the result of how complex the current system appears to people who are not working directly in it. That being said, there is some evidence about public views towards Strand One that gives insight into how people might see various possible reforms.

To start, it is clear from polling research that public support for the 1998 Agreement, devolution, and the core principles of power-sharing remains high. In a survey conducted after the 2022 Assembly elections, two thirds of respondents agreed that the Agreement ‘remains the best basis for governing Northern Ireland’. Yet it also found that 44% of those supporting the Agreement believed some changes may be necessary to make it function better.¹⁵⁸ Northern Ireland election surveys and the annual Northern Ireland Life and Times survey (NILT) also show consistent support for the Agreement, though this is higher among Catholic than Protestant respondents, and there is significant frustration across society with the inefficiencies of the Strand One institutions and their tendency towards gridlock.¹⁵⁹

Qualitative evidence reveals a similar picture. A series of focus groups conducted by the Constitution Unit in 2022 with members of the public in Northern Ireland found strong support for the Agreement across society, though there was considerable discontent across different communities with how it worked in practice, and some outright opposition in sections of unionism and loyalism. Public knowledge of the precise detail of how the institutions operated, how they might be reformed, and what mechanism of change should deliver reform, was low.¹⁶⁰ Again, given the complexity of this topic, it is not surprising that people who are not closely engaged with it would not have specific views on many such matters.

¹⁵⁴ [Murray and Deb, 2022](#).

¹⁵⁵ [Deb, 2024](#).

¹⁵⁶ [Robb et al., 2022](#).

¹⁵⁷ [McCann, 2024](#).

¹⁵⁸ [Garry, 2023](#), pp. 4–5.

¹⁵⁹ [Renwick and Kelly, 2023](#), pp. 79–88.

¹⁶⁰ [Renwick and Kelly, 2023](#), pp. 88–122.

In terms of public attitudes towards specific reform ideas, the post-election survey in 2022 also found that over half of respondents either agreed or ‘strongly agreed’ that the current system for nominating the FM and dFM should remain as it is.¹⁶¹ In a deliberative forum run by Dr Jamie Pow from Queen’s University Belfast and Dr Sean Haughey from the University of Liverpool, members of the public appeared more open to changing the titles of these positions to reflect their equal status. They also expressed a preference for maintaining the designation system as a community safeguard in the Assembly along with the ‘mandatory’ coalition model in the Executive. That being said, participants were open to discussion of reform and, as noted elsewhere, were frustrated at the inefficiencies of the current system.¹⁶²

5. Conclusion

This chapter has shown that few of those people who have spoken publicly on the matters addressed in this report want to move away from the 1998 Agreement’s core principles, and most see power-sharing and devolution as offering the best system of government for Northern Ireland at present. But there is serious concern about the way that the institutions are operating, or not operating, resulting in a wide range of reform proposals.

Despite this concern, there has not, so far, been a detailed public debate on these issues – they are technical, albeit of potentially great significance. Some areas are more fully explored than others: measures designed to prevent collapse, and to make the system more equitable have been more fully discussed than have reforms intended to enhance good government. The next chapter catalogues these proposals thematically and examines what their effects might be.

¹⁶¹ [Garry, 2023](#), pp. 6–7.

¹⁶² [Haughey and Pow, 2023](#): 1–8.

Chapter 3. Assessing Reform Proposals

The previous chapter set out the attitudes to Strand One political reform of each of Northern Ireland's political parties and of a range of other actors. This chapter focuses on the main reform proposals themselves. It provides a catalogue of such proposals and examines the potential consequences of each.

We organise the proposals into four groups. The first two of these relate to the Executive. There have been multiple proposals for reforming how the Executive is formed, and we therefore examine these in detail in the first section. The second section looks at proposals to change other aspects of the Executive. The third section focuses on the Assembly and the fourth on other areas of Strand One.

We examine each proposal in terms of the three themes set out in chapter 1:

- the likelihood that the institutions could **collapse**
- the protection of **equity** in the system, especially across Northern Ireland's political communities
- the promotion of **good governance** and better delivery of public services.

In considering possible reforms, it is important also to remain aware of potential **interactions** among individual reform proposals, and to consider how far reform proposals **fit with the terms of the 1998 Agreement**, as amended by later texts. We therefore address these points for each proposal as well.

We do not offer our own judgements on proposals, but instead seek to enable structured and informed debate on reform ideas. As in chapter 2, we aim to present those proposals in a non-partisan and objective manner.

1. Reforming the process of Executive formation

One of the most significant sources of concern for many observers has been the capacity of a single political party to prevent the Executive and Assembly from functioning. A number of proposals have been made to constrain that power. Other proposals seek to address perceived inequities in the current Executive formation rules.

Perhaps the simplest reform option would return the system to the arrangements used before the St Andrews process in 2006–7. Alternatively, the most radical change would replace the current 'mandatory coalition' model with a system of 'voluntary' coalitions. Between these options are three more specific possible reforms: using a new voting threshold for election of the First and deputy First Ministers (FM and dFM); allowing the transfer of nomination rights from one party to another; and counting the FM and dFM when calculating the d'Hondt allocation of other ministerial posts. This section examines each of these proposals in turn.

1.1. Returning to a joint ticket for electing the First and deputy First Ministers

The original process for nominating the FM and dFM was changed following St Andrews. Under the original rules outlined in the 1998 Agreement, as explained in chapter 1, the Assembly elected a joint slate of candidates for FM and dFM, by a cross-community vote requiring the support of at least 50% each of nationalist and unionist members voting, as well as 50% of the Assembly as a whole.¹⁶³ Under the rules used since 2007, the largest party in the Assembly nominates the First Minister, and the largest party in the designation that does not include the First Minister nominates the deputy First Minister. If either of these parties refuses to make a nomination, the whole process of Executive formation is blocked: those parties cannot choose opposition.

Some people suggest there should be a return to the old, pre-St Andrews system. It is argued that the old system meant that both officeholders had a mandate from across the community, which is of symbolic and perhaps practical importance. Under the current rules, each holds their post through having been nominated by a single political party

Collapse: If the pre-St Andrews system were restored, no party would formally have an outright veto over Executive formation. Parties would need to present a joint ticket to the Assembly, which any two parties could do. On the other hand, a party with 50% of the MLAs in either the unionist or nationalist designation, would (in the absence of any further reforms) be able to block any ticket in a cross-community vote. But, in principle at least, this system would give a party the option of not taking the FM/dFM post without blocking the operation of the institutions, as is the case at present.

The original system required supporting parties to vote for both members of the FM/dFM ticket. It appears that reluctance among DUP members to be seen voting for a Sinn Féin deputy First Minister motivated the change. Returning to the old system might therefore increase the risk that inter-party negotiations did not produce a viable joint ticket. Over a quarter of a century on from the end of the Troubles, however, this risk may now be less significant.

Equity: The balance between nationalism and unionism would not be affected by this change.

In addition, supporters of smaller parties within unionism and nationalism believe that the 2007 change disadvantaged them. Under the current rules, the larger parties in each bloc can argue that voters need to support them, so as to ensure that the First Minister comes from their community. This has been a concern of the Ulster Unionist Party in particular, but in recent years the SDLP has also commented on the dynamic.¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, a return to the pre-2007 rules would, at least in principle, allow smaller parties to secure the FM or dFM positions if they gained the support of 50% of MLAs within their designation.

On the other hand, parties designating as ‘other’ would see reversion to the old system, in the absence of other changes, as increasing the unfairness towards them. Since a cross-community vote requires at least 50% of both unionist and nationalist MLAs to pass, a candidate from outside those blocks would in practice stand little chance of election – even if their party had become the largest party, thereby giving it the right to nominate under the current system.

¹⁶³ [Northern Ireland Act 1998, section 16 as originally enacted.](#)

¹⁶⁴ [Belfast Live, 2023.](#)

Good governance: As we saw in chapter 2, some argue that requiring the joint election of the two heads of government positions, as before St Andrews, would reduce the sectarian ‘carve up’ nature of the current system by fostering a greater sense of common purpose between two parties from different designations. How far a change of this sort would, by itself, have such beneficial effects on governance is hard to predict, however.

Fit with the Agreement: The proposed system was the one endorsed by the public in the 1998 referendum, and adopting it would constitute a return to the spirit and letter of the 1998 Agreement. It therefore poses no direct threat to the Agreement settlement.

Interactions with other reform proposals: The impact of this change would be different if it were combined with reforms to the designation system to put the ‘others’ on an equal footing with nationalism and unionism (see section 3.2, below). Assuming such changes applied to cross-community votes on the FM and dFM, the ‘others’ designation would then be significantly enhanced, adding a new veto player to the system.

1.2. Moving to a voluntary coalition approach to Executive formation, endorsed by a weighted majority

A much more radical proposal to reform how the Executive is formed is to move away from so-called ‘mandatory’ coalitions whose composition is regulated by the FM/dFM appointment provisions and the d’Hondt system, to a system of ‘voluntary’ coalitions, under which a new Executive as a whole would be endorsed by a vote in the Assembly, subject to a weighted majority threshold to guarantee a degree of cross-community participation. The exact mechanics are unclear: the vote would probably be on a single slate for the whole Executive, including the FM and dFM, though variations are possible.

The effect of this change would differ markedly depending on the level at which the threshold was set – and this varies across different proposals. The commonest proposal appears to be around two thirds of MLAs, but it could be as low as 55% or as high as 75%. One proposal is that it should be ‘calculated after each election ... to ensure that it includes unionists, nationalists and those who are neither’: a formulation that is open to different interpretations, but that might amount to giving ‘others’ a veto.¹⁶⁵ Such thresholds can be called either ‘weighted majority’ or ‘supermajority’ thresholds; we use the former term here, as it is more frequently heard in Northern Ireland.

If this proposal were accepted, it would be seen by many as right in principle that weighted majorities would then be used also for a range of other matters: decision-making within the Executive; selecting the Speaker of the Assembly; deciding on matters requiring broad consensus within the Assembly. The subject of weighted majorities will thus recur several times in the sections below (sections 1.3, 2.5, 3.1, and 3.2). If it were adopted for all circumstances in which cross-community votes are currently used, then the system of designation would be redundant. There are potentially strong interactions between such proposals: having weighted majority rules in one area but not in another could create tensions. We highlight such matters within each section.

¹⁶⁵ [Alliance Party, 2022b](#), p. 7.

Collapse: Depending on where the threshold was set, the proposal could end the ability for one party to prevent an Executive from being formed. Table 3.1 sets out the results of the most recent Assembly elections in order to illustrate the possible effects. The current Executive formation rules give Sinn Féin and the DUP effective veto powers as, respectively, the largest party and the largest party in the largest designation not containing the largest party. With a two-thirds overall weighted majority requirement, they would lose these veto powers, as neither party holds a third of the total seats; by contrast, they would retain their vetoes if the weighted majority threshold were set at 75%. With either of these thresholds, nationalism and unionism as a whole would be able to veto nominees by voting cohesively. Under the current rules and with current voting strengths, ‘others’ have no say in selecting the FM or dFM. They would continue to have no veto powers under any threshold below 80%, but could potentially exercise influence by allying with parties from other designations.

Table 3.1. Seats in the Assembly after the 2022 election

Designation	Seats (no.)	Seats (%)	Political party	Seats (no.)	Seats (%)
Nationalism	35	38.9	Sinn Féin	27	30.0
			SDLP	8	8.9
Unionism	37	41.1	DUP	25	27.8
			UUP	9	10.0
			TUV	1	1.1
			Independents	2	2.2
Others	18	20.0	Alliance	17	18.9
			People before Profit*	1	1.1

* People before Profit (PBP) is a small left-wing party that runs candidates on either side of the Irish border and supports the creation of a united Ireland by democratic means. Its MLAs designate as ‘other’ because they reject the designation system, not because they are agnostic on the constitutional question.

Of course, future elections could yield different results, with different effects. Indeed, parties have recently come close to winning a third of the seats: Sinn Féin currently holds 30% of the seats; the DUP held 31% of the seats following the election of 2017. If a party did secure over a third of seats, then it would, with a two-thirds majority rule, retain veto power.

Such arrangements might allow the formation of a functioning cross-community Executive without the largest party in either unionism or nationalism. At present, this would mean excluding Sinn Féin or the DUP from the Executive; instead, the second party of nationalism or unionism would join with the parties in the other designation and the ‘others’ to form a government. Even if the reform attracted sufficient support to be enacted, the political feasibility of such an approach would depend very much on the circumstances: it would not be guaranteed.

Equity: This change would make designations irrelevant for the purpose of forming an Executive. In an important sense, the votes of all representatives – whether unionist, nationalist, or ‘other’ –

would have equal weight. On the other hand, the protections that currently exist for the two largest designations – which have always been unionist and nationalist – would be diminished.

Interactions with other reform proposals: As we highlighted above, any move towards a weighted majority threshold in confirming an Executive could stand alone or could be combined with making the same change for matters that are currently subject to a cross-community vote in the Assembly (see sections 3.1 and 3.2).

If the Executive appointment process were reformed, but these procedures in the Assembly were left unchanged, a party excluded from the Executive could block the government's business in the Assembly. This could be seen positively by the excluded party as a protection mechanism, allowing effective opposition. However, it could also lead to a 'lame duck' Executive, which was in effect unable to govern as the excluded party repeatedly voted down its business (particularly finance bills) in the Assembly.

Fit with the Agreement: The introduction of weighted majority voting would constitute a significant departure from the text of the 1998 Agreement, which specifically prescribes cross-community voting with minimum thresholds of support in the nationalist and unionist designations. The Agreement does not recognise the 'others' as a distinct group requiring the same degree of political protection (though it does recognise the right of people in Northern Ireland to identify as 'both' British and Irish).

On the other hand, proponents of the change would argue that a weighted majority scheme would provide a more effective guarantee of a significant element of consensus across the community in a changing Northern Ireland, in line with the intentions of the Agreement. The core principle of power-sharing would on this view be upheld in a different way, perhaps better suited to present circumstances.

While weighted majorities have rarely been adopted as yet in Northern Ireland, they have a long history in proposals, notably featuring regularly in British government papers from 1972 until the 1990s. The 1995 British government document *A Framework for Accountable Government in Northern Ireland* – one of two Framework documents produced in advance of the negotiations that led to the Agreement, the other being a joint production with the Irish government – embodies many proposals to use weighted majorities for key votes in the Assembly. The dominant parties in the Agreement negotiations, however, preferred a different approach. One weighted majority threshold does appear in the Northern Ireland Act 1998, in the mechanism through which members of the Assembly can bring about an early election.¹⁶⁶ But that provision did not appear in the Agreement, and it seems in fact to have been borrowed from the Scotland Act.¹⁶⁷

Were the largest parties in unionism and nationalism to agree to this change, it might be seen as a natural progression of the system, allowing for different coalitions to be formed at different points in time. They might agree to go into opposition if protections remained in other parts of the system. If the largest parties were opposed to the change, and it was made without their consent, they could argue the 1998 Agreement's protections were being ignored and their community was being marginalised in the system.

¹⁶⁶ [Northern Ireland Act 1998, section 32.](#)

¹⁶⁷ [Scotland Act 1998, section 3.](#)

Good governance: If this change were to reduce or remove the issues related to Executive formation, it might also mean government could become more effective and efficient. Parties that had more of a common purpose or that were ideologically closer could work together more smoothly. In other words, Northern Ireland would be governed by a ‘coalition of the willing’ rather than one led by two parties at diametric ends of the political spectrum. But in the present state of Northern Ireland politics, this is far from guaranteed.

1.3. An alternative, weighted majority threshold for electing the First and deputy First Ministers

A third option for reforming the Executive formation process lies between the first two. It would reinstate much of the original method for electing the FM and dFM, but it would allow a weighted majority threshold to suffice for election, alongside the 50/50/50 cross-community threshold described above (section 1.1). That is, a joint slate of FM/dFM candidates would be elected if it passed *either* the 50/50/50 threshold (50% of unionists, 50% of nationalists, and 50% of the Assembly as a whole) *or* a weighted majority threshold – most likely, two thirds of MLAs voting.

Collapse: This approach might avoid the collapse of the institutions in some circumstances, if it allowed an Executive to be formed when one of the main parties was not willing to take part. Indeed, the ease or difficulty of forming an Executive might be broadly the same as under the voluntary coalition model just discussed. As for that model, this option could again raise questions of legitimacy, because of its departure from the Agreement’s terms.

Equity: Such a change would give the votes of MLAs designated ‘other’ the same value in the alternative method of calculation as those of unionist and nationalist members.

Fit with the Agreement: As in the case of the voluntary coalition model above (section 1.2), some would say that introducing weighted majorities would depart from the principles of the Agreement. Others would see it as an alternative way of embodying the power-sharing principle in changed times. Section 1.2 set out the history of this matter in some detail.

Interactions with other reform proposals: Proponents of this change do not appear to argue for an immediate wider move to weighted majority voting for other Assembly business currently decided by cross-community voting (see sections 1.2, 3.1, and 3.2). That may seem anomalous, if the equity argument for such a change is accepted in this situation. It could also create difficulties if an Executive based on a weighted majority vote could not meet the 50/50/50 or 40/40/60 thresholds on some other matters.

1.4. Transferring nomination rights if a party refuses to nominate a First or deputy First Minister

Another proposal would keep the current (post-St Andrews) arrangements for Executive formation in place, except that, where the party entitled to nominate an FM or dFM declined to do so, that entitlement would pass to the next largest party in the Assembly. The argument is that this could avoid the paralysis of the institutions, and that it would permit a nominating party that might wish not to participate in the Executive (or at least to hold one of the top two posts) to take that course without causing such paralysis. In the current Assembly, the Alliance Party would acquire the right to nominate if either Sinn Féin or the DUP opted for this course.

Collapse: This might avoid the possibility of the institutions collapsing in some circumstances, as with some proposals considered above. On the other hand, the party passed over might be large enough to block the business of the Executive in the course of votes in the Assembly, leading to another kind of gridlock.

Equity: The proposed change might be seen as enhancing equity between political parties: it would deprive any party of a right to block the operation of the institutions; and it would confer the right to go into opposition on a nominating party, in the same way as the d'Hondt mechanism does at a later stage in Executive formation.

But the reform could leave either unionism or nationalism unrepresented among the FM and dFM. As for the weighted majority proposals above (sections 1.2 and 1.3), some would see this as a significant attack on the principle of power-sharing, potentially depriving the institutions of legitimacy and even viability.

Fit with the Agreement: At least in theory, the Executive formation process established by the 1998 Agreement did allow the largest parties to decline the FM or dFM role without collapsing the institutions – though Executive formation would not have been possible if one of those parties had voted against the slate of nominees. The St Andrews reforms removed this flexibility. The proposed reform under consideration here would restore it.

On the other hand, the proposal would allow significantly more such flexibility than the Agreement provided for. As for the options already outlined, it could be seen as violating the guarantees that the Agreement provided to the unionist and nationalist communities; or it could be seen as updating the fundamental Agreement principle of power-sharing to contemporary circumstances.

Interactions with other reform proposals: This is an alternative to the reform options already set out: unlike them, it would retain most aspects of the post-St Andrews arrangements. It would be compatible in principle with any of the options set out below.

1.5. Counting the First and deputy First Ministers in the d'Hondt process

A final set of reform options regarding Executive formation would bring the FM and dFM positions either wholly or partially into the d'Hondt process that is used to allocate other ministerial portfolios. At present, the FM and dFM positions are not themselves allocated through d'Hondt; nor are they taken into account when the d'Hondt allocation is done. These points could both be changed, thereby bringing the FM and dFM positions fully into the d'Hondt allocation process. Or only the second point could be changed: FM/dFM appointment could remain separate; but the parties securing these positions would have those seats credited to them before the d'Hondt formula was applied to the allocation of the remaining ministerial roles.

The first of these options would simplify the Executive formation process, at least on paper. It would also allow the largest parties to opt out of assuming the FM and dFM positions if they so wished, without collapsing the institutions. On the other hand, it would automatically allocate those two positions to the largest two parties, irrespective of the designations they belonged to, and there are scenarios in which that could cause severe problems. This option appears to have few supporters, presumably for that reason, and we therefore do not consider it further here. The option, already considered above (section 1.4) of allowing the transfer of FM/dFM nomination

rights within otherwise unchanged rules would be a simpler way of allowing the largest parties to opt out of assuming those positions.

By contrast, the milder option of counting the FM and dFM positions when applying the d'Hondt formula to other ministerial roles does have prominent advocates. As noted in chapter 1, this change has already been made for the position of Justice Minister, which is selected by a cross-community vote, but which now counts against the d'Hondt total of the party to which the appointee belongs.¹⁶⁸ The paragraphs below therefore focus on this milder option.

Equity: The purpose of this change would be to improve equity among the parties. At present, the parties that secure the FM and dFM positions are overrepresented within the Executive: they hold the FM and dFM offices in addition to their proportional d'Hondt allocation (which itself tends slightly to favour larger parties). That would no longer be the case under the proposal.

There is no obvious reason why this change would affect the likelihood of institutional **collapse**. Nor would it directly affect **good governance**.

Interactions with other reform proposals: This reform could be adopted on its own or in conjunction with one of the adjustments to the existing processes of FM/dFM appointment discussed above. It would have no place in the event of a wholesale shift to voluntary coalitions, as the d'Hondt process – at least formally – would no longer be used.

Fit with the Agreement: The Agreement text does not explicitly state whether the FM and dFM positions are to be counted against the d'Hondt formula. The proposed change would strengthen the principle of proportional allocation, and would therefore seem consistent with the Agreement's spirit.

2. Other reforms to the Executive

Reforms have been proposed not only to how the FM and dFM (or the Executive as a whole) are chosen, but also to a range of other aspects of the Executive. Some of these relate again to the top posts within the Executive: what they are called and how many there are. Others relate to other ministers and to the functioning of the Executive once it is in place.

2.1. Renaming the First Minister and deputy First Minister

The fact that the First Minister and deputy First Minister are equal in powers (and remuneration), but not nominally equal, is frequently criticised.¹⁶⁹ Many suggest the two positions should be renamed 'Joint First Ministers' or some other title reflecting their equal status.

Equity: The primary goal of this change would be to increase a sense of equity between nationalism and unionism (the two communities that have to date always held the positions of FM and dFM) by putting the posts on an equal footing.

Smaller unionist and nationalist parties would say they are unfairly disadvantaged by the current difference in titles. The rules at present give a premium to the largest party, in the form of sole use

¹⁶⁸ [Northern Ireland \(Miscellaneous Provisions\) Act 2014, section 8.](#)

¹⁶⁹ [McCormack, 2023.](#)

of the title of ‘First Minister’. That may incentivise voters to back the largest party in each bloc, even if it is not their true first preference. Allowing for two First Ministers would reduce this distortion.

On the other hand, the change could be criticised as purely cosmetic. A deeper counterargument, from a nationalist perspective, is that serious scrutiny of the current names came only once there appeared to be a chance of a nationalist securing the nominally superior position.¹⁷⁰ That being said, Sinn Féin frequently referred to the two positions as ‘Joint First Ministers’ before 2022.¹⁷¹ But this is perhaps more an argument about timing than about the principle itself. It is possible that any nationalist concern would be reduced *after* the next Assembly election, when a nationalist would have served as sole ‘First Minister’ for a term.

Collapse: The political and legal reality that the two positions are equal would remain unaffected by this reform. It appears unlikely to increase the risk of one party refusing to nominate someone to the positions. Indeed, it might *reduce* that risk: some have suggested that the current titles make it harder for the smaller of the two main parties to accept the nominally inferior role.¹⁷²

Good governance: Some argue that, with this change, parties might spend less time during election campaigns focused on who will be the First Minister and more time on substantive policy issues. Any such effect would, however, be at most small.

Interactions with other reform proposals: The proposed change in nomenclature could be introduced on its own or in conjunction with any of the other reforms discussed here. Its interaction with other reforms would not produce any obvious side effects.

Fit with the Agreement: The change would involve a departure in terminology, perhaps in symbolism, from the 1998 Agreement, but not in substance.

2.2. Changing the number of First Ministers

Northern Ireland is, to our knowledge, unique in having two joint and co-equal heads of government – but there is little discussion whether the arrangement remains right.¹⁷³ As explained in chapter 1, this system was created to deal with a divided society that was seen as being comprised of two distinct ethnic and political blocs: unionism and nationalism. The joint nature of the two offices can be seen as operationalising the idea of parity of esteem at the top of government.

Over a quarter of a century on, many have made the point that Northern Ireland is in many ways no longer the binary society it once was.¹⁷⁴ That fact invites the question whether the current arrangement remains desirable, with parity of esteem appearing not to be granted to those not belonging to the two largest designations. To date, it has been the ‘others’ who have thereby been disadvantaged. But it could in future be either nationalists or unionists – this would occur if Alliance became the largest party in the Assembly, or if the ‘others’ became the largest or second

¹⁷⁰ [Feeney, 2023](#).

¹⁷¹ [Cummings, 2024](#).

¹⁷² [BBC, 2022](#).

¹⁷³ Some other systems share non-equal roles between communities. In Lebanon, for example, the President is always a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of Parliament a Shia Muslim.

¹⁷⁴ [Coakley, 2021](#).

largest designation. Such an outcome – which does not appear imminent, but is possible at some point – could prove destabilising.

Might Northern Ireland move at some point to the usual model of having one head of government only?¹⁷⁵ The hope might be that such a change would reduce attention on who leads the Executive Office, and instead underline the importance of collaboration and cross-community government across the Executive as a whole. A critical question would be how the figure was appointed, to ensure the greatest degree of cross-community acceptability. A variation on this possibility would be to create such a post as part of a binding obligation for it to rotate between political parties, as has recently happened voluntarily between coalition partners in the Republic of Ireland. Whether it was a rotating position or not, moving to a single First Minister might also allow the post-holder to act as a unifying figure.

If such a move is not possible, to reflect the growing sense that Northern Ireland politics is about more than simply two political communities in Northern Ireland, another logical alternative would be to have three ‘First Ministers’: a nationalist, a unionist, and someone representing those who vote for parties that do not designate as unionist or nationalist.

These proposals are perhaps worth some consideration, not least because further changes in the political landscape could bring these issues onto the reform agenda more prominently in the future.

Equity: Moving to three Executive Office ministers would make the system more representative. But there are still substantially fewer voters for the parties that do not designate than for those that do, and some would say that such a change in approach would go beyond what was equitable, to the detriment of the other two blocs and their voters.

Moving to one First Minister in present circumstances could undermine the sense of each community being equal, as there would be intense competition between parties and the different designations to see who could get the single ‘top’ position. However, it might also focus attention on the other aspects of the system that ensure cross-community power-sharing.

Collapse: Moving to three First Ministers would make Northern Ireland even more distinct and unusual than it already is. Given that many of the collapses of devolved government have originated in the dual nature of the First Minister roles, this change might only exacerbate the difficulties here – it might only be viable with a change in the rules about Executive formation.

Moving to a single First Minister might be expected in principle to make collapse less likely – though how the system worked in practice would depend heavily on how the new First Minister was chosen.

Good governance: Moving to one First Minister might refocus attention on the Executive as a whole, rather than on this position. The person in charge of the Executive could be a ‘first among equals’ in this sense, replacing the tiered nature of the current system where the FM and dFM are given prominence over the other ministerial roles. It is less obvious that introducing a three-person model would change governance, beyond its effects on the likelihood of institutional collapse.

Fit with the Agreement: The joint heads of government are one of the most notable features of the 1998 Agreement, and moving to a single office would appear to be a significant departure.

¹⁷⁵ [Tonge, 2022](#).

How big a departure would depend, however, on the detail of how such an appointment might be made and how it would operate – a debate not yet begun.

Moving to a three-person model would also change the institutions agreed in 1998, but it would not alter the underlying principle of power-sharing, and it could be seen as yielding a better embodiment of that principle in changed circumstances.

Interactions with other reform proposals: Changing to three Executive Office ministers would presumably be made alongside recognising the ‘others’ as a designation on an equal footing with nationalism and unionism in terms of Assembly voting procedures, either by adding them to a new cross-community vote system, or by abolishing the cross-community vote and using a weighted majority voting system instead (where each MLA’s vote would be equal). The dangers of simply adding an extra veto player would need to be thought through, and possible ways of addressing them considered.

As noted above, a move to a single First Minister might require a shift in how the office was filled. Simply applying the current system – under which the largest party has the sole right to nominate the First Minister – would clearly not be acceptable. Shifting to one of the alternatives – cross-community voting or a weighted-majority vote – may therefore be necessary.

2.3. Appointing the Justice Minister by the d’Hondt system

Justice issues were extremely contentious in Northern Ireland before and immediately after the 1998 Agreement for a variety of reasons. Unionists, nationalists, and the two governments alike struggled to agree on issues related to ending paramilitary violence, policing, and the way the legal system dealt with different individuals and groups in the aftermath of the Troubles. When power was devolved to Northern Ireland immediately after the Agreement, justice issues remained the responsibility of Westminster.

As outlined in chapter 1, following Sinn Féin’s recognition of the Police Service of Northern Ireland that emerged from the recommendations of the Patten Commission, and other commitments related to justice, the Hillsborough Castle negotiations in 2010 paved the way for the devolution of most law and order matters to Northern Ireland. This was the first time local politicians had been able to manage justice matters since the suspension of the old Parliament of Northern Ireland in 1972.

The decision to devolve the post was much argued over and threatened the stability of the Executive. Because of the sensitivities, it was decided that the Justice ministerial brief would have a separate appointment process to the other Executive ministerial positions, whereby the Justice Minister would need to be confirmed via a cross-community vote in the Assembly on a 50/50/50 threshold. The main motivation here was unionist concern about a Sinn Féin Justice Minister – though, of course, there may also have been parallel concerns among some nationalists about some unionist figures holding this position. Practically, the appointment arrangement greatly narrowed the range of acceptable candidates. The position has been held by an MLA from the Alliance Party three times, and once by an independent unionist (Claire Sugden): never by a nationalist politician, nor a politician from one of the unionist parties. Generally, though, since its adoption, the appointment arrangement here has not been a major source of contention. As noted above (section

1.5), the law was later changed so that holding the Justice Minister appointment counted against the relevant party's allocation in the d'Hondt calculations.

Almost 15 years on from Hillsborough, some propose that the appointment to the post should itself now be conducted as part of the d'Hondt process, along with the other ministerial positions.

Equity: This change would put the Justice brief on the same footing as other matters of public policy and would open the post up to a wider range of officeholders. The fact that a nationalist has never held this position is sometimes criticised,¹⁷⁶ and the change would remove any veto over that happening.

Collapse: Adding Justice to the d'Hondt process would end the ability for one designation to veto another party's nomination.

However, it might make wider Executive formation more difficult if a contentious figure was nominated by their party to fill the Justice brief. It seems likely that some unionist politicians would still be strongly opposed to a Sinn Féin Justice Minister, particularly if that person had ties to republican paramilitarism in the past. Nationalists might object to a unionist politician on account of their background or views also. These inhibitions might, however, diminish over time.

Good governance: Many would say there is now no particular reason why justice matters should not be treated the same as other public policy issues, which might aid a process of normalising the ways in which Northern Ireland is governed.

On the other hand, if the appointment process around the post were to lead to heightened tensions between the parties, that could not only impede the formation of an Executive, but also inhibit effective day-to-day governance.

Interactions with other reform proposals: This change would not interact strongly with other proposals.

Fit with the Agreement: As the Justice portfolio was not devolved in 1998, and the issue has evolved considerably since that point via the St Andrews and Hillsborough Agreements, there appear to be no direct tensions between the proposed change and the spirit or text of the Agreement.

2.4. Ensuring formulation and delivery of an effective Programme for Government

A Programme for Government is envisaged by the Agreement as a basis for Executive activity. It is of particular importance in the context of Northern Ireland, where a government is brought together not on the basis of political agreement but as the product of the d'Hondt formula, without the degree of shared understanding about policy or experience of working together likely to be found in other governments, probably even other coalitions.

But Northern Ireland has a patchy record when it comes to formulating a Programme for Government. Until February 2025, none had been in force since 2016.¹⁷⁷ Considerable preparatory

¹⁷⁶ [Walsh, 2016](#).

¹⁷⁷ [Whysall, 2022a](#), pp. 59–60.

work was done with the parties during the hiatus in government from 2022 to 2024. But it took the Executive restored in February 2024 until September 2024 to put out a draft programme covering the remainder of the Assembly term to 2027.¹⁷⁸ And it required a further five months for the Executive to adopt a final version, which was submitted to and agreed by the Assembly on 3 March 2025.¹⁷⁹ In terms of actually delivering on an agreed Programme for Government, the record has also been mixed.

There is wide agreement generally that governments need a clear vision or plan in order to govern effectively. Such a text provides an overall strategy and set of aims for government to work towards from the outset of a new administration. But in Northern Ireland, it has never appeared to be a political imperative to formulate a programme, nor adhere closely to it. Most political discourse has not concerned good government issues, though the problems of the health service are now commanding attention; parties are generally not judged on their performance in governing, the more so because in the present Northern Ireland political setup, there is not really room for an alternative government.

What could ensure a more concentrated effort from actors entering Programme for Government negotiations? One possibility is the imposition of legal requirements. There might be provision that a draft Programme decided by the parties intending to form an Executive had to be submitted to, and perhaps approved by, the Assembly, before the formal selection of the Executive. To underpin the importance of the Programme, it might perhaps also be required that each member of the Executive should explicitly endorse it before taking office (in addition to the implicit commitments made by affirming the Pledge of Office).

The effectiveness of such a provision is not guaranteed, however. It would be very hard to legislate for the substance and quality of a Programme. Especially if it was produced at speed, it might be brief and cast in general terms – perhaps indeed embodying ambiguities to overcome political difficulties. A requirement for early agreement on a Programme might bring a greater focus to policy positions in initial discussions; though there would also be a risk that it might delay negotiations to form an Executive at all.

The more effective approach here may be to raise the profile of good government issues, and increase debate on the contents of a Programme: this is discussed in section 2.6, below.

Good governance: New rules or expectations relating to the Programme for Government would be designed to improve governance. As just highlighted, however, the likely efficacy of legal interventions in this area may be doubted.

Collapse: Requiring a Programme for Government before the appointment of new ministers could make Executive formation harder. It would not make subsequent collapse more likely.

Equity: This proposal does not interact with the theme of equity in any clear way.

Interactions with other reform proposals: This reform strongly interacts with any changes that might be made to the Executive formation process. If steps were taken to allow some parties to

¹⁷⁸ [Northern Ireland Executive, 2024](#).

¹⁷⁹ [Northern Ireland Executive, 2025](#); [Northern Ireland Assembly, 2025](#).

exclude other parties from the Executive and form a ‘coalition of the willing’, the Programme for Government could become more straightforward to negotiate and work towards.

Naturally, the wider risks around reforming the system so that one of the major parties could be excluded from the Executive (see above, sections 1.1–1.4) apply also to any Programme for Government negotiation process that shut them out.

Fit with the Agreement: A Programme for Government is directly mentioned in the text of the 1998 Agreement, so delivering one would clearly keep to the general spirit of the Agreement too.

2.5. Decision-making processes in the Executive

By default, the Northern Ireland Executive takes decisions by simple majority vote. Following the St Andrews Agreement, however, a mechanism analogous to the petition of concern in the Assembly was introduced, whereby a decision in the Executive must be made via a cross-community vote if any three ministers request it. Whereas limitations have recently been introduced on the petition of concern mechanism in the Assembly (see chapter 1), these have not been replicated as regards decision-making in the Executive. The provision essentially gives the largest parties in unionism and nationalism a veto at the Executive level.¹⁸⁰

There has also been criticism of the fact that the FM or dFM can block any item from appearing on the Executive agenda, which again gives a veto to the two largest parties. There was a convention that three ministers could request that an item not be delayed longer than three meetings, but it has been suggested that this has been disregarded in recent years.¹⁸¹ Hence a minister recently complained that the Executive’s procedures are an impediment to good decision-making, and that ‘getting progress on some things feels like walking through treacle’.¹⁸² Another prominent politician singled out the deputy First Minister for blocking important decisions.¹⁸³

A variety of reforms could be introduced to these arrangements. First, the process for triggering a cross-community vote within the Executive could be changed. One option here would be to apply the restrictions that have already been introduced to the petition of concern mechanism within the Assembly: a request for a cross-community vote at the Executive table would then require the support of ministers from two different parties. Second, the voting system used within the Executive when this mechanism is triggered could be changed, either by altering the rules of cross-community voting or by moving to a weighted majority threshold. Such changes have been mooted more often in relation to Assembly voting, so we discuss them in greater detail below (sections 3.1 and 3.2). Third, the delaying power of the FM and dFM could be altered. For example, the norm that items should not be delayed for longer than three meetings could be placed on a statutory basis.

Collapse: These proposals are directed at the day-to-day functioning of the Executive, rather than at the question of institutional collapse.

¹⁸⁰ [St Andrews Agreement](#), 2006, Annex A, paragraph 2. See also section 2.12 of the Ministerial Code: [Northern Ireland Executive, n.d.](#)

¹⁸¹ [Alliance, 2022b.](#)

¹⁸² [Manley, 2025a.](#)

¹⁸³ [McCambridge, 2025.](#)

Good governance: Removing or reducing veto powers within the Executive could speed up government decision-making, and thus improve the Executive’s performance in developing policy, implementing it, and overseeing effective public services. It could mean fewer delays and more action on topics where there was a significant measure of consensus.

Equity: Any of the reforms considered here could address the inequity faced by members of the Executive who do not designate as unionist or nationalist and who are therefore excluded from the protection offered by cross-community voting (there are currently two non-designating ministers, both representing the Alliance Party). They would do so either by scrapping such voting within the Executive, or by reforming how it operates, or by limiting its scope.

The specific idea of requiring two parties to trigger a cross-community vote within the Executive could be problematic if, as is the case now, there were two unionist parties in the Executive that could trigger a veto, but only one nationalist party that could therefore not reach the required threshold without support from a party outside that designation. The opposite scenario, of two nationalist parties and one unionist parties in the Executive would, of course, raise the same concern.

Interactions with other reform proposals: The possible reforms mentioned here strongly interact with several other proposals outlined elsewhere in the chapter. If changes were made to how the Executive was constituted, particularly if an Executive without one of the two largest parties could be formed, there would be a direct impact on the dynamics of Executive decision-making. Indeed, moving to a weighted majority ‘coalition of the willing’ model of government might reduce the salience of decision-making rules within the Executive: the use of veto powers might naturally diminish in this scenario.

If changes were made to the operation of the Assembly, including how the designation system, cross-community votes, and the petition of concern work (see, respectively, sections 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4, below) there would be a strong case that those changes would best be mirrored at the Executive level as well. Otherwise, reforms at the Assembly level designed to reduce veto points could only move the issue to the Executive level, or vice versa.

Fit with the Agreement: The change canvassed here would mark a significant departure from how the Executive has operated in recent years. But the current practices were not in the 1998 Agreement. The original power-sharing arrangements were intended not to bar discussion of matters, but to ensure that decisions reflect a broad range of interests. Some of the practices that have emerged over time could be seen as more restrictive than was intended.

2.6. Ensuring effective policy-making and implementation

As discussed in chapter 1, it is widely acknowledged that Northern Ireland has struggled in the post-Agreement period to meet a number of serious policy and public service challenges that confront it. There has been limited discussion, however, about the reasons for this underperformance, and still less about the potential remedies. Further such discussion is needed. Rather than discussing concrete existing proposals, this section can therefore provide only preliminary indications of the problems and potential responses.

The reasons for failure may be largely cultural, rather than structural, so the remedies may largely not be found through institutional tinkering. But there may nevertheless be some institutional changes that would support better performance directly, or encourage the cultural change necessary to an effective solution.

Perhaps the most promising suggestion is the creation of a public body that could help shape the public policy debate, and support and encourage the efforts of the institutions to get to grips with the challenges. The Fiscal Council, established following the *New Decade, New Approach* agreement to assess the Executive's spending and revenue plans, has made a significant contribution to debate on public finances, and probably to the conclusion of recent financial agreements with London.

A parallel body, perhaps called the Public Policy Council,¹⁸⁴ could be charged with examining and bringing more fully into public debate key policy options. Its role could go further: it could develop draft Programmes for Government, or options for them; it could arrange public consultation on drafts; it could monitor implementation. And potentially, it could help develop a longer-term vision, beyond the five-year span of a Programme for Government (and irrespective of constitutional destiny) to allow planning in fields such as infrastructure where a long-term vision is particularly important.

Such a body – if, like the Fiscal Council, it had a certain independence from government and ministers were willing to work with it – could raise the profile and momentum of debate on good government. There are parallels elsewhere: the Institute for Government in 2019 commended the role of 'buttressing Institutions' that provide standing arm's-length policy capacity.¹⁸⁵ The UK, for example, has a National Infrastructure Commission that advises on infrastructure development. The Welsh government partners with academia through the Wales Centre for Public Policy to help develop policy.¹⁸⁶ Within Northern Ireland, there may be read across to the work of the Public Sector Transformation Board.¹⁸⁷ Such institutions may be complemented by independent policy think tanks, of which Northern Ireland now has one, Pivotal.¹⁸⁸

Looking within the Executive itself, the silo mentality of departments is sometimes blamed for public policy failings. The caveat above about the limited value of institutional change alone may also apply here. Clearly, the phenomenon may have something to do with the means by which the ministerial heads of departments are selected and may be dismissed – by their party alone. One initiative that was justified by a reduction of silos, and may have had some beneficial effect, was the reduction in 2016 in the number of Northern Ireland departments.¹⁸⁹ But there are clearly limits, political and administrative, to the extent to which departments can be merged and ministerial posts abolished. The main answer to silo working may again be cultural: an increasing focus on public policy issues may encourage ministers and departments to make greater efforts to cooperate.

Some suggest that structural reform to the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) is required, though detailed proposals have not been made. Occasionally, unionist politicians have suggested

¹⁸⁴ See [Whysall, 2024](#), p. 19.

¹⁸⁵ [Rutter and Sargeant, 2019](#), p. 53.

¹⁸⁶ The Wales Centre for Public Policy is part funded by the Welsh government and associated with Cardiff University (see [Wales Centre for Public Policy, n.d.](#)).

¹⁸⁷ [Northern Ireland Executive Department of Finance, 2025](#).

¹⁸⁸ See Pivotal's website: [Pivotal, n.d.](#)

¹⁸⁹ [McCaffrey, 2015](#).

the integration of the NICS into the Home Civil Service (which serves both the UK government and the devolved governments in Scotland and Wales). But that would be extremely controversial: non-unionists would see it as an ‘integrationary’ measure, designed in some way to make Irish unity more difficult, and perhaps to stymie Northern Ireland Executive actions unwelcome to London. It is not apparent what it would do in itself to improve public policy performance. The last UK government's white paper on Northern Ireland of January 2024 proposed skills exchanges between the NICS and the Home Civil Service, which may be worthwhile in principle – as indeed they may be with other bureaucracies – but probably not transformative.¹⁹⁰

Good governance: All such proposals are designed to enhance good governance. As we have suggested above, the depth of impact might in some cases be limited, but there is some evidence in particular that a Public Policy Council could be effective.

These proposals would have no direct effect on likelihood of **collapse** or **equity**; there would be no **interactions with other reform proposals**, and there would create no problems of **fit with the Agreement**.

3. Reforming the Assembly

This section turns to proposals for reform of the operation of the Assembly. The first of these concerns the office of Speaker. Several relate to the Assembly’s voting procedures. Others concern the role of the official opposition within the Assembly and how Assembly members themselves are chosen.

3.1. Electing the Speaker via a weighted majority threshold

The unwillingness of the DUP to permit the election of a Speaker following the 2022 Assembly election was criticised by the party’s political rivals and by other observers.¹⁹¹ The election of the Speaker, which requires cross-community support, is the first thing any Assembly must do before it can move to any kind of substantive work.

There have been proposals to move to a new weighted majority threshold for electing the Speaker, to prevent the election being so readily blocked. As in relation to Executive formation and voting within the Executive (both discussed above – sections 1.2, 1.3, and 2.5), the exact threshold varies between proposals, but it is normally suggested to be around a two-thirds majority. Such a change might permit the Assembly in future cases of conflict between the parties to move on to further business.

Collapse: On current numbers, this change would remove the ability for any one party to prevent a Speaker from being elected (see Table 3.1, above). Multiple parties would need to object to a nomination to stop someone being confirmed into the position. Still, the weighted majority threshold would ensure at least a substantial measure of cross-community support for the successful candidate. And it is possible that a party could reach one third of the entire Assembly in a future election.

¹⁹⁰ [Northern Ireland Office, 2024](#), p. 75.

¹⁹¹ [Sky News, 2022](#).

Good governance: This change made in isolation from other proposals could allow the Assembly to meet, debate motions, and perhaps propose pieces of legislation, even if there continued to be boycotts and vetoes in other parts of the political system. From a good governance perspective, simply allowing the Assembly to meet could provide some kind of locus for politics, which could be a net positive, and might help keep competent people in politics who would otherwise drift away, while maintaining most of the cross-community protections.

On the other hand, how much an Assembly could realistically do in the absence of an Executive is not clear. Some rule changes might be necessary even to permit it to conduct effective debate and scrutiny.

Equity: Currently, the ‘others’ do not count in cross-community votes. The proposed change would put their votes on a par with nationalists and unionists for the purpose of electing the Speaker. On the other hand, there may be concern that allowing the election of a Speaker without significant support in one part of society could undermine the principle of power-sharing.

Fit with the Agreement: The Agreement does not mention in terms the election of the Speaker, so it could be said that the change discussed here represents no departure from it. But its general principle is that important votes in the Assembly may be subject to cross-community support; and so some would argue that the change contemplated here was inconsistent with at least the spirit of the Agreement.

Interactions with other reform proposals: This change often comes with similar proposals to move towards a two-thirds majority voting system for electing an Executive (see above, sections 1.2 and 1.3) and for passing normal Assembly business (see below, section 3.2). A new weighted majority system for electing the Speaker could be part of such a package of reforms. But it could also be singled out as an exceptional case that allows the elected Assembly to meet in the face of boycotts elsewhere.

3.2. Abolishing designations and moving to a weighted majority threshold for Assembly votes

It is sometimes argued that designations should be abolished altogether. This is perhaps the most far-reaching of the reforms that are currently being discussed; and it has been given new life with the rise in the numbers of MLAs who do not designate in the Assembly in recent years.

Mechanisms that depend on the ‘community’ headcount would be replaced by a weighted majority threshold for sensitive Assembly business thought to require a guarantee of wide consent. As with the other weighted majority proposals discussed above, the exact threshold proposed varies, but it is normally around two-thirds majority support.

Equity: This change would put the votes of ‘other’ MLAs on a par with nationalists and unionists in the Assembly. All votes would count equally, and a degree of cross-community support would be guaranteed by the weighted majority threshold.

On the other hand, the current levels of protection for unionists and nationalists would be diminished to a degree. It would become possible to pass measures that had limited support from one of these designations, which could seem at odds with the power-sharing principles that underlie the 1998 settlement.

Collapse: A large part of the rationale for moving away from designations, as seen with some of the weighted majority proposals already discussed, is reducing the likelihood of collapse. Much depends, though, on the threshold: as we have seen, some proposals have set this in absolute terms, others see the margin as being computed in the light of each Assembly election result. More exploration of these ideas is needed.

As for the more specific two-thirds thresholds discussed above, this change would, at least in the current Assembly, give veto power to no single party. But unionism and nationalism would each retain a collective veto, as each of these designations currently constitutes well over a third of the MLAs. As such, votes would still need some degree of cross-community support to pass. And it is possible that a party could attain a size permitting it to exercise a veto by itself in the future.

Good governance: Depending on the exact threshold, Assembly votes could likely pass more easily under a weighted majority rule. Some would see in this an opportunity for the institutions to develop new policy and respond more quickly to events than is possible at present, to the benefit of the standard of governance.

As ever, the converse danger is that, if part of society felt excluded from decision-making, that could destabilise politics in the round. In addition, ill-considered policies could be adopted with insufficient scrutiny.

Interactions with other reform proposals: The impact of this change would depend on whether equivalent reforms were also made to processes for forming the Executive, making decisions within the Executive, and electing the Assembly Speaker (see sections 1.2, 1.3, 2.5, and 3.1, above).

Fit with the Agreement: As for the other weighted majority proposals discussed above, this change would depart from the text of the 1998 Agreement. But some would see it as providing a better mechanism for applying the principle of power-sharing in a changed context.

3.3. According ‘others’ the same veto rights as nationalists and unionists

The proposal immediately above is often motivated by a desire to recognise that politics in Northern Ireland is no longer as binary as it was in 1998. In principle, an alternative way of acknowledging the emergence of a larger block of ‘others’ would be to extend to this group the protections that the Agreement conferred on unionists and nationalists. It should be noted, though, that this is not a change that is generally argued for by members of that group, who may regard the conferring of rights on different groups or communities as entrenching divisions.

The current cross-community vote allows a motion to pass if it is supported by a majority overall plus a majority of unionists and nationalists, or (in most cases) by 60% of the Assembly overall including 40% of unionists and 40% of nationalists. Those members who do not designate in one of those categories therefore lack the veto rights possessed by unionists and nationalists.

The simplest approach would be to accord this group the same protections as unionists and nationalists, so that a cross-community vote in the Assembly would need 50% support in each of the three designations to pass, or 40% in all three plus 60% overall. But this would add a further hurdle to decision-making.

Alternatively, alongside adding the ‘others’ designation to the process, the proportion of members from each designation needed to pass a cross-community vote could be reduced to something less than 40%. The percentage required for each group could be adjusted after each election depending on designation strength.

Equity: This change would put non-designating members on an equal footing with unionist and nationalist counterparts, in that all three groups would have the same voting rights.

On the other hand, as discussed above in relation to cross-community voting in the Executive (section 2.5), giving equal voting power to groups of very different sizes might be regarded as inequitable. This could potentially be addressed by giving veto rights only to a designation that held at least a minimum share of the Assembly seats – say 20% or 25%. Yet if veto rights exist to protect minorities, it is not clear why a smaller minority would be less deserving of protection.

Meanwhile, if the threshold of support required in cross-community votes were lowered to compensate for an increased number of designations with veto powers, the existing protections for unionists and nationalists would be weakened.

Good governance: Simply adding a third veto power would in principle make vetoes in individual decisions more likely. Simultaneously lowering the threshold support required within each designation would reduce the prospect of such vetoes. The overall effect of the two changes would depend on how far the threshold was reduced and on specific voting patterns. As above, lifting the threat of vetoes could aid effective decision-making, but also create some dangers.

Collapse: While these measures would affect the likelihood of vetoes in individual decisions, they would be unlikely of themselves to make institutional collapse more or less probable.

Interactions with other reform proposals: This change is an alternative to that of abolishing designation and moving generally to weighted majorities for deciding sensitive matters.

As noted above, changing the cross-community voting process in this way would also have implications if Executive formation returned to the pre-St Andrews arrangements, with a cross-community vote to appoint the FM and dFM.

Fit with the Agreement: As already noted, the 1998 Agreement recognised two, not three, communities. The ‘others’ are not in the same way a clear historic grouping, but embody a diverse range of perspectives. Recognising them in this way would be an innovation not explicitly envisaged by the Agreement. On the other hand, some would suggest that change to recognise the growing vote for members who do not designate one of the traditional communities is a legitimate accommodation to new circumstances, consistent with the overall approach of the Agreement.

3.4. Reforming the petition of concern to prevent abuse

As chapter 1 explained, the Assembly has a ‘petition of concern’ mechanism, through which 30 MLAs can force a cross-community vote in the Assembly, in situations where such a vote is not already required. This was designed to protect against majoritarianism in the Assembly and prevent one community from exercising power without the consent of the other community. Yet its usage has been frequently criticised, especially when applied to issues not related to the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland’s divided politics, as envisaged by the 1998 Agreement.

As noted in chapter 1, the reduction in the number of MLAs from 108 to 90, which took effect in 2017, made reaching the 30-MLA threshold for triggering a petition of concern harder. Since the *New Decade, New Approach* agreement in 2020, those 30 MLAs have had to come from at least two parties, and additional restrictions on when in the legislative process the mechanism can be used have also applied.¹⁹² These measures have reduced the frequency of its use.

Despite these reforms, some argue that further restrictions are needed on what issues the petition of concern can be applied to. Some would limit its scope to issues related to human rights and constitutional politics. There could be a variety of ways of adjudicating whether an issue fell within those areas. One option would be the creation of a special Assembly committee as mentioned in the Agreement for certain matters – a procedure that has not been invoked.¹⁹³

Collapse: Changing the rules around petitions of concern would not directly affect the likelihood of institutional collapse.

Equity: As already seen, non-designating MLAs do not count equally to unionists and nationalists in cross-community votes, at least under current rules. If the petition was used less often, more decisions would be taken by simple majority, meaning all MLAs' votes would have equal weight. Conversely, parity protections for the nationalist and unionist designations would be weakened.

Good governance: The aim of these proposals would be to prevent the petition being used as a blocking mechanism on political issues not related to human rights or the constitution. Reducing how often it is used, and what kinds of issues it can be used for, could enable more effective governance by allowing measures that have large support in the Assembly to pass.

Interactions with other reform proposals: Other changes may impact here. If the present form of cross-community vote were replaced across the board with weighted majority vote, a petition of concern would require the Assembly to use that new weighted majority threshold.

Fit with the Agreement: The petition of concern is one of the key protections afforded to unionists and nationalists in the 1998 Agreement. Removing it entirely, or making it more difficult to use, could be opposed by those who see this as a departure from Agreement guarantees that are still necessary. On the other hand, it is difficult to see how some of the issues the petition of concern has been used for are in line with what was envisaged in 1998.

3.5. Strengthening the official opposition

Any party in the Assembly entitled to nominate a minister to the Executive under the d'Hondt procedure can opt not to take part and go into opposition (although, as discussed in sections 1.1 and 1.4, the parties entitled to nominate to the FM/dFM posts cannot forswear this responsibility without bringing the institutions to a halt). As noted in chapter 1, the 'official opposition' was put on a statutory footing in 2016. It is open to parties that opt out of the Executive, or others that are too small to nominate a minister but that have at least 8% of MLAs.¹⁹⁴ It is allotted 10 days per Assembly session, when it selects the business. It asks the first question on ministerial statements

¹⁹² [New Decade, New Approach, 2020](#).

¹⁹³ [Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, 1998](#): Strand One, para. 11.

¹⁹⁴ [Assembly and Executive Reform \(Assembly Opposition\) Act \(Northern Ireland\), 2016](#).

and in Topical Questions to ministers and, where possible, it is entitled to at least one seat on most Assembly committees. Its leader appoints the chair of the Public Accounts Committee.¹⁹⁵

The first official opposition, composed of the UUP and the SDLP,¹⁹⁶ functioned for only a short time after 2016 and ended after the Executive collapsed in 2017. When power-sharing returned in 2020, both of those parties opted to enter the Executive, and no official opposition was created (though the entitlements of the opposition were increased through standing orders, following proposals in the *New Decade, New Approach* deal). After the restoration of power-sharing in 2024, no party opted out of its d'Hondt entitlement; but the SDLP, having fallen just short of the numbers required to nominate a minister, became the official opposition.

The official opposition innovation was well received when it came into effect in 2016.¹⁹⁷ One view is that more time should be allowed before any further changes are made, given the stop/start nature of the Assembly since the official opposition was established.

But some argue that the functions of the official opposition should be strengthened further. One proposal is to allocate more committee chair and deputy chair positions to the opposition. For example, the d'Hondt process for the selection of chairs and deputy chairs could be modified to take into account the number of ministerial positions parties had taken up in the earlier round of nominations for that purpose under d'Hondt. This would give parties that had chosen to go into opposition a larger number of committee chair/deputy chair positions.

There have also been calls to ensure the Executive cannot sideline the opposition by not sending ministers to hear their contributions in the Assembly – though how this could be achieved in practice is unclear.¹⁹⁸ There could also be reforms to increase the speaking time allocated to the official opposition. Similarly, more provision could be made for the official opposition to offer costed budget proposals, and to have better access to Stormont's professional legislative drafting services.

Good governance: Having an effective and constructive opposition is usually seen as a prerequisite for good governance around the democratic world. It can provide crucial functions, including scrutinising government decision-making, and giving a voice to different, sometimes marginalised, political opinions across society. Traditionally, an opposition also presents voters with an alternative 'government in waiting' – but in current Northern Ireland circumstances, it is much more difficult to envisage an alternative government emerging in this way, and opposition cannot really at present achieve this.

Collapse: By its nature, an official opposition has no institutional way to bring an Executive down. Some may see it leading to more factional politics, making life harder for an Executive seeking to make difficult but necessary decisions; but it could also cause the Executive to up its game.

Equity: Strengthening the opposition would have little effect on equity between unionists and nationalists in the system. Reforms such as those proposed to committee chair appointments could marginally over-represent MLAs from smaller parties in those roles, which some might view as

¹⁹⁵ [Northern Ireland Assembly, n.d.\(c\)](#).

¹⁹⁶ Alliance also remained out of government, but fell short of the numbers required for official opposition status.

¹⁹⁷ [News Letter, 2016](#).

¹⁹⁸ [Agenda NI, 2024](#).

problematic. On the other hand, any such effect would be very small, and larger parties would still tend to be over-represented when looking across both ministerial and committee positions.

Interactions with other reform proposals: This proposal strongly interacts with those above around the formation of the Executive (section 1). If that process were changed, and some of the larger parties were not in government, they could take up a place in the official opposition.

Strengthening the role and functions of the opposition might in some circumstances change the political calculations parties make about the merits and drawbacks of changing how the Executive is composed; forming part of an official opposition might be seen as politically preferable at different points by different parties.

Fit with the Agreement: The Agreement did not make provision for an official opposition. But nor would it be incompatible with the Agreement to ensure that an opposition, to the degree that it exists, can function effectively.

3.6. Filling Assembly vacancies between elections

We are not aware of any significant support for reform away from the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system that is used to elect MLAs. Chapter 2 mentioned that some academics have proposed alternatives; but these ideas have few advocates in Northern Ireland.

Nevertheless, reform has been proposed to one aspect of how STV functions. Currently, when an MLA vacates office by resignation or death, the post is filled by co-option: the nominating officer (usually the leader) of their political party can nominate a replacement as MLA.¹⁹⁹ No by-election is held, because it is recognised that, in a system of multimember constituencies, this can lead to distorted results. Initially after 1998, a candidate at an election submitted a list of up to six substitutes (which was published). The system was changed in 2009 on account of ‘practical problems’. The then four largest parties in the Assembly favoured a system of co-option.²⁰⁰

In the first Assembly (1998–2003), just three out of 108 MLAs were replaced. By the end of the 2017–22 Assembly, however, 29 out of 90 MLAs were co-opted, nearly a third of the total. In the most recent (2022) elections, the success rate of previously co-opted MLAs who stood for election was very high, at 96%.²⁰¹ Nevertheless, the high proportion of elected representatives coming to public office this way has brought the system under greater scrutiny, as have some high-profile individual cases (including the current dFM).²⁰² The Electoral Commission suggested in a report in late 2024 that the current system ‘removes democratic choice from voters and reduces transparency’.²⁰³

The case against holding by-elections remains strong, as doing so could upset the delicate balance of Northern Ireland’s politics. Take, for example, the Foyle constituency, which currently has two Sinn Féin MLAs, two from the SDLP, and one from the DUP. If the DUP MLA resigned and a

²⁰⁰ See the government’s explanation of the change [here](#).

²⁰¹ [Agenda NI, 2022](#).

²⁰² [McCann, 2024](#).

²⁰³ [Electoral Commission, 2024](#), p. 42.

by-election were held, a nationalist would almost certainly win the seat, leaving the party (and unionism) without any representation in the constituency.

One solution would be to revert to the old system by which candidates submitted lists of substitutes. This has recently been mooted by the Electoral Commission – which spoke of working with the UK government and the political parties on the matter – and by others.²⁰⁴

An alternative would be to adopt the system used by Malta, one of only two democracies outside the island of Ireland using STV for national elections. This is a ‘countback’ arrangement: the votes cast for the departing MLA at the preceding general election are re-examined; these votes are transferred to the next available candidate on each ballot paper until one candidate passes 50% of the total and is declared elected. This means that the choice of candidate is the result of voters’ preferences. But it clearly introduces some extra complexity.

Collapse: None of these options would affect the probability of institutional collapse.

Equity: The option of introducing by-elections would weaken the protections for minority parties and designations in individual constituencies. Introducing alternate lists or countback processes would not affect equity in the sense we have used it, and would strengthen democratic control over the composition of the Assembly.

Good governance: The quality of co-opted MLAs is not in question, and, as we have seen, they tend to get re-elected by voters. The motivation for any reforms would thus be democratic legitimacy, not good governance.

Interactions with other reform proposals: This issue does not interact with other potential reforms.

Fit with the Agreement: The Agreement does not mention this issue directly.

4. Reforming other areas in Strand One

While the Executive and the Assembly are the main institutions of devolved government in Northern Ireland, Strand One of the Agreement has several additional components where changes have been proposed. These include mechanisms for wider public input into policy-making, and proposals for a Bill of Rights.

4.1. Reintroducing a Civic Forum

The 1998 Agreement provided for a Civic Forum to be established as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues, drawn from various civic society sectors. It had no formal powers to scrutinise or legislate. The Forum was established in 2000, but last met in 2002. The law required the FM and dFM to make arrangements for the Forum, but successive ministers failed to do so. The Stormont House Agreement of 2014 committed instead to the establishment of a Compact Civic Advisory Panel, a commitment repeated in the *New Decade, New Approach* deal. The Panel apparently met on several occasions in 2016, but it is not clear there were any substantive

²⁰⁴ [Electoral Commission, 2024](#), p. 42; [McCann, 2024](#).

consequences; it was then caught up in the collapse of the institutions in 2017, and the *New Decade, New Approach* commitment was overtaken by Covid-19 and then the 2022 collapse.²⁰⁵

Good governance: Advocates for reestablishing the Forum hope that it could become a useful venue for airing ideas and fostering a less partisan form of political debate, which might lead over time to improved policy-making.

Critics argue that the Forum would be made up of people who lack a political mandate from election to speak for the wider community.²⁰⁶

Collapse: The Civic Forum has only ever been proposed as a consultative forum. It would have no blocking powers over the Executive or the Assembly.

Equity: These proposals would not directly affect equity between communities. They could have a positive effect on the equity of the system as a whole, by raising voices that are not normally heard in political debate.

Fit with the Agreement: Reestablishing the Forum would advance the implementation of the 1998 Agreement. In not establishing the Forum, First and deputy First Ministers would seem to have breached their legal obligation. This appeared to be the conclusion of the High Court in a judicial review in 2023, though the Court felt unable to make any order.²⁰⁷

Interactions with other reform proposals: Other proposals have also been made to bring outside voices into politics and policy-making (see the proposal immediately below). These could function alongside the Civic Forum, or they could be alternatives. Indeed, more than 25 years on from the 1998 Agreement, there could be better options than the Civic Forum model for reflecting the dynamics of contemporary politics.

4.2. Allowing civic input through other means (citizens' assemblies)

Alongside calls to reestablish the Civic Forum, there have been proposals to create other avenues through which non-political voices could be heard in the policy process. Supporters of such calls highlight the collapse in public trust in politicians to act in the public interest, and argue that new channels for dialogue could help to overcome that.

One of the most prominent proposals is the use of 'citizens' assemblies' on policy issues to inform and guide political debate at the Executive and Assembly level. Citizens' assemblies comprise people who are randomly selected from the public at large to examine a specific policy issue; after hearing from expert witnesses and discussing the options among themselves, they make recommendations. They have been widely used around the world, including in the Republic of Ireland and at all levels of government within the UK.²⁰⁸ The *New Decade, New Approach* deal included a commitment to holding annual citizens' assemblies. As with the civic advisory panel, however, no progress towards implementing this pledge appears to have been made.

²⁰⁵ See the detailed account of the institutional history given in the High Court case about the Forum: [Wilson \(Eileen\) Application for Judicial Review \[2023\] NIKB 10](#): paragraph 3ff.

²⁰⁶ [Gooch, 2024](#).

²⁰⁷ [Wilson \(Eileen\) Application for Judicial Review \[2023\] NIKB 10](#).

²⁰⁸ [Farrell, Suiter, Harris, 2019](#); [Preller and Renwick, 2025](#).

Good governance: Much like the idea of reviving the Civic Forum, advocates of citizens' assemblies argue that, if used well, these processes could foster a less partisan and better-informed style of political debate, leading to improved policy outcomes and better relations between politicians and the public.

Opponents sometimes question the representativeness of citizens' assemblies – though it is not clear such criticisms are always well grounded.²⁰⁹ In addition, citizens' assemblies can positively influence wider decision-making processes only if they have support from politicians; without that, they risk becoming wasteful talking shops.²¹⁰

Equity: Citizens' assemblies would not directly affect equity across Northern Ireland's major communities. If they brought voices into political debate that are rarely heard, such as those of marginalised groups within society, they could boost equity in a broader sense.

Collapse: The proposal here is for more consultation with wider society, not for new blocking powers over the Executive or the Assembly.

Fit with the Agreement: The world's first citizens' assembly was held in British Columbia only in 2004, so the idea was not available at the time of the 1998 Agreement. Such assemblies are, however, arguably in line with the general spirit of the Agreement around civic input into the political process.

Interactions with other reform proposals: Advocates of Irish unity frequently say there should be citizens' assemblies to prepare for unification. This might affect how different communities in Northern Ireland view the idea of using citizens' assemblies more generally. There are risks that opportunities to use civic initiatives to bring different sections of society together in constructive dialogue may be diminished if only one side of a political debate is arguing for them.²¹¹

4.3. Bill of Rights

The 1998 Agreement established a Human Rights Commission (HRC) for Northern Ireland. One of the primary tasks of this new body was to advise on scope for 'a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland', which would contain 'rights supplementary to those in the European Convention on Human Rights, to reflect the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland'.²¹² This was intended to build on 'the principles of mutual respect for the identity and ethos of both communities and parity of esteem' that are guaranteed elsewhere in the Agreement.

In 2008, advice on a bill was produced, but agreement on the content could not be found among political actors. In the years since, several other proposals and initiatives from politicians, civic society, and academics have sought to bring about a Bill of Rights, but none have been successful.

The debate around a Bill of Rights, and issues related to human rights law more generally, are complex, and sit outside the scope of this report. But several aspects of the Strand One reform

²⁰⁹ For discussion, see [Renwick and Kelly 2023](#), pp. 48 and 66.

²¹⁰ [Renwick, 2024](#).

²¹¹ [Renwick and Kelly, 2021](#).

²¹² [Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, 1998](#) and [Renwick and Kelly, 2023](#), pp. 14–15.

debates would be directly or indirectly affected if a Bill of Rights were ever adopted. For example, the petition of concern mechanism could be limited to the areas covered by the Bill of Rights.

The impact of a Bill of Rights on **equity** and **good governance** would depend on its specific content. It would not directly affect the likelihood of institutional **collapse**, though it could have indirect effects if contentious judgments raised political tensions.

Interactions with other reform proposals: The preceding paragraphs have already set out how this interacts with the petition of concern and the potential areas the Assembly can legislate in.

Fit with the Agreement: This is a vexed and complicated debate. But the creation of a Bill of Rights would clearly in principle be in line with the spirit and letter of the 1998 Agreement.

4.4. Propriety and legality

There have been a succession of concerns about standards of propriety and legality in the operation of the devolved institutions. The Renewable Heat Incentive scheme (see chapter 1) exposed a number of them.²¹³ This led to an inquiry, which reported in 2020.²¹⁴ In 2022, however, the Comptroller and Auditor General expressed disappointment that implementation of the inquiry's recommendations had been slow and incomplete.²¹⁵

A concern in recent months has been over public appointments. Several such appointments have attracted controversy since the institutions returned. In principle, there is a Public Appointments Commissioner to oversee the system of appointments – but the post has been vacant for nearly four years,²¹⁶ and the FM and dFM have failed to make an appointment to it.

There have also been concerns about ministers straightforwardly failing to discharge statutory duties, even when the courts have drawn attention to them. In a case just before the last collapse of the institutions, DUP ministers failed to send representatives to meetings of the North South Ministerial Council, persisting in their refusal after the High Court had made a declaration that legally they were obliged to. The court concluded that 'Ministers are acting in plain breach of what they know to be their legal obligations to participate in the Strand Two structures'. Having made its declaration, however, the court felt it could do no more.²¹⁷

The court judgment establishing that the FM/dFM had also failed to discharge their duty to re-establish the Civic Forum (see section 4.1) was similarly without consequence: there continues to be no Forum, despite the commitment in the Agreement and the statutory duty on the FM and dFM to establish it.

A High Court case this year has established that the Executive was in breach of a statutory duty in force since 2007 to adopt an anti-poverty strategy – a conclusion already reached by the Court in 2015. There have been similar findings over the years in relation to an Irish language strategy.²¹⁸

²¹³ See also [Whysall, 2022a](#), p. 58.

²¹⁴ [Renewable Heat Incentive Inquiry, 2020](#).

²¹⁵ [Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2022](#), p. 18.

²¹⁶ [Hughes, 2024](#).

²¹⁷ Napier (Sean) Application for Judicial Review, [first](#) and [second](#) judgments ([2021] NIQB 86, [2021] NIQB 120)

²¹⁸ See [Committee on the Administration of Justice Application for Judicial Review \[2025\] NIKB 16](#), the most recent case, concerning the anti-poverty strategy, where the earlier cases are discussed.

This is a small selection of issues that have arisen around standards and propriety. Sometimes, such issues have had grave effect: the institutions were brought down in 2017 ostensibly at least over RHI. They have the potential again to cause serious political difficulty, but also loss of public trust.

There has been no substantial discussion of what might be done about these issues. But there is at least scope for exploring the potential of more effective watchdogs (and perhaps ones that do not ultimately depend on ministers being willing to do their duty and appoint them).

Any measures introduced in this area would be designed primarily to promote **good governance**. As the RHI saga illustrates, problems in this area can lead to **collapse** of the institutions, and so action to promote propriety and legality could be expected to diminish the dangers of such collapse. The aspects of **equity** that are the focus of this report would not be directly affected.

Measures in this area would be unlikely to raise any questions regarding **fit with the Agreement**, and they would have negligible **interactions with other reform proposals**.

5. Conclusion

This chapter has analysed a wide range of proposals for reforming the Stormont institutions, covering the process of Executive formation, other aspects of the Executive, the Assembly, and other elements of the Strand One framework. Without taking a view on these options, it has examined what effects each might have on the likelihood of institutional collapse, equity across different groups, and good governance, as well as the degree to which each proposal would fit with the 1998 Agreement, and whether its effects would depend on other reforms that might also be introduced.

The next chapter turns to the question of how, if at all, any such reforms might come about.

Chapter 4. Pathways Forward

The preceding two chapters have set out and examined various possible reforms to the Strand One institutions. This chapter examines how any such reforms might come about.

It begins by considering possible processes for agreeing reforms. It then works back to look at how proposals for reform might be developed, and how different stakeholders – the political parties, civic society, members of the public, and the governments in London and Dublin – could be involved. The third section highlights implications of these processes for the nature of the reforms that might go through, emphasising that such reforms are likely to take the form of package deals, in which different parties compromise in some areas in return for advancing their goals in others. Finally, the chapter looks at what should happen if it proves impossible to find reforms to the current system that deliver stable government. This is a particularly vexed question, but one that it is important to raise.

1. How would reforms be agreed?

The possible reforms set out in chapters 2 and 3 relate to the 1998 Agreement in several ways. Some would mark a departure from the Agreement; some a departure from the original terms of the statute implementing it; others would be compatible with it or even shift practice closer to its terms; a final group would lie beyond the Agreement's scope. This variation might suggest that different reforms would come about by different routes, and that some would be easier than others. That may be true to an extent. But it should not be exaggerated: in reality, no substantial reform is likely without broad cross-party agreement. Understanding how the Agreement itself might be changed is a crucial starting point.

The Agreement text in fact contains no guidance on this point. It has two parts.²¹⁹ The first is the multi-party agreement – the text endorsed by the parties in the Agreement negotiations, and by the two governments, which is a political agreement without direct legal force. The second is the international agreement between the British and Irish governments, which accompanies the multi-party agreement and reproduces certain of its provisions – though not those concerning the Strand One institutions. This is binding in international law. Neither of these elements specifies a mechanism through which its text can be amended.

But it was clearly not intended that the Agreement should be completely immutable. The multi-party agreement concludes with a section on 'review procedures', which envisages the possibility of change or 'remedial action'. Its provisions for the British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC) likewise stipulate that the Conference 'will keep [the Agreement] under review'.²²⁰ The British–Irish agreement endorses these provisions. As an international treaty, it can be varied by the agreement of the two signatories. Change is thus envisaged – though how much change remains opaque.

²¹⁹ [Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, 1998](#).

²²⁰ See [Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, 1998](#): provisions on Validation, Implementation and Review, paragraph 5ff; and on the BIIGC in the Strand Three section, paragraph 9.

Two kinds of precedent for processes of change can be considered: the mechanisms through which the Agreement was endorsed in the first place; and the mechanisms through which it has subsequently been altered.

On the first of these, the original Agreement came about through talks involving the major parties and the British and Irish governments. The rules of the negotiations required ‘sufficient consensus’ to be attained, including majorities among both unionist and nationalist representatives.²²¹ Following the conclusion of the talks, the Agreement was then validated also by votes in the British and Irish parliaments, and in referendums in both parts of the island of Ireland. It may be argued that subsequent change should be subject to similar requirements. In particular, there is clearly an argument that changes of significant principle should be the subject of referendums. Whether significant change to Strand One might require a referendum in the South as well as the North is a complicated question on which people will disagree.

Regarding the second kind of precedent, the rules around the institutions established by the Agreement have been changed multiple times since 1998, most notably following the St Andrews Agreement of 2006, which, in particular, made changes to the way the First Minister and deputy First Minister (FM and dFM) were chosen; and the Hillsborough Castle Agreement of 2010, which provided for policing and justice to be devolved to the institutions.²²² There was no suggestion that these changes might require referendums: the basic power-sharing principles were maintained. On the other hand, the two governments sought a large element of cross-party consensus. This reflects continuing recognition that government structures need consensus across the community, which underpins the commitment to power-sharing.

The preference for broad consensus appears to remain. In its 2023 report, the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (NIAC), writing while the institutions were suspended, did suggest that the British government might make a number of smaller changes, apparently without seeking consensus support. Yet it is hard to see that unilateral permanent changes by the British government, or even the two governments, without substantial support across the community in Northern Ireland, would be legitimate – and they might not even be workable.

On the other hand, tying future reform strictly to the 1998 threshold, which like the Agreement itself was founded very much on a binary model of politics from which Northern Ireland has moved on to some degree, would now appear problematic in principle to some. Complicating the picture, Northern Ireland political leaders have at times been content to acquiesce to reforms, rather than bear the political burden of positively endorsing them.

The most that can probably be said is that future permanent reforms to the Strand One structures would need substantial agreement across the community in order to be seen as legitimate; without which anyway they might lack political efficacy.

²²¹ The requirements were set out in rule 34 of the Rules of Procedure for the Agreement negotiations, and specified that the support was needed of political parties commanding a majority of votes cast by both the nationalist and unionist communities. The support of both governments was needed in most cases, but only of the British government in the case of Strand One. See [Northern Ireland Office, 1996](#).

²²² See the [St Andrews Agreement, 2006](#) – although the method for choosing the FM and dFM was developed further after the St Andrews conference, reflected in the [Northern Ireland \(St Andrews Agreement\) Act 2006](#); [Hillsborough Castle Agreement, 2010](#). A step towards devolution and policing was envisaged in the 1998 Agreement: [Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, 1998](#): Policing and Justice section, paragraph 7.

2. How would reform proposals be developed?

Given that any reforms would need a broad measure of consensus among the parties in Northern Ireland, one obvious place for debate on reform of the institutions of Strand One might be the Assembly and Executive Review Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly (AERC). Established through the St Andrews Agreement, this committee's role is to 'review matters relating to the functioning of the Assembly and the Executive'.²²³ Following its creation, it first considered devolution of policing and justice, and it was notably influential in the development of provisions for an official opposition in 2016. At its meetings on 4 February and 11 March, it agreed to examine a range of reform options.²²⁴ The detail of its work programme is still to emerge, but potentially it will be the focus of significant discussion for the remainder of this Assembly term.

Nothing in the texts indicates, however, that it is the only route to reform of Strand One, and the committee does not have a track record of delivering large changes.

Other changes have emerged through political negotiation, often at the initiative of the governments, sometimes with their informal brokerage, sometimes in the form of formal interparty talks. Such negotiations have tended to be conducted behind closed doors, with little public discussion. Given the history, and the ways changes would directly impact on the political system, it seems inevitable that the parties in Northern Ireland would again play a central role if conversation about reform intensified.

Yet other actors could also contribute. Society has moved on considerably since the negotiations of 1998, and more opportunity might usefully be given for public discussion in the development of proposals for reforming the institutions. One such avenue might be citizens' assemblies, which were discussed in chapter 3 as a potential reform idea in their own right. Such assemblies might also be considered as a venue for the public to explore reform options and feed into debates among politicians. As chapter 2 showed, a range of civic society bodies and academics have already expressed views, and a more developed public discussion would give an opportunity for ideas advanced to be considered in greater depth. The AERC's work may offer an opportunity for this.

Any agreement between the major political parties in Northern Ireland would, in all likelihood, involve the British and Irish governments in a facilitation role. This is how significant changes have happened in the past. At the same time, the current UK government has said that any initiative should come from the Northern Ireland parties themselves. While the previous Irish government did advocate for reform, the Programme for Government of the current administration, published in January, says little on the matter: it touches only on the importance of restoring the Civic Forum.²²⁵

The proper role of the Irish government in discussions about the Strand One institutions has become controversial. The last British government in its paper of early 2024 (following which the DUP returned to the institutions) asserted 'the fact that Strand One of the Agreement is a purely internal matter', relying on the 'well-established... three-stranded approach' of the Agreement.²²⁶ This is not a universally accepted position, however. It is true that, reflecting the pattern in earlier

²²³ [Northern Ireland Assembly, 2024](#).

²²⁴ [Assembly and Executive Review Committee, 2025a](#); [Assembly and Executive Review Committee, 2025b](#).

²²⁵ [Irish Government, 2025](#), p. 143.

²²⁶ [Northern Ireland Office, 2024](#): see in particular p. 69, paragraph 5e, and p. 73, paragraph 21.

discussions, the Strand One section of the Agreement was negotiated in 1998 in a format chaired by the British government, without Irish government involvement. It is also true that in practical terms, the British government's willingness to go along with proposed change is essential, in a manner that the Irish government's is not, because many reforms require legislation at Westminster, being outside the Assembly's legislative competence.

On the other hand, the Irish government was involved in plenary sessions of the Agreement negotiations that considered its overall architecture, and it endorsed the final text. There is nothing in the Agreement that characterises Strand One questions as 'purely internal' and precludes Irish government involvement in them. Moreover, the Irish government's right to make representations on non-devolved matters through the BIIGC to the British government is not limited so as to exclude institutional questions, or 'internal' ones – indeed in its origin the provision was all about giving the Irish government a right to raise 'internal' issues. And there is a history of British governments, of both main parties, working together with the Irish government to overcome political difficulties, including ones with an institutional dimension, though the Irish government has sometimes remained outside detailed discussion on institutional questions.

3. Reform packages

The 1998 Agreement was a package of measures designed to appeal sufficiently to the varying interests of Irish nationalism and republicanism, British unionism and loyalism, and both governments. Many of its individual measures, taken in isolation, would have been opposed by one actor or another. Only in the context of a wider package, where nothing was agreed until everything was agreed, was the Agreement acceptable to the different sides in 1998. When major reform has happened since 1998, at St Andrews, Hillsborough, or the *New Decade, New Approach* accord, a similar pattern has emerged, with different actors accepting changes they might otherwise oppose because of a broader package offer.

Though there are areas where individual changes have been made in the past, and it is conceivable that some change could happen in isolation in the future, major reform made to how politics works in Strand One are likely to follow a similar trend in the future. Parties will expect a degree of *quid pro quo*.

Aside from this political balance, it will also be important that reforms are logically consistent with one another. Notably, any changes to the operation of Strand One would need to make sense when viewed across both the Assembly and the Executive. For example, replacing cross-community votes with weighted majorities for some matters but not others could create tensions. If the largest party of either unionism or nationalism were excluded from the Executive table by a reform there, but no changes were made at the Assembly level, the excluded party might still retain an ability to impede the Executive by blocking votes that were subject to cross-community support (for example, on finance). Likewise, changing Assembly decision-making while leaving processes for reaching decisions within the Executive unaltered could simply move existing problems from one arena to another.

Notwithstanding the attraction of package deals, there is a good case for saying that comparatively uncontentious but important changes – such, perhaps, as the creation of a new Public Policy Council – should not need to wait until there was agreement on implementing big picture changes

on matters such as how the FM and dFM are appointed. Reaching agreement on larger changes could be a long process, with no guarantee of success, so the case for agreeing to implement some changes in isolation may be strong. Whether it is possible remains to be seen.

Any changes made to Strand One in the name of reducing the danger of institutional collapse and improving effectiveness would ideally be endorsed by the whole political system, or as much of it as possible. In other words, there would be an inclusive negotiation process that delivers a substantial element of consensus on moving towards more effective decision-making and fewer vetoes. The objective should be to ensure that the leading party of unionism and nationalism to agree that their veto powers would be diluted or removed, as they would retain important powers elsewhere in the system that would provide sufficient protection.

4. How to deal with any future collapses

The first way to head off future collapses of the Stormont institutions – and these remain entirely possible – is to begin a debate on reforming the institutions in earnest. But if the institutions did collapse again there would be arguments for some steps to be taken to bring them back in a form as close to the original institutions as possible, even if only on a temporary basis – because there are no arrangements consistent with the Agreement for governing Northern Ireland in the absence of the institutions. The fallback of leaving government in the hands of the civil service, with restricted involvement from Westminster, as was seen in the two recent breaks in devolved government, was not at all consistent with the Agreement.²²⁷ In real-world terms, it meant that much of the work of government, particularly longer-term work, went undone, which is reflected in the current economic and public service problems experienced in Northern Ireland.

Direct rule, the recourse when institutions collapsed in earlier days, though it ensured the work of government went on, had no express legitimacy in terms of the Agreement either. Reserve powers to reinstitute such direct rule, which had been in place on the statute book during the early years of devolved government under the Agreement, were expressly repealed following provision in the St Andrews Agreement of 2006.²²⁸

If the institutions collapsed again, there might be a stronger case in principle, therefore, for the governments to take action with something less than the full measure of consensus support, to restore devolved government on a temporary basis, in a form as close as possible to the Agreement model. While the institutions functioned, political negotiation would continue on longer-term solutions commanding a wider measure of support. Whether practically such measures could work is a separate issue, for judgement in the political context of the time.

What such temporary arrangements would entail needs further examination. If they were designed to overcome a veto, they might need to go well beyond appointment provisions. They would need to ensure not only that the Assembly could meet and an Executive be selected, but that it was

²²⁷ A certain degree of involvement from Westminster was necessary for even this system to operate. Westminster legislation was needed to confirm the civil service could exercise statutory powers in certain circumstances, despite the absence of ministers. There were also powers to make appointments when existing terms expired: see for example the [Northern Ireland \(Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions\) Act 2018](#), sections 3 and 5. Westminster had to pass financial legislation each year, without which departments would have had no money; for example the [Northern Ireland Budget Act 2023](#).

²²⁸ [St Andrews Agreement, 2006](#), section on ‘Practical Changes to the Operation of the Institutions’, paragraph 14.

sufficiently representative of the community; and that the Executive could get its business through the Assembly, despite the opposition of those outside government. Otherwise the veto the provisions were designed to overcome would simply take effect at a later stage. It is possible, therefore, that such temporary changes might need to borrow from some of the ideas considered in the chapter 3. For example, they might involve changes to cross-community support rules, possibly indeed through the introduction of a temporary alternative weighted majority threshold.

Depending on the parties' willingness to participate, something of this sort might or might not be politically possible. Some would argue that, given its exceptional nature, it should be time-limited, to something less than an ordinary Assembly term.

Regardless of the intention, there is a risk that any temporary measures adopted would be seen by the excluded party as permanently endangering their veto. Indeed, were the temporary measures to prove popular (presumably particularly popular with the sections of society that do not support the excluded party's right to sit in government) then there could be calls to make the temporary measures permanent. This would carry significant risks for the sustainability of the system and the 1998 settlement. On the other hand, there might also be significant risks to long-term stability in a further prolonged period without any functioning institutions. These risks would all need to be balanced by the governments in the context of the politics of the time.

5. Conclusion

The first two sections of this chapter examined how any reforms to the Stormont institutions might come about – looking first at how they would be agreed, and then working back to how detailed proposals might be developed. Given that significant reforms would most likely emerge through a broadly consensual process, though could well take the form of package deals, and the third section looked at the form these might take. Finally, the last section explored the question of what might happen in the event that the institutions collapsed – and whether there could be a case for temporary reforms to enable a form of democratic government within Northern Ireland to continue.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

This report has set out what options exist for reforming Northern Ireland's political institutions. As the Introduction and chapter 1 explained, there have been many political successes since the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, and Northern Ireland is undoubtedly transformed in many respects from the society that experienced the Troubles. The institutions' record is nevertheless a mixed one. Because of a shared desire to prevent further institutional collapses, improve equity, and enhance good governance, conversation about reform has grown louder. Any such debate, if it is to serve Northern Ireland well, will need to be structured, inclusive, and cognisant of the wider political settlement that was so hard to reach in 1998, and which has, despite some shortcomings, delivered a lasting peace.

The report has provided an overview of reform ideas and analysed each option against a set of specific criteria. It has not passed judgement on any of these ideas, or made overall recommendations. It has been intended simply as an aid to further discussion.

Having outlined the context, the history, and our framework of analysis in the Introduction and chapter 1, we examined in chapter 2 the positions on reform of a wide range of relevant actors, including Northern Ireland's political parties, the London and Dublin governments, civic society, retired experts, academics, and the general public. The focus throughout was on proposals for change to the institutions established under Strand One of the Agreement.

Chapter 3 then catalogued the main reform proposals under four headings, relating to Executive formation, other aspects of the Executive, the Assembly, and other parts of Strand One. It also analysed what can be said about the impact each proposal might have, examining effects on the likelihood of institutional collapse, equity across society, and good governance, as well as how far each proposal would fit with the 1998 Agreement, and how it might interact with other options. Chapter 4, finally, considered how any reforms might actually come about.

We hope the content of this report will assist further discussions, including those that have recently begun within the Assembly's own Assembly and Executive Review Committee. Whether or not any particular reforms turn out to be desirable, it is certainly valuable to talk about them and further weigh their potential costs and benefits. We look forward to hearing different views on the options we have outlined (and perhaps others) over the coming months and years.

Repeated institutional collapses, concerns about inequity, and the parlous state of some public services have all fuelled desire for change. At the same time, politicians today are custodians of a young and fragile peace process, and reform measures that undermined the spirit of the Agreement would be dangerous. Debates about reform will need to keep these different imperatives in mind.

Bibliography

Legal acts

[Government of Ireland Act \(1920\).](#)

[Scotland Act \(1998\).](#)

[Northern Ireland Act \(1998\).](#)

[Northern Ireland \(St Andrews Agreement\) Act \(2006\).](#)

[Northern Ireland \(Miscellaneous Provisions\) Act \(2014\).](#)

[Assembly and Executive Reform \(Assembly Opposition\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) \(2016\).](#)

[Assembly Members \(Reduction of Numbers\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) \(2016\).](#)

[Northern Ireland \(Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions\) Act \(2018\).](#)

[Northern Ireland Budget Act \(2023\).](#)

International and/or inter-party agreements

[Anglo-Irish Treaty \(1921\).](#)

[Belfast/Good Friday Agreement \(1998\).](#)

[St Andrews Agreement \(2006\).](#)

[Hillsborough Castle Agreement \(2010\).](#)

[Stormont House Agreement \(2014\).](#)

[*A Fresh Start for Northern Ireland* \(2015\).](#)

[Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland \(2019\).](#)

[*New Decade, New Approach* \(2020\).](#)

[Windsor Framework \(2023\).](#)

Legal cases

[Napier \(Sean\) Application for Judicial Review \[2021\] NIQB 120.](#)

[Wilson \(Eileen\) Application for Judicial Review \[2023\] NIKB 10.](#)

[Committee on the Administration of Justice Application for Judicial Review \[2025\] NIKB 16.](#)

Parliamentary debates

Statement on ‘Recent Developments in Northern Ireland’, [Dáil Éireann debate, 14 February 2024](#), vol. 1049, no. 5.

Debate on ‘Northern Ireland’s Political Institutions’ (Westminster Hall), [House of Commons Hansard, vol. 760 \(21 January, 2025\)](#).

Other materials cited

AgendaNI (2022), ‘[Assembly co-optees: 96 per cent re-election rate](#)’. AgendaNI, September.

AgendaNI (2024). ‘[Opposition day: A new step for the Assembly](#)’. AgendaNI, April.

Ainsworth, Paul (2024). ‘[New poll reveals voters’ doubts over chances of Stormont surviving to end of current mandate](#)’. *Irish News*, 22 February.

Alliance Party (2003). [Alliance Works: Alliance Manifesto for the Northern Ireland Assembly Elections, 26 November 2003](#).

Alliance Party (2022a). ‘[Sharing Power to Build a Shared Future](#)’. Policy document, 23 June.

Alliance Party (2022b). ‘[Written evidence submitted by the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, relating to the Effectiveness of the Institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement \(GFA0023\)](#)’. House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

Alliance Party (2022c). [Together We Can: Alliance Party Assembly Manifesto 2022](#).

Alliance Party (2023). ‘[Westminster report a strong endorsement of the need for reform, says Farry](#)’. Press release, 4 December.

Assembly and Executive Review Committee, 2011–16. ‘[Archived Assembly and Executive Review Committee Reports](#)’, 2011–16. Northern Ireland Assembly website; accessed 16 March 2025.

Assembly and Executive Review Committee (2013). [Review of D’Hondt, Community Designation and Provisions for Opposition](#). Report NIA 123/11-15. Northern Ireland Assembly.

Assembly and Executive Review Committee (2025a). [Assembly and Executive Review Committee – Minutes of Proceedings: 2024–2025 Session](#). Northern Ireland Assembly. Webpage; accessed 24 March 2025.

Assembly and Executive Review Committee (2025b). [Assembly and Executive Review Committee: video recordings of meetings](#). Northern Ireland Assembly. Webpage; accessed 24 March 2025.

BBC News (2022a). ‘[Northern Ireland Protocol: Assembly Speaker blocked by DUP for second time](#)’. BBC News website, 30 May.

BBC News (2022b). ‘[Northern Ireland Assembly Election Results 2022](#)’. BBC News website.

BBC News (2024a). ‘[NI’s Covid response “hampered by lack of government”](#)’. BBC News website, 18 July.

- BBC News (2024b). [‘Northern Ireland Election 2024 Results’](#), BBC News website.
- Belfast Live (2024). [‘SDLP Leader Colum Eastwood Speaks to Belfast Live’](#). Interview (video), accessed 22 February 2025.
- Benn, Hilary (2025). [‘One Year on from Restoration – The Challenge ahead’](#). Speech given at Ulster University, 4 February.
- Breslin, John (2024). [‘Stormont to be abolished in the longer term, but remain during transition to new Ireland, Mary Lou McDonald suggests’](#). *Irish News*, 7 January.
- Clarke, Patricia (2002). *The Foot-and-Mouth Crisis and the Irish Border*. Armagh: Centre for Cross Border Studies.
- Coakley, John (2021). [‘Is a Middle Force Emerging in Northern Ireland?’](#). *Irish Political Studies* 36, no. 1, 29–51.
- Cochrane, Feargal (2013). *Northern Ireland: The Reluctant Peace*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Cummings, Judith (2024). ‘Sinn Féin first minister a defining moment in Northern Ireland’. BBC News website, 3 February.
- Cushnahan, John (2022). [‘Written evidence submitted by John Cushnahan, Former Leader of the Alliance Party and Former Fine Gael MEP, relating to the effectiveness of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement inquiry \(GFA0015\)’](#). House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.
- Deb, Anurag (2024). [‘The Northern Ireland Executive: politics, law and a rethink of judicial intervention’](#). *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly* 74, no. 2, 267–97.
- Doyle, John, and Eileen Connolly (2017). [‘Brexit and the Future of Northern Ireland’](#). In Federico Fabbrini (ed), *The Law & Politics of Brexit*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 139–160.
- DUP (2003). [‘Fair Deal: Manifesto 2003’](#).
- DUP (2011). [‘Moving Forward: Manifesto 2011’](#).
- DUP (2024). [‘Speaking Up for Northern Ireland: Working and Winning for You: General Election Manifesto, June 2024’](#).
- Durkan, Mark (2008). [‘Speech by Mark Durkan at the British Irish Association Conference, Oxford, \(5 September 2008\)’](#). CAIN; accessed 18 February 2025.
- Edgar, Damien, and Eimear Flanagan (2022). [‘DUP: NI First Minister Paul Givan announces resignation’](#). BBC News website, 3 February.
- Electoral Commission (2024). [‘Report on the 2024 UK Parliamentary General Election and the May 2024 Elections’](#). London: Electoral Commission.
- Elliott, Sydney (1999). [‘The Referendum and the Assembly Elections in Northern Ireland’](#). *Irish Political Studies* 14, pp. 138–49.
- Evans, Holly, and Archie Mitchell (2024). [‘Starmer announces UK and Ireland to host annual summit to “reset” relationship after Brexit’](#). *Independent*, 7 September.

- Farrell, David M., Jane Suiter, and Clodagh Harris (2019). [“Systematizing” constitutional deliberation: the 2016–18 citizens’ assembly in Ireland](#). *Irish Political Studies* 34, no. 1, 113–23.
- Farrington, Christopher (2004). [‘The Northern Ireland Assembly Election 2003’](#). *Irish Political Studies* 19, no. 1 (Summer), 74–86.
- Feeney, Brian (2024). [‘Why did local broadcasters never ask Peter Robinson or Arlene Foster if they’d be first minister for all the people?’](#). *Irish News*, 16 February.
- Flanagan, Eimear (2022). [‘Stormont: Why were NI leaders given unequal job titles?’](#). BBC News website, 15 May.
- Garry, John (2016–17). [‘The EU Referendum Vote in Northern Ireland: Implications for Our Understanding of Citizens’ Political Views and Behaviour’](#). Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (Northern Ireland Assembly, Queen’s University Belfast, Open University, and Ulster University).
- Garry, John (2023). [‘What the Northern Ireland Public Thinks about Power-Sharing under Current Devolution Arrangements’](#). Northern Ireland Assembly.
- Gooch, Niall (2024). [‘Say no to Labour’s citizens’ assembly’](#). *Spectator*, 20 February.
- Graham, David A. (2017). [‘The Strange Friendship of Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley’](#). *The Atlantic*, 21 March.
- Harris, Simon, and Keir Starmer (2024). [‘Joint Statement by Taoiseach Simon Harris and Prime Minister Keir Starmer’](#). Department of the Taoiseach, 17 July.
- Haughey, Sean, and Jamie Pow (2023). [‘A Deliberative Forum on Possible Reforms to Power-Sharing’](#). Northern Ireland Assembly.
- House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (2022). [The effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement](#). Inquiry webpage; accessed 18 February 2025.
- House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (2023a). [The Effectiveness of the Institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement: First Report of Session 2023–24](#). House of Commons, 4 December.
- House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (2023b). [Oral evidence by Doug Beattie: The effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement](#), HC 781. House of Commons, 5 July.
- House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (2023c). [Oral evidence by Mark Durkan, Baroness \(Arlene\) Foster of Aghadrumsee, and Lord \(John\) Alderdice: The effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement](#), HC 781. House of Commons, 7 June.
- House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (2023d). [Oral evidence by Alan Renwick, Alan Whysall, and Sean Haughey: The effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement](#), HC 781. House of Commons, 1 March.
- House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (2024). [The Effectiveness of the Institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement: Government Response to the Committee’s First Report: First Special Report of Session 2023–24](#). House of Commons, 20 February.

- Hughes, Brendan (2015). [‘Martin McGuinness hopes to re-name role as “joint first minister”’](#). Irish News, 20 November.
- Hughes, Brendan (2024). [‘NI public appointments commissioner: Hundreds of posts filled with no watchdog’](#). BBC News website, 19 April.
- Hughes, Brendan, and Matt Fox (2024). [‘Stormont: Michelle O’Neill makes history as nationalist first minister’](#). BBC News website, 3 February.
- Irish Government (2025). [Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland’s Future](#).
- Irish Times* (2005). [‘Stormontgate: how events unfolded’](#). *Irish Times*, 17 December.
- Kelly, Conor J., and Etain Tannam (2023). [‘The UK Government’s Northern Ireland Policy after Brexit: A Retreat to Unilateralism and Muscular Unionism’](#). *Journal of European Public Policy* 30, no. 11, 2275–2302.
- Kelly, Conor J., and Alan Whysall (2024). [‘The restoration of Stormont and the need for reform’](#). *Fortnight*, no. 493.
- Kelly, Tom (2022). [‘Written evidence submitted by Tom Kelly, relating to the effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement inquiry \(GFA0038\)’](#). House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.
- Landow, Charles, and James McBride (2024). [‘Moving Past the Troubles: The Future of Northern Ireland Peace’](#). Council on Foreign Relations backgrounder, last updated 16 February; accessed 18 February.
- Lijphart, Arend (1969). [‘Consociational Democracy’](#). *World Politics* 21, no. 2 (January), 207–25.
- Long, Naomi (2025). [Speech to the 2025 conference of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland](#), 1 March.
- Logue, Patrick, and Damian Cullen (2017). [‘McGuinness resignation: Why did he quit and what happens next?’](#). *Irish Times*, 9 January.
- Manley, John (2024). [‘Still no Stormont programme for government despite previous assurances that it would be ready ‘for summer’](#). *Irish News*, 19 July.
- Manley, John (2025a). [‘Andrew Muir: It’s like wading through treacle to get anything done at Stormont’](#). *Irish News*, 1 February.
- Manley, John (2025b). [‘DUP fails to block Stormont committee’s reversal on reform agenda’](#). *Irish News*, 5 February.
- Martin, Micheál (2024a). [‘Address by the Tánaiste Micheál Martin at Alliance Party Conference, Belfast’](#). Department for Foreign Affairs, 1 March.
- Martin, Micheál (2024b). [‘Tánaiste’s Remarks at the British Irish Association Conference’](#). Department of Foreign Affairs, 7 September.
- McBride, Sam (2019). [Burned: The Inside Story of the ‘Cash-for-Ash’ Scandal and Northern Ireland’s Secretive New Elite](#). Newbridge, Co. Kildare: Merrion Press.

- McBride, Sam (2024). '[SDLP's first Opposition day at Stormont splits Executive as DUP and SF join forces to defeat reform proposal](#)'. *Belfast Telegraph*, 4 March.
- McCaffrey, Ray (2015). '[The Executive Departments \(Northern Ireland\) Bill](#)'. Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service Bill Paper (NIAR 694-15), 7 December.
- McCambridge, Jonathan (2025). '[Emma Little-Pengelly accused of blocking major Stormont projects by "sitting on Executive papers"](#)'. *Irish News*, 2 March.
- McCann, David (2024). '[How to reform Stormont's co-option system](#)'. *Irish News*, 17 July.
- McCormack, Jayne (2023). '[Stormont leaders "should be joint first ministers" – Westminster committee](#)'. BBC News website, 4 December.
- McCormick, Andrew (2024). *[The Constitutional Status of Northern Ireland: Consent, Acquiescence, Subjugation, Indifference](#)*. London: Constitution Society.
- McEvoy, Joanne, and Allison McCulloch (2022). '[Written evidence submitted by Dr Joanne McEvoy, University of Aberdeen and Professor Allison McCulloch, Brandon University, relating to the effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement \(GFA0019\)](#)'. House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.
- McGarry, John, and Brendan O'Leary (2016). '[Power-Sharing Executives: Consociational and Centripetal Formulae and the Case of Northern Ireland](#)'. *Ethnopolitics* 15, no. 5, 497–519.
- McKibbin, Malcolm, David Sterling, and Andrew McCormick (2022). '[Written evidence submitted by Sir Malcolm McKibbin, Sir David Sterling and Andrew McCormick, relating to the effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement inquiry \(GFA0022\)](#)'. House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.
- McKittrick, David, and David McVea (2012). *[Making Sense of the Troubles: A History of the Northern Ireland Conflict](#)*. London: Penguin.
- Melaugh, Martin, and Fionnuala McKenna (1998). '[Results of the Referenda in Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland, Friday 22 May 1998](#)'. CAIN website; accessed 18 February 2025.
- Mikhael, Drew (2020). '[Northern Ireland reforms "ethnic veto" to help get its legislature back to work](#)'. Queen's University Belfast blog, 24 January.
- Millar, Frank (2008). '[Talk of removing Stormont's "ugly scaffolding" is premature](#)'. *Irish Times*, 11 September.
- Mitchell, David (2023). '[The International Significance of the Northern Ireland Peace Process: Revisiting the Lessons 25 Years after the Good Friday Agreement](#)'. *Politics*, online first.
- Murray, Colin, and Anurag Deb (2022). '[Written evidence submitted by Colin Murray and Anurag Deb, relating to the effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement inquiry \(GFA0052\)](#)'. House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.
- News Letter* (2016). '[John McCallister: Opposition bill a victory for democratic politics](#)'. *News Letter*, 1 March.

House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (2022). [The effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement](#). Inquiry webpage; accessed 18 February 2025.

House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (2023a). [The Effectiveness of the Institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement: First Report of Session 2023–24](#). House of Commons, 4 December.

House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (2023b). [Oral evidence by Doug Beattie: The effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement](#), HC 781. House of Commons, 5 July.

House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (2023c). [Oral evidence by Mark Durkan, Baroness \(Arlene\) Foster of Aghadrumsee, and Lord \(John\) Alderdice: The effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement](#), HC 781. House of Commons, 7 June.

House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (2024). [The Effectiveness of the Institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement: Government Response to the Committee's First Report: First Special Report of Session 2023–24](#). House of Commons, 20 February.

Northern Ireland Assembly (2025). [Motion: Programme for Government 2024–2027](#). Webpage; accessed 6 March 2025.

Northern Ireland Assembly (n.d.(a)). [Understanding the d'Hondt Method: its use in the Northern Ireland Assembly](#). Webpage; accessed 18 February 2025.

Northern Ireland Assembly (n.d.(b)). [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) and the Role of the Northern Ireland Assembly](#). Webpage; accessed 18 February 2025.

Northern Ireland Assembly (n.d.(c)). [Official Opposition](#). Webpage; accessed 7 March 2025.

Northern Ireland Audit Office (2022). [Northern Ireland Non-Domestic Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme: Progressing implementation of the Public Inquiry recommendations: Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General](#). Belfast: Northern Ireland Audit Office.

Northern Ireland Executive (2024). [Draft Programme for Government 2024–2027: 'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most'](#). Website; accessed 22 February 2025.

Northern Ireland Executive (2025). [Programme for Government 2024–2027: 'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most'](#). Website; accessed 6 March 2025.

Northern Ireland Executive (n.d.). [Ministerial Code](#). Website; accessed 22 February 2025.

Northern Ireland Executive Department of Finance (2025). [O'Dowd announces £129 million to fund transformation projects](#), 4 March. Webpage; accessed 24 March 2025.

Northern Ireland Office (1996). [Rules of Procedure](#), 29 July. Website; accessed 21 March 2025.

Northern Ireland Office (2024). [Safeguarding the Union](#), 31 January.

Pivotal (2022). [Written evidence by Pivotal, relating to the effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast /Good Friday Agreement inquiry \(GFA0033\)](#). House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

Pivotal (2024). [The Return of Stormont: Time for Real Change](#). Briefing, 5 February.

Pivotal (2025). [*Review of the First Year of the Restored Northern Ireland Executive*](#). Belfast: Pivotal.

Pivotal (n.d.). [Website](#); accessed 22 February 2025.

Pogatchnik, Shawn (2021). [‘David Frost: UK wants a “reasonable” Irish Sea border’](#). Politico, 7 November.

Preller, Patricia, and Alan Renwick (2025). [‘Local citizens’ assemblies: why do councils set them up and what can they do?’](#). UCL Constitution Unit blog, 11 February.

Renewable Heat Incentive Inquiry (2020). [Archived inquiry website](#); accessed 21 February 2025.

Renwick, Alan (2024). [‘Eight key questions about citizens’ assemblies’](#). Constitution Unit blog, 1 March.

Renwick, Alan, and Conor J. Kelly (2021). [‘How might Irish unification be decided?’](#). *The Loop*.

Renwick, Alan, and Conor J. Kelly (2023). [‘Perspectives on the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement: Examining Diverse Views, 1998–2023’](#). London: Constitution Unit.

Retail NI (2022). [‘Written evidence submitted by the Retail NI, relating to the effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement inquiry \(GFA0013\)’](#). House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

Robb, Niall, Ben Rosher, Frances Neilson and Mylie Brennan (2022). [‘Written evidence submitted by Mr Niall Robb, Ben Rosher, Frances Neilson and Mylie Brennan, relating to the effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement inquiry \(GFA0028\)’](#). House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

Robinson, Peter (2012). [‘Speech by Peter Robinson \(DUP\) on “Reflections on Irish Unionism”, \(29 March 2012\)’](#). CAIN website; accessed 18 February 2025.

RTÉ (2024). [‘Stormont Assembly challenged to prevent future collapses’](#). RTÉ News website, 4 March.

Rutter, Jill, and Jess Sargeant (2019). [‘Governing without Ministers: Northern Ireland since the Fall of the Power-Sharing Executive’](#). London: Institute for Government.

SDLP (2023a). [‘Written evidence submitted by the Social Democratic and Labour Party \(SDLP\), relating to the effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement inquiry \(GFA0053\)’](#). House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

SDLP (2023b). [‘Hanna: NIAC report sets out need for ambition and delivery’](#). Press release.

SDLP (2024). [‘SDLP Manifesto: Westminster 2024’](#).

Sinn Féin (1998). [‘Sinn Féin 6 County Assembly Election Manifesto 1998 For Real Change – Building a New Ireland’](#).

Sinn Féin (2019). [‘Time for Unity: Sinn Féin Westminster Election Manifesto 2019’](#).

Sinn Féin (2022). [‘Time for Real Change: Assembly Election 2022: Sinn Féin Manifesto’](#).

Sinn Féin (2024). [‘Strong Leadership, Positive Change: Westminster Election 2024: Sinn Féin Manifesto’](#).

- Sky News (2022). '[DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson says party will not support election of new Speaker in Stormont](#)'. Sky News website, 13 May.
- Stratagem and the John and Pat Hume Foundation (2022). '[Written evidence submitted by Stratagem and the John and Pat Hume Foundation, relating to the effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement inquiry \(GFA0026\)](#)'. House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.
- Taylor, Peter (1998). *The Provos: The IRA and Sinn Fein*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Taylor, Peter (2000). *Loyalists*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Taylor, Peter (2023). *Operation Chiffon: The Secret Story of MI5 and MI6 and the Road to Peace in Ireland*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Taylor, Rupert (2006). '[The Belfast Agreement and the Politics of Consociationalism: A Critique](#)'. *Political Quarterly* 77, no. 2 (April–June), 217–26.
- Tonge, Jon (2022). '[Written evidence submitted by Professor Jon Tonge, University of Liverpool, relating to the Effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement inquiry \(GFA0002\)](#)'. House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.
- Torrance, David (2019). '[Abortion and same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland: Do Westminster votes undermine devolution?](#)'. House of Commons Library insight paper, 10 July.
- TUV (2022). *Principle, Strength, Integrity: No Sea Border: TUV Manifesto 2022*.
- UK and Irish Governments (2024). '[British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference Joint Communiqué](#)'. Northern Ireland Office, 3 December.
- UUP (2001). *Manifesto*. Manifesto for the 2001 Westminster general election.
- Wales Centre for Public Policy (n.d.). [Website](#); accessed 22 February 2025.
- Walsh, Alan (2016). '[Eastwood: In SF/DUP Executive, Justice Ministry is “a position for which no nationalist need apply”](#)'. *Derry Now*, 25 May.
- Whitten, Lisa Claire (2023). *Constitutional Change in Northern Ireland*. Institute for Government and Bennett Institute for Public Policy.
- Whysall, Alan (2021). '[How can the institutions deliver better?](#)'. *Fortnight*, no. 483 (October).
- Whysall, Alan (2022). *Northern Ireland's Political Future: Challenges after the Assembly Elections: A Discussion Paper*. London: Constitution Unit.
- Whysall, Alan (2023). *The Agreement at 25: A Time for Constitutional Change in Northern Ireland*. London: Constitution Unit.
- Whysall, Alan (2022a). *Northern Ireland: Challenges for the Next Westminster Government*. London: Constitution Unit.

Whysall, Alan (2022b). [Written evidence submitted by Alan Whysall, relating to the effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement inquiry \(GFA0035\)](#). House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

Wilford, Rick, and Robin Wilson (2006). [*The Trouble with Northern Ireland: The Belfast Agreement and Democratic Governance*](#). Dublin: New Island Press.

Over a quarter of a century after the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998, Northern Ireland is rightly celebrated around the world as offering a model for how to build a lasting peace. Yet the governing institutions established through Strand One of the Agreement – principally, the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive – have had a mixed record of success. For much of the period since 1998, they have not functioned. Some have come to view them as operating inequitably. And there are widespread concerns about weaknesses in governance and poor delivery of public services.

This report provides a technical analysis of possible reforms to those institutions that have been or might reasonably be proposed, and that can plausibly be said to preserve the Agreement's underlying principles. It groups these ideas into four categories, relating to the process of Executive formation, other aspects of the Executive, the Assembly, and other Strand One institutions. It offers no view on the desirability of these reforms. Rather, it seeks to provide a basis for more coherent and informed future discussion.

About the Constitution Unit

The Constitution Unit is a research centre based in the UCL Department of Political Science. We conduct timely, rigorous, independent research into constitutional change and the reform of political institutions. Since our foundation in 1995, the Unit's research has had significant real-world impact, informing policy-makers engaged in such changes – both in the United Kingdom and around the world.

About the authors

Dr Conor J. Kelly is the Bingham Fellow in Constitutional Studies at Balliol College, University of Oxford. He previously worked at the Constitution Unit between 2019 and 2024.

Professor Alan Renwick is Deputy Director of the Constitution Unit, and Professor of Democratic Politics at UCL.

Alan Whysall is an Honorary Senior Research Associate at the Constitution Unit at University College London. Until he left the UK government in 2015, he had for most of the previous 20 years been involved with the Northern Ireland peace process as a senior British civil servant in the Northern Ireland Office. He was an adviser to British ministers throughout the negotiations that led to the 1998 Agreement.

Website: www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit

Blog: www.constitution-unit.com