



PARTNERSHIP THAT IS WORKING FOR YOU



2019 Local Election Manifesto

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Message from the Leadership

We live in a moment of true choice for people across these islands. Two years after scandal, incompetence and division collapsed the Executive, and three years after the Brexit referendum, uncertainty has become a new normal. People are fed up and they are angry. Is it any wonder? Tens of thousands of people continue to wait for a hospital bed. Principals in schools across the North have been forced to write to parents asking for donations to buy basic supplies. In less than a year, hard-pressed households in all our communities will be forced off the cliff-edge when welfare mitigations run out. And yet there has been no meaningful attempt to bring parties together to deal with our differences.

Enough is enough.

At every election, we are all offered a choice. Some parties will knock on your door with the politics of division. They will ask for your vote to keep other parties out. Haven't we had enough of that? The SDLP is offering a new choice. Ours is a rapidly changing party determined to bring real, measurable and lasting change to our communities and to this island. Acknowledging that we're asking voters to choose change, we've started by choosing change too.

This SDLP manifesto roots our politics in new policy ideas and in a new spirit of partnership. It is an ambitious platform for change that refuses to accept that our local councils should be small shadow Stormonts. It is a manifesto which sets out how we will transform local government to tackle climate change, enhance community health services and bring new employment to communities which have been left behind.

It's time for politicians to get back to work. Every vote in this election is an opportunity to fix this broken place, it is a chance to vote for partnership between parties to deliver the services our communities need. It is a vote for change.

This manifesto sets out a programme for that change.

On May 2nd, Vote SDLP.

Colum Eastwood
Nichola Mallon



A Programme for change across Ireland

Change is happening at an unprecedented pace across these islands. Brexit and the rise of a new populism around the world has destabilised conventional politics. The SDLP knows that to meet the new challenges we all face; we have to change too.

That's why we've taken bold action. The SDLP is working in partnership with Fianna Fáil on an unparalleled programme of public engagement across Ireland which can help frame an ambitious and practical agenda for the future of this island and our people.

Our partnership is organised around three central themes: *A Politics That Works, Better Public Services and Uniting Ireland's People.*



A Politics That Works

We will address the clear failures of current political practice in Northern Ireland which mean so few serious issues are being addressed and so little common ground is being forged.

The economic model which has repartitioned the North along an East/West axis, depriving communities of the investment they need to grow and thrive is fundamentally broken. We will explore a new model which provides opportunity and sustainable growth in all our communities and maximises the potential of integration across the island.

We will also address the need to reform how Dublin and London engage with each other and with Northern Ireland.

Better Public Services

Key public services in Northern Ireland are under acute pressure and lack any coherent vision for the future.

Under this theme, we will address public attitudes to priorities and specific options for improving services such as healthcare and education.

Uniting Ireland's People

The potential for cooperation on this island has not been fully realised in the past twenty years and Brexit threatens much of what has been achieved. In the post-Brexit scenario this may become even more difficult.

We will address practical steps for greater cooperation and the shape of future possible constitutional arrangements should a unification poll be held and passed.

Public Engagement

As part of our commitment to forging robust new ideas that unlock the potential of the island and undo the damage of sectarian retrenchment, we'll make specific policy proposals in the following areas:

- Economic Development
- Brexit
- The Unity of our People
- Health Services
- Education
- Housing

Reforming Government

In each area, the work will be linked to a public forum and followed by the publication of specific recommendations.

The partnership is very deliberately based on the substance of policies which affect people. Nowhere is that more important than in local government where people come into contact with front line public services that directly affect their lives. It remains the only level of government operating in Northern Ireland and, as such, we want to maximise its potential and the potential for cooperation across the island.

Our partnership seeks to deliver an alternative to a government record of mismanagement, incompetence and inertia delivered by the DUP and Sinn Féin. Our alternative will be a politics rooted in the reality of people's lives and a politics that actually delivers for them.

By focusing on people-centred policies such as jobs, health and education, we are seeking to transform the culture and the climate of northern politics under which our people have suffered.

Because there is no point in being a party of protest across Ireland - political parties are only relevant if they can use the power of government to enact real and progressive change for our people.

Unity and reconciliation in Ireland are simply not possible if you refuse to govern.

We will offer a positive alternative to pointless protest and point-scoring.

The SDLP and Fianna Fáil will agree and deliver joint policies which can be effectively implemented in government across the island.



Partnership in Councils

The SDLP is committed to the restoration of power sharing. Since the collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive, the SDLP has worked constructively in an effort to reach a resolution to the current stalemate.

The SDLP is very clear that the failure to get the institutions working is letting our people down. Devolution exists to improve the lives of everyone in our society by enabling us to design policy and public services in a way that is right for Northern Ireland. The SDLP has engaged and will continue to engage with both Governments and the other parties to get the Assembly and Executive restored.

More than two years after the collapse of power sharing, our councils are the only functioning layer of local government. SDLP Councillors have, and will continue to, put the people of Northern Ireland first – working for a better future for all.

This is a critical time. Confidence in politics and politicians is low. This is a moment for all parties to return to the values of partnership, cooperation and compromise. That is in the DNA of the SDLP.

Central to the councils is the ethos of power sharing and the protection of minority views – which the SDLP ensured was enshrined in legislation. People want to see their councillors working in partnership, across party lines, not retreat to the tribal trenches that have poisoned political debate.

SDLP Councillors have continued to work to create jobs, create cleaner, greener and safer communities and secure better facilities in communities across Northern Ireland.

The SDLP was the architect of the Local Government Bill which increased the responsibility of local councils and enhanced the levels of scrutiny, transparency and accountability. We believe that powers to shape cities, towns and communities should be exercised at the level closest to their need. That's why we support the devolution of further powers to our councils - including responsibility for regeneration so that people can be more involved in setting their own vision for what their community should look like in five, ten or twenty years. It is our strong belief that planning, community planning and regeneration powers should be strings of the same bow, used together to transform local places.

The SDLP is proposing a review of the powers exercised by local councils. Five years after the reform of local government, it's time to reflect on the progress made and the problems to address. This review should consider how councils work together, how effectively and efficiently they exercise their powers and which further powers should be devolved to meet the needs of local communities. The review should also consider 'crisis-proofing' local government so that, in the absence of an Assembly or Executive, effective decision making can continue at a local level.

The SDLP believes that power sharing must be embedded across Northern Ireland, and that government should always be representative and reflective of both communities. Under the SDLP's Local Government Bill, sharing council positions of responsibility across political parties and independents is enshrined in law. The SDLP is committed to partnership working in every level of government.

Fighting Brexit, Defending our Place in Europe

Brexit is the most immediate and fundamental political, economic and constitutional challenge facing communities, businesses and people across these islands.

We understand that the Brexit vote was a moment of true change because it was a moment of lasting change. It created a fixed lens through which all other issues have been viewed over the last three years.

But the future chosen by the English and Welsh peoples is not the future chosen by the Irish and Scottish peoples.

As the only local party that registered to campaign against Brexit in the 2016 Referendum, the SDLP is proud of our progressive, pro-European values. Like others, we knew that the consequences of withdrawal from the European Union would be devastating for trade, labour and relationships across this island. Unlike others, we weren't content to sit by and watch it happen.

Since the referendum was called, the SDLP:

- Was the only local party to register to campaign against Brexit.
- Tasked public representatives and activists with securing a remain vote in the North.
- Took the British Government to court to protect the Good Friday Agreement.
- Arranged rallies in Belfast to respect the 56% in Northern Ireland who voted to remain.
- Met with European Heads of State to make the case for a bespoke arrangement for the North.

We know that a hard border in Ireland poses an existential threat to many of our industries - it threatens to position us as a permanent economic backwater. This is particularly true for communities west of the Bann and along the border – communities already economically neglected.

The backstop, negotiated and agreed by the European Union and the British Government, is not our first choice but we acknowledge that it remains our ultimate protection from the DUP/ERG hard Brexit axis which is on a destructive isolationist path that will lead to a hard Brexit and a hard border on this island.

There is no such thing as a good Brexit. That's why the SDLP has called on Theresa May to revoke Article 50 and suspend this process rather than lurching from crisis to cliff edge.



OUR PLEDGES



Continue defending the interests of people in Northern Ireland who voted to remain.



Support the backstop as our ultimate protection against a hard border.



Establish a Brexit Committee on every council to make preparations to protect local communities from the worst impact of withdrawal.



Continue working with our colleagues and European Heads of State in the Party of European Socialists to get the best deal for Ireland.



First class community health services

Northern Ireland's Health Service has been a victim of chronic under-resourcing for decades. From hospitals to community care, there has been no commitment to a strategic and resourced vision of how health services should be delivered for a growing and ageing population.

There are currently 281,705 people waiting for an out-patient appointment with their local hospital and 88,605 people waiting for a hospital bed. Trusts across the North routinely miss waiting time targets and cancer treatment targets. That's why the SDLP backed the Bengoa Report and the Transformation Plan for our health service. We believe that the first step to creating an efficient, affordable and proactive health service is removing politics from the equation and planning services objectively.

Our Health Service is one of the key public services suffering from the vacuum caused by parties which refuse to get around the table and restore government. Acknowledging that many of the systemic challenges facing the health sector can only be addressed by a functioning Assembly, we believe that local councils can play their part to enhance community and public health services.

Below are a number of our positions on health related issues as well as our pledges to enhance health care through our councils.

Mental Health

The legacy of conflict has left an indelible mark on the mental health of many of those who lived through it. More than 200,000 people in the North suffer as a result of poor mental health and almost half of these cases are directly related to conflict.

The scale of the challenge facing us reaches far beyond the health service. Higher instances of poor mental health have led to increased unemployment and reliance on welfare meaning that communities here are disproportionately affected by cuts passed by the DUP, Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party at Stormont. That's why we'll continue to make the case for funding advice services through local government to provide those suffering most with practical support.

The SDLP believes that this is an area requiring significant attention to ensure an appropriate community-based provision which addresses both the trauma imparted by the conflict and other areas of mental ill health such as eating disorders.

Rural Healthcare

There must be a balance between the centralisation of services in regional centres of excellence and ensuring that rural communities are able to access care, particularly emergency care, in a comprehensive and timely way. We understand the importance of rural health services and want to sustain existing critical services as well as planning for the provision of new services where capacity exists.

Cross Border Healthcare

The SDLP is committed to an all-island approach to health and social care, maximising resources and providing the highest level of treatment. We want to see increased provisions for North-South healthcare including a joined-up approach to ambulance service provision in border communities.

We're working with our partners in Fianna Fáil to explore how additional capacity can be secured across the island through better utilisation and cooperation between existing services, particularly in border areas.

General Practice and Primary Care

The number of GP practices in the North has decreased to the lowest level in over 20 years and each GP surgery is, on average, now providing care to 500 more people than 10 years previously. The SDLP recognises the need to review GP and primary care provision in Northern Ireland urgently.

Loneliness

We now understand the devastating impact that loneliness can have on individuals, families and communities. It is a sad reality that many people go for long periods on end without engaging in conversation, interacting with community or experiencing care from others.

It is recognised that loneliness is highly prevalent amongst older citizens and people living with disabilities, but we must recognise it reaches far beyond these groups. Loneliness can affect many people such as first-time mums, immigrants, carers, people starting new jobs or university, and those bereaved, to name just some.

Therefore, it is imperative that society better understands the extreme effects loneliness can have on a person. Modern medical reports share startling revelations on how loneliness can impact our physical and mental health and the increased likelihood of mortality.

The SDLP believes that there should be a strategy to address loneliness in the North.



OUR PLEDGES

Local government has an important role to play in providing the infrastructure and incentives for people to lead healthier lives.

In our councils we will:



Recognise the impact of loneliness on mental and physical health and press for each council to engage with the work of the loneliness taskforce to baseline statistics that will lead to bespoke interventions.



Encourage people to lead more active lives by creating new greenway and quietway infrastructure which will incentivise walking or cycling. We'll also press for active travel hubs as a key part of the transformation of transport services in Belfast and Derry and introduce an active health strategy for every council.



Increase the amount of green space in our towns and cities, enhancing our environment and providing people with the opportunity to exercise in a welcoming space.



Press for the introduction of clean air zones in those councils where people are most at risk of health complications related to higher concentrations of particulate matter.



Create safe and healthy play opportunities for young people by introducing smoke-free zones in our public parks and ensure, where possible, that access to play facilities is free for children and families. We'll also ensure that public parks and play equipment meet the needs of children and adults with disabilities.

Celebrating diversity, protecting rights

Communities across the North are becoming more and more diverse. Local government should embrace and celebrate that diversity in all its forms, providing support to cultural events, festivals and minority communities.

Language Rights

The SDLP supports language rights for all. We have consistently called for, developed and worked towards comprehensive legislation which will protect, promote and enhance language rights.

The SDLP wants to see a comprehensive suite of legislation to deal with language inequality and the mistreatment of those who speak Irish, Ulster Scots and languages other than English. It is a matter of profound regret that parties and politicians have used the Irish language as a tool to score points against one another. We continue to support a standalone Irish Language Act, recognising that this issue is about more than simply supporting Irish language speakers. It speaks to the mistreatment of an entire community and the mistrust between people on this island.

Previously the SDLP attempted to legislate for the Irish Language – both Dominic Bradley and Patsy McGlone worked on Private Members' Bills. We have consistently argued for rights for the Irish Language.

The SDLP also supports further legislative provision to protect the rights of Ulster Scots speakers. We believe that accommodation for our shared linguistic heritage should be a source of unity, not division.

While the issue of language has remained a priority political topic, it is important that the conversation is expanded to include other minority languages and sign language. The SDLP supports a Sign Language Act for Northern Ireland which would introduce sign language into the school curriculum, enhancing quality of life for deaf people.

Disability Rights

The SDLP is committed to ensuring that the rights of persons with disabilities are no longer denied. The SDLP has proposed that each council undertakes a review on how they meet local obligations within the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

As well as engaging with people with disabilities in the design of new council services, it is important that local government works to enhance what's currently on offer. That means reviewing our streetscapes to ensure poorly designed or placed furniture is removed, thinking again about the affordability and accessibility of transport networks in towns and cities across the North, reimagining street commerce so that it isn't intrusive for disabled people and working with the PSNI to ensure that pavement parking is tackled in commercial and residential areas.

Persons with disabilities play a central role in our workplaces and wider communities. It is vitally important that we recognise and value the contribution they make to our society, and acknowledge the role we all have to ensure we are doing everything we can to uphold the rights of disabled people. That should also be reflected in the community planning process.

LGBT+ Rights

The SDLP strongly supports LGBT+ rights. We will continue to use our votes and voices to speak up for these rights.

SDLP Leader Colum Eastwood MLA tabled the first motion calling for civil marriage equality to achieve a majority in the Assembly. We will continue to seek to reform the Petition of Concern to ensure that when the Assembly is reinstated, we can fairly legislate for Marriage Equality on behalf of the LGBT+ community.

Councils should undertake a review of the services and facilities they provide to ensure they meet the needs of people in the LGBT+ community, particularly those in the process of gender transitioning.

Councils across the North have a key role to play in tackling prejudice, intolerance and hate crimes against the LGBT+ community through policing and community safety partnerships and outreach with sectoral organisations.



Petition of Concern

The original intention of the Petition of Concern was to act as a mechanism to protect minority communities from the abuse of power of Assembly majorities. The SDLP believes that the Petition of Concern should be restored to its original purpose – a tool to defend minority communities, not a weapon to be used against them.

The reform of the Petition of Concern can break the deadlock on other issues like Equal Marriage, the Irish Language and others that have been intractable for too long. As long as the Petition of Concern continues to be abused it will discredit the democratic integrity and reputation of the Assembly and will be seen as a bar to transparency and accountability.

Our position is that the Petition of Concern must be deployed as it was intended under the Good Friday Agreement to protect equality and human rights. We believe that it should be reset to meet the terms of the Agreement as outlined in Paras 11-13 of the Good Friday Agreement.

Similar to the Petition of Concern, the SDLP supports the Call-In procedure in Local Councils, whereby councillors can request a Call-In if they feel a decision did not properly consider the relevant facts and issues; or the decision would disproportionately and adversely affect any section of the inhabitants of the district. The council then asks a lawyer to examine the decision to determine whether it should be reconsidered. The Call-In process provides a key check and balance in the system of local governance.

Festival Funding

Councils have responsibility for funding a diverse range of community festivals across Northern Ireland. The support provided by local government is critical to sustaining some of our most vibrant cultural, arts and community festival programmes.

All festivals and organisations should have an equal opportunity to bid for the resource available from local government. A review of festival funding should take place across council districts to ensure that resources are delivered equitably across a range of groups.

OUR PLEDGES



Support for council service users who want to engage in Irish or Ulster Scots including exploring the potential for dedicated officers to support these communities.



Support the introduction of a Sign Language Act. In the absence of an Assembly to deliver legislation, training for public-facing council staff in sign language to enhance the service available to people suffering from hearing loss.



A review of how councils are meeting their obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.



A broad review of streetscapes, to include street commerce, in towns and cities across Northern Ireland to ensure the poorly designed or placed on-street furniture is removed or redesigned.



Councils to work with the PSNI to deal with obstructive pavement parking in commercial and residential areas.



Further support for diversity projects and events, including annual pride festivals, that enrich our communities and provide a sense of belonging to minority communities.



Further work between councils, PCSPs and the PSNI to tackle hate crimes in communities across Northern Ireland.



A review of council services and facilities to ensure they meet the needs of all communities.



Fundamental reform of the petition of concern to break the veto on equality.



A review of festival funding to ensure groups receive resources equitably.

Planning towns and cities for the future

Planning and Development

The SDLP supports planning decisions being made by councils. It was an SDLP Minister who managed the reform of local government and the devolution of new powers to give councils the opportunity to fundamentally reshape towns and cities across Northern Ireland.

We understand, however, that the devolution of powers to local government has not been a pain-free experience. The backlog in planning applications in councils across the North has held up the much needed transformation of our towns and cities and has deprived communities of new jobs, investment and housing. With only four out of eleven local councils meeting their planning targets, the SDLP believes that changes have to be made.

The rationale behind transferring planning powers to local councils was steeped in the understanding that decisions would be taken in line with the needs of local communities. However, until local planning offices are more adequately resourced and structured to deal with their new responsibilities, the backlog in applications for new homes, office accommodation and industrial sites will continue to suspend our ambitions.

Among the immediate changes needed are specialist housing planning officers to ensure applications for new homes, which are designed to tackle growing waiting lists, are processed as efficiently as possible and on time. Planning offices also need to recruit or retrain staff with specialist skills related to the full range of their statutory powers including compulsory purchase and maximising the community benefit from developer contributions. Using the right authority effectively and appropriately, in conjunction with robust local consultation will enhance the planning process and ensure local communities have buy-in to projects at the earliest possible stage.

The SDLP is proposing a review of the powers exercised by local councils. Five years after the reform of local government, it's time to reflect on the progress made and the problems to address. This review should consider how councils work together, how effectively and efficiently they exercise their powers and which further powers should be devolved to meet the needs of local communities. The review should also consider 'crisis-proofing' local government so that, in the absence of an Assembly or Executive, effective decision making can continue at a local level.

City and Region Deals

The SDLP has been calling for City Deals to be developed for Northern Ireland for many years. We welcome the partnership approach which has led to the Belfast Region City Deal which will benefit councils across the North. SDLP Councillors will continue to work to ensure that the Belfast Region City Deal is delivered and delivers for local people.

A City Deal for Derry and the North West must now be the next step. The SDLP has led on this for many years. The united voice and vision behind the tireless advocacy for the deal is extremely encouraging and the SDLP will continue to work with all parties from across the political and civic spectrum to ensure that the deal is secured.

SDLP Councillors are continuing to press for City and Region Deals in those councils which have not yet benefitted from treasury approval, in principle, for enhanced investment.

Infrastructure

Many of our roads, already neglected as a result of years of underinvestment, are now in even worse repair as a consequence of cuts to maintenance budgets. This has had a disproportionate impact on rural communities and our rural roads network. The SDLP will continue to press for the highest quality standards of road safety across the North.

In the rural areas of the North many roads have fallen into dangerous structural disrepair – resulting in increased claims for damage caused to vehicles. The SDLP will continue to lobby on behalf of our constituents to ensure that the rural roads network is maintained to the highest possible standard.

Town Centres

The SDLP is proud to support our local town centres – it is vital that they remain the centre of social and community life. SDLP Councillors will continue to promote a ‘town centre first’ approach to planning, ensuring that the viability of town centres is protected and enhanced.

Community Planning

Community Planning should involve all those who deliver public services working together in partnership to develop a shared vision and agree actions which will make a real difference to people’s lives.

We acknowledge the concerns of many individuals and third sector organisations that collaboration between stakeholders and service providers has not been as immersive as many would like.

The SDLP will continue to play a substantial role in shaping these plans, ensuring they are community focused and fit for purpose.

OUR PLEDGES



A team of dedicated Housing Planning Officers in each council area with responsibility for ensuring applications for new homes, designed to tackle waiting lists, are processed efficiently.



An evaluation of specialist skills required in planning offices to ensure councils are able to deploy their full suite of powers.



A review of the powers exercised by local government to ensure decisions are made at the most appropriate level and that local government is crisis-proofed against the collapse of Stormont.



The SDLP will continue to lead on a City Region Deal for Belfast, the North West and for those council areas yet to benefit from this investment.



A Town-Centre First approach to planning that revitalises our main streets.



Enhanced collaboration between statutory partners and the voluntary and community sector in the community planning process.

Making great places

SDLP Councillors across Northern Ireland aim to create shared spaces which are safe and healthy and provide opportunities for all our citizens. We are committed to working with the relevant health agencies in both urban and rural settings to ensure each council has an effective strategy to tackle health inequalities and that council policies are health-proofed. Our councillors will protect and enhance our parks, beaches and green spaces and we will work to develop age appropriate facilities in all community recreation facilities. We will work to encourage healthier lifestyles by improving upon, and promoting the use of, existing health and wellbeing facilities, sports facilities, allotments and projects to enhance quality of life.

Community Champions

Many of the public services provided by the council directly intersect with the work of the community and voluntary sector. We recognise the need to work collaboratively with organisations and projects where high quality intervention and advocacy work is happening within communities.

The SDLP also recognises, however, that divergence between council policies can make it more difficult for individual organisations, particularly at a regional level, to work as closely with elected representatives in each district as they would like.

We will therefore appoint a lead SDLP councillor on each council to act as a champion for the community and voluntary sector, working with individuals and organisations to maximise cooperation on specific issues and with specific communities.

Delivering Council Services

SDLP Councillors across the North remain committed to seeing their councils operating in the most efficient, transparent, accountable manner and providing value for money. The SDLP will work to deliver improved public services. This includes maintaining vital council services such as cleansing and waste collection that must remain at a constantly high standard to engender civic pride and to prevent the development of petty crime and anti-social behaviour. We will ensure that the provision of council services for older people continues through discounted schemes at our leisure centres and activities at our community centres. The SDLP will work to ensure that all council facilities are welcoming to breastfeeding mums.

Safer Communities

The SDLP remains committed to combating crime, and ensuring safer communities for everybody. The SDLP is committed to Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PSCPs) and we are committed to working with the PSNI to improve the safety of our local communities. These PCSPs should be open and transparent, to help ensure that local communities have a greater say over local policing issues.

SDLP Councillors will continue to encourage councils to provide increased funding for community projects which promote individual and community responsibility, youth engagement, advice on security for older people, simple ways to report anti-social behaviour and infrastructure measures such as alley-gating. Our aim is to assist in reducing crime, tackling anti-social behaviour and allowing people to feel safe in their homes and on the streets.

Bonfires

The SDLP recognises the importance of bonfires to the wider unionist community as part of their celebration of culture and tradition and supports a sensible 'Bonfire Management Scheme' which incentivises bonfire organisers to limit environmental damage and anti-social behaviour.

The SDLP will continue to work with statutory partners Council, NIHE, PSNI and NI Environmental Agency who all have a collective and strategic responsibility to address bonfires which put at risk people's health or property. We wish to engage in discussion with other parties to implement the recommendations of the Frawley report which can tackle difficult bonfires.

OUR PLEDGES



The SDLP will appoint a community champion in each council district to act as a leader and a focal point for community organisations in the development of new policy.



SDLP Councillors will make the case for enhanced work within PCSPs to engender civic confidence in policing and create safer communities.



The SDLP will continue to support a sensible bonfire management scheme that rewards organisers for limiting environmental damage and anti-social behaviour. We remain committed to the implementation of the Frawley report.

Housing and Homelessness

Access to a good quality, secure and affordable home is a fundamental right. It is critical if communities are to flourish.

The SDLP will ensure that we continue to support positive housing decisions and priority spending to help tackle homelessness.

At least 3,000 new homes are needed each year to meet the rising demand – these must be targeted at the areas with the greatest social need.

Homelessness

The rise in homelessness has been well documented over the last number of months. There are currently more children and young people registered as homeless than ever before, yet due to the lack of social housing stock in areas of high demand this number is only set to increase.

The only way to address this is by building more homes and building them at a fast rate. This is why the SDLP has proposed a dedicated planning officer assigned specifically to process planning applications for social housing new builds to ensure they can be processed as a matter of urgency rather than being stuck for months in a log jam.

First Time Buyers

The inability of first-time buyers to get on the property ladder is well documented and evidenced. Many people, despite working and saving hard, find themselves trapped in expensive private rented accommodation or staying in their parents' home well into their thirties because they cannot afford the deposit and mortgage to own their own home.

As the crisis in social housing grows and we have continued inaction when it comes to responsible reform of the private rented sector, affordable home ownership is one of the few avenues open to alleviate pressure on the system.

Shared Communities

The SDLP has been a strong advocate of sharing our communities. We believe that both shared housing and mixed tenure housing developments are required to ensure an inclusive, socially cohesive society. The SDLP will work to tackle segregation with shared future and new build housing schemes as well as shared neighbourhood strategies in existing developments. We will ensure that the desire to live in a mixed area is properly recognised and facilitated.

OUR PLEDGES



A dedicated team of housing planning officers in each council to ensure homes are delivered at high quality and on time to address spiralling waiting lists.



Reform of the Private Rented Sector to deal with irresponsible landlords and an end to no-fault evictions.



Tackle segregation through new build housing schemes which bring people and communities together.



Supporting hard-pressed households

Welfare Reform

The SDLP has been steadfast in our opposition to Welfare Reform – In the Northern Ireland Assembly, in Westminster and in Local Councils. We will continue to expose and oppose cuts to benefits, tax credits, pensions and other plans to cut the incomes of hard-pressed families.

In Council, SDLP Councillors have been resolute in their commitment to negate the worst impacts of Welfare Reform, securing funding for much needed advice services.

The SDLP has remained consistent in our approach to dealing with the issue of social security, recognising that those who will be affected most by the reform of welfare are those who are the most vulnerable.

The record shows that the SDLP has consistently attempted to negate the devastating impact of Welfare Reform changes by amending legislation, presenting alternative proposals and calling for protections for the elderly, disabled and deprived.

Welfare cuts are pushing working families and vulnerable people further into poverty. Come 2020 when the mitigation package runs out, people are going to be thrown into even higher levels of poverty and despair. The SDLP will continue to work to stop welfare reform.

The bedroom tax is already hitting dozens of homes across the North, despite some parties saying that they had stopped the controversial welfare cut. The SDLP consistently warned that the mitigation package is not enough and that all parties should have resisted the bedroom tax.

A priority must be to put in place a support package for all of these households and those facing the guillotine of welfare cuts when the mitigation package runs out.

Anti-Poverty

It is unacceptable that one in four people living in the North is living in poverty, that over 125,000 pensioners live on low incomes, of which 18,000 are living in severe poverty, and more than 121,000 children (27%) living in poverty.

The SDLP is committed to tackling poverty in all its forms. Poverty underpins many of the difficulties we face as a society and the effects of poverty are far-reaching and can place people in situations that are challenging to break free from. A robust strategy with clear targets is essential if we are to halt the increasing trend of poverty in the North.

When you tackle poverty, you can begin to transform lives. This is why the SDLP has consistently called for a standalone Anti-Poverty Strategy, with clear cross-cutting targets focusing on health, education, employment and housing. In the absence of a Northern Ireland Executive, the SDLP is proposing that each council should develop an Anti-Poverty Strategy with specific measurable targets and a suitable budget line. Any Anti-Poverty Strategy should be linked in closely with the Community Planning aspect of council. Community plans should include measures to deal with poverty in all its forms.

Education

The SDLP believes that there must be a targeted aim of tackling the root causes of educational underachievement, which often lies in poverty and in social deprivation. Schools based in deprived areas will particularly feel the pressure of budget cuts, exacerbating problems they already face. Programmes such as Sure Start which target the most disadvantaged areas should continue to be supported.

We recognise that Early Years Education is vital for our young people's development. Early interventions, focused on children and their parents, can have a profound impact on later years. The cost of childcare is a significant barrier for parents of young children entering the workforce. We believe that increasing free childcare provision is critical to families in Northern Ireland.

The SDLP is fully supportive of the Childcare for All Charter, which sets out a vision of a childcare system that is affordable, accessible, flexible, high quality, and which supports children's education and development. We also want to see the value of childcare work recognised with decent pay and terms and conditions.

We believe that local government can do more to support parents, and in order to achieve this the SDLP supports the implementation of the 'Parents in the Picture' recommendations.

The SDLP believes that councils should support cycling by ensuring that school children are trained in on-road cycling in their local communities. This should be complemented with council support to encourage safe routes to schools, making it easier for pupils to walk and cycle to school safely.

Older People

The SDLP fully supports the Age Sector Platforms Strategic Framework for the Health and Wellbeing of Older People, and the key priorities within it:

- Maintain the 'Triple Lock' to protect the value of the Basic State Pension;
- Make measurable progress towards transformation in health and social care as outlined in 'Health and Wellbeing 2026 - Delivering Together';
- Legislate to make Age Discrimination in accessing Goods, Facilities and Services illegal in Northern Ireland;
- Address increasing incidence of loneliness and isolation amongst older people through measures including digital inclusion programmes;
- Extend the Warm Home Discount Scheme to Northern Ireland;
- Protect key pensioner concessions including the Smartpass, free TV licenses for over 75s and the Winter Fuel Allowance.

OUR PLEDGES



Support and resource advice services in towns and cities across the North to deal with the impact of welfare cuts.



Support the introduction of an anti-poverty strategy in each council district with specific measurable targets and a suitable budget line.



Support the Childcare for All Charter which sets out a vision of a childcare system that is affordable, accessible, flexible, high quality, and which supports children's education and development.



Support active travel education for all children, including teaching on-road cycling in schools through council road safety programmes.



Support the Age Sector Platform's Strategic Framework for the Health and Wellbeing of Older People



Economic development

Economic Inactivity

Northern Ireland has the highest economic inactivity rate in the UK. We need a robust and realistic plan to tackle the systemic issues and barriers preventing people from entering the workforce. As long as inactivity rates continue to rise, our economy will at best stay stagnant and at worst start to drop, and with a no-deal Brexit looming over us, that is becoming increasingly likely.

It is vital that councils consider every financial instrument available to create jobs, grow the economy and support disadvantaged communities.

The SDLP has consistently called for the development of Enterprise Zones in Council areas where unemployment is high.

Growing our Tourism Sector

Tourism is one of our natural assets and with proper structures and supports, it is an industry that we could lead in, supporting the economy and creating jobs and training opportunities. The SDLP recognises the potential of tourism to transform the local economy and understands the industry needs support to develop.

Despite difficult economic times, our tourism industry has managed to not only survive, but thrive. This is something that should be celebrated and built upon. It is also why the SDLP has long campaigned for a reduction in Tourism VAT, in line with the rate in the South. Such an incentive could see further growth for the industry in the North. SDLP Councillors will continue to support our tourism sector.

Expansion of Magee

The SDLP will continue to support the development of a Medical School in the North West to address long standing workforce issues and to enhance primary care provision west of the Bann. The SDLP has always been eager to see this expansion and we will continue to actively pursue this.

Rural Broadband

SDLP Councillors will continue to fight for better rural broadband across the North. Remote rural areas with poor or no internet access are at a distinct disadvantage, whether they are families, business people or farmers.

Agri-food industry

Agriculture is one of the bedrocks of Northern Ireland's economy. On the critical issues facing the Industry, the SDLP will continue to be a leading voice. A competitive agri-food industry remains crucial to the North's growing export market. The SDLP is committed to the protection of fisheries and the fishing industry and will continue to advocate on their behalf.

OUR PLEDGES



Continue to campaign for a reduction in Tourism VAT which will unlock the potential of our unrivalled natural landscapes and hospitality industry.



Expand enterprise zones to those council areas where unemployment has remained consistently high.



Cleaner, greener places

Climate Change

Climate change is the seismic global challenge facing this generation. Failure to take action now will result in significant changes to our global climate and weather that will devastate developed and developing economies as well as leaving millions homeless.

The SDLP is committed to making changes at a local level so that Northern Ireland can play its part in addressing the causes and impacts of climate change, including the reduction of carbon emissions and promoting sustainability.

The SDLP believes that climate change adaptation should be a material consideration in all future planning decisions.

The SDLP supports the divestment of NILGOSC pensions from fossil fuels. We believe that, as political leaders, we should be prepared to make personal and civic investments in technologies that will reduce reliance on fossil fuels.

We support the development of a clean air strategy, and further support the introduction of clean air zones in those councils where people are most at risk of health complications related to higher concentrations of particulate matter.

We will press for councils across the North to cooperate with local authorities in Great Britain on a decarbonisation agenda in homes to reduce reliance on solid fuel burning.

The SDLP will work to establish a climate change committee on each council.

Fracking and Precious Metal Mining

In government, when others wanted to exploit our natural resources for reckless profiteering, the SDLP took a stand and introduced a moratorium on fracking until we could be assured by scientific evidence that there would be no lasting impact on our environment or on local communities. We stand by that approach.

It is our duty, as political leaders and custodians of our natural environment, to leave our stunning landscapes in a better state than we found them for future generations to enjoy. But, more importantly, our first responsibility is to protect the health of local people and local wildlife.

The SDLP supports a moratorium on strip mining and precious mineral/metal mining until we can be assured that the extraction process poses no risk to our environment, public health or local communities.

Flooding

The Met Office predicts that, within 50 years, rising global temperatures will have a marked impact on local weather patterns. Alongside harsher, drier summers, rain patterns are likely to intensify in future autumns and winters. Our towns and cities must become more flood resilient to deal with the economic and human impact of increased storm activity.

Over the course of the last few decades, increased development has led to a decrease in the permeability of our town and city centres. This has made them less resilient to severe flooding incidents. In anticipation of future climate changes, local government must take action to invest in water harvesting technologies, sustainable urban drainage systems and enhance the levels of green space capable of absorbing excess water.

The SDLP will also press for an inter-council coastal community network to develop a coastal adaptation plan to deal with the threat of rising sea levels and increased erosion which threatens homes and businesses. This work should enhance ongoing collaboration between Northern Ireland and the Welsh Government as part of the Ireland Wales Programme.



OUR PLEDGES



Making climate change adaptation a material consideration for future planning proposals.



Divestment of the Local Government pension scheme from fossil fuels.



The introduction of a clean air strategy and clean air zones in those council areas with high concentrations of particulate matter.



Cooperation across councils on a decarbonisation agenda to reduce reliance on solid fuel burning.



A climate change committee on each council.



A moratorium on strip mining and precious mineral/metal mining across Northern Ireland until it can be proven that there will be no risk to the environment or public health.



Investment in water harvesting technologies and sustainable urban drainage systems to prepare for enhanced instances of flooding.



Enhancing green space in towns and cities to increase the permeability of our urban landscape and improve flood resilience.



Establishment of an inter-council coastal community network to develop a coastal adaptation toolkit.



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