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We will deliver better.



**Ulster
Unionist
Party**

For the Union

Ulster Unionist Party
Local Government Priorities



Foreword by Leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, Robin Swann MLA

I am delighted to publish our priorities for the Local Government election on May 2nd.

This is a vital poll, not only for the citizens of Northern Ireland but for the future of democracy and political accountability in this country.

Voters have a clear choice – they can either vote for candidates and parties that are committed to serving the needs of local communities, or they can vote for parties that have abdicated their responsibilities, shown no willingness to work with one another and no awareness of the damage that their obstinacy and self-interest has been inflicting.

It has long passed the point at which those parties needed to get back to reality and start focusing on the things that matter most to people. That is particularly important at a time of such significant political and legal upheaval due to Brexit.

Yet there is a real and definite danger that in these elections the dysfunctionality, chaos and ineptitude that ultimately became Stormont's downfall will spread to local government.

We cannot simply allow the last operating vestige of local democracy here to be destroyed as well.

That's especially the case as I see local government – the services that it delivers and the Councillors within it - as a great force for good.

Councillors are most aware of the immediate needs within their areas, and as they are closest to the community they are often most trusted by the community.

Councillors have a unique role in shaping our society and creating the environment in which communities and businesses can thrive. That is why the Ulster Unionist Party wants to see strong, effective, truly empowered local councils.

In 2014 we had a brilliant opportunity for radical reform, and yet that chance was squandered. Ratepayers were promised better services, delivered more efficiently and with greater effectiveness. Yet the promised savings haven't materialised and an array of powers that were promised were never delivered. It's hugely frustrating to me that those powers remain in a now mothballed Stormont.

In the ongoing absence of an Executive it is more important than ever before that local government is given greater powers and resources to address the many challenges that we as a society face.

I'm proud and privileged to be Leader of this Party and I am even more delighted that this year we're running a slate of candidates, current and new, from various backgrounds and levels of experience. I know that each and every one of them are individually driven and committed to improving their local areas for the better.

Vote for Ulster Unionists who will **put the country and your community first** and who will **deliver better FOR YOU. Vote Ulster Unionist Party on 2 May.**

Robin Swann

Putting the super back into super councils

With the Assembly still in gridlock after two years it is more important than ever that our eleven local councils have the powers, the ambition and the resources to deliver tangible benefits to the lives of local people.

Whilst we vehemently opposed the 2014 reorganisation, it was actually the Ulster Unionist Party that first put in motion the idea of genuine reform of our local councils.

We supported their transformation as we envisioned fewer streamlined councils delivering far more powers, more efficiently.

But just as we feared, that hasn't happened.

What we witnessed instead was the sectarian carve up of boundaries, Stormont Ministers hoarding a swathe of powers that should have been transferred, and big promises of huge potential savings which ultimately have never materialised.

What we now have are eleven councils with only slightly greater powers than they had prior to 2014.

We believe that we now have another opportunity to deliver a lasting shift of power from a deeply broken Stormont to local people.

We want councils to be firmly at the centre of decision-making in their communities, and for power to be exercised at community level. In order to deliver that we want to see meaningful powers passed back to where they belong.

The powers we want to see wrestled from the grip of Stormont Departments include;

- Community regeneration
- Street lighting
- Roadside grass cutting
- Libraries
- Youth services
- Minor roads maintenance
- On-street car parking
- And responsibility for the natural and built heritage

We also want to see the revenue generated locally through the Landfill Tax, to be devolved from the UK Government in order to allow Councils here to invest in their waste management infrastructure.

Of course each of the new powers would come with their own individual costs. One of the many mistakes from the limited transfer of powers in 2014 was that the funds that accompanied them often fell far short of what was actually required.

That same mistake must not be repeated. That is why we would ensure any new powers would only be transferred with a hypothecated budget, drawn from the regional rate, and increased each year in line with the regional rate.

Other Ulster Unionist Party key priorities

- **Establish the true costs, and any savings, of local government reform**

The actual savings of the 2014 reforms were not what was originally envisaged. As a result, the costs incurred far outweigh any economic benefits to date. At the time there was a frightening lack of economic scrutiny of the proposals and even now it's not possible to ascertain the true scale of supposed savings. As a priority the Ulster Unionist Party wants to see the Northern Ireland Audit Office conduct a thorough and meticulous analysis of all costs incurred and any savings generated.

- **Abolish the existing Rates system and replace it with a new, separate and far more transparent split Council Rates Bill and Assembly Tax Bill.**

The current rating system is no longer fit for purpose. As households and businesses across Northern Ireland pay their rates bills, many understandably believe it is going towards the funding of their local council. Indeed, the fact that the charge comes as one single bill reinforces the perception that all of the money remains within the local council area. But that's not the case – the regional rate is determined by the Executive, and is only spent on services that are the responsibility of the Executive. With every passing year a smaller and smaller share of the bill is made up of the district element and as a result the proportion being spent locally is diminishing. That's why we want to split them into a separate Council and Assembly Tax, and allow ratepayers to see exactly where their money is going.

- **Backing our town centres**

The high street has struggled to respond to modern shopping practices. The rise of out-of-town shopping centres, combined with the surge in popularity of online retailing, has forever changed the face of our town centres. Shopping habits have altered permanently, so too must our high streets. Yet the business rating system hasn't responded or shown the required flexibility to the changes in the market and that in part explains why we have the highest rate of shop vacancies in the UK. That needs to change. The future of our town centres will depend on more than just retail. They will have to include housing, social and leisure options if we are to place them on a sustainable footing.

- **Empowering communities and maximising existing assets**

Over the last number of years communities right across Northern Ireland have unfortunately lost greatly valued local amenities and assets. As a result, some are now coming together to try to save and take over what few remain. The Ulster Unionist Party wants to make it easier for those communities to take over the amenities and keep them part of local life. That is why we would strongly support the introduction and implementation of a Community Right to Bid scheme. It would also mean that we would no longer be the only part of the UK without such an arrangement.

- **A new single model of waste management**

Whilst much progress has been made on reducing waste over the last decade, unfortunately there are indications that waste tonnages are on the rise, that recycling rates are starting to level off and that we are increasingly unlikely to meet the key 2020 target within the revised Waste Framework Directive. As a result, the cost of waste treatment and disposal will likely increase as landfill supply ends and export increases. Whilst individual councils are trying to tackle the problem, there is neither sufficient nor effective leadership from the centre.

Our priorities for Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon

Minimising the rates burden

We are committed to reducing the rates burden on local homes and businesses. That's why the Ulster Unionist Councillors were glad to be able to ensure that the increase in domestic rates for this year was a third lower than the rate agreed last year. But there is still more that we should be doing – we should be maximising all efficiencies and exploring all options to generate more income. Encouraging more people in to use our existing local council facilities would be a boost to a major revenue stream for the council.

Retaining essential local health services

Unfortunately, some people are using the ongoing absence of a Health Minister and functioning Assembly to remove some essential health services locally. There is major concern about the future of the Stroke Unit in Craigavon Area Hospital, even though it is clinically proven that the sooner a stroke patient gets to hospital, the better their outcome. The future of breast cancer screening is under even greater threat. This must be resisted to ensure that the service is retained. It's despicable that an Irish Language Act has been given greater priority by some than the health and wellbeing of local people.

Securing a Growth Deal

Whilst there has been much publicity and success regarding City Deals for the Greater Belfast area and Londonderry, there has been less focus on the three councils covering the south and west of Northern Ireland and that is something the Ulster Unionist Party is keen to remedy. Between them Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon, Mid Ulster and Fermanagh & Omagh councils represent over a quarter of Northern Ireland's population and collectively provide over 200,000 jobs. A Growth Deal, equivalent to the City Deals, would undoubtedly bolster the local economy.

Supporting rural communities

Our rural communities and farming families are facing great uncertainty. The ambiguity about how, or even when, we will be leaving the European Union is incredibly destabilising for the local sector. Ulster Unionist Councillors believe that the design of a post-Brexit land based support model – which both safeguards our environment and financially supports our farmers – has to be an immediate priority. Right now our farmers have no leadership, just when they need it most.

Maximise our tourism potential

Tourism is a crucial component in the local economy, but it could be doing even better. Our council area includes some of the most important tourist and conservation sites in Northern Ireland. Armagh, for example, is the unquestioned ecclesiastical capital of Ireland and Northern Ireland's largest and arguably most striking urban park is in Lurgan. Many thousands are also attracted to the shopping hubs of Banbridge and Portadown each year. We believe the new Council will have a major role to play in the development of the tourism industry in the Borough.

Our priorities for Antrim and Newtownabbey

In the 2014 local government election your substantial votes put the Ulster Unionist Party into a leadership position in Antrim and Newtownabbey Council... and they DELIVERED!

Your Ulster Unionist Councillors have:

- delivered 3 consecutive rate freezes over this council term;
- and provided strong civic leadership that distinguishes your council from the shambles of Stormont.

Your Ulster Unionist Candidates across Antrim and Newtownabbey will also;

Maintain their efforts to reduce the rates burden on local homes and businesses

This year Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council had the smallest district rates increase of any of the 11 local Councils. That's something to be immensely proud of, and an achievement that was only possible with shrewd financial planning and delivering efficiencies.

Keeping rates increases down to a minimum is something that all Ulster Unionist candidates running locally are absolutely committed to.

Build upon our significant investment to develop the best leisure facilities in Northern Ireland

Providing adequate sport and leisure provision is one of the Council's most valued services. It's also a key measure in tackling the rising levels of obesity and inactivity. That is why the Ulster Unionist Councillors on Antrim and Newtownabbey Council have been committed to improving the facilities available for residents right across the borough. We also want to ensure that as many of our facilities and playparks as possible are open and accessible for people with disabilities.

Encouraging more people in to use our existing local council facilities would not only improve their health and wellbeing, but would also deliver a big boost to an important revenue stream for the council. That is why we want to see Antrim and Newtownabbey become recognised for having the best leisure facilities of any Council borough across Northern Ireland.

Believe in strong public service with integrity for the benefit of the entire community

With the stalemate continuing at Stormont it would be easy to disengage with the local political system, but the only people who would benefit from that are the Parties that want the dysfunctionality to continue.

With the Ulster Unionist Party you can be assured of a Party that puts country and people ahead of self.

Our priorities for Ards and North Down

Lower Rates

The Ulster Unionist Party is proud that our Councillors have been able to contribute towards Ards and North Down currently having the second lowest domestic rate and third lowest non-domestic rate across all of Northern Ireland's Councils.

That is why your local Ulster Unionist candidates will:

- Fight to keep the rates across Ards and North Down as one of the lowest;
- Seek to ensure that any increases are minimised to below inflation.

More Jobs

The Ulster Unionist Party is committed to contributing to the economic prosperity and growth of Ards and North Down. Usually optimum job creation requires leadership and a stable macroeconomic framework from the top, but with Brexit and the stalemate at Stormont this isn't possible. Local Government is set to play an increasingly important role.

That is why your local Ulster Unionist candidates will:

- Prioritise local business growth and town centre regeneration;
- Fight for our fair share of Invest NI support;
- Create more opportunities to work in and;
- Campaign for better transport to and from Belfast for commuters.

Better Services

Despite ever increasing financial pressures, Local Government must remain committed to delivering a full range of high quality services.

That is why your local Ulster Unionist candidates will strive to:

- Make sure Ards and North Down has some of the best leisure facilities in Northern Ireland;
- Invest in increased enforcement to deter dog fouling, littering and dumping;
- Become the greenest Borough in Northern Ireland;
- Bring more council services online.

Community Planning

Community planning has the potential to make a significant impact to the lives of local people. For it to work Councils need ambition and drive, that is why we will use the powers to call for:

- More investment in our local health service, as well as for mental health support;
- More visible policing to tackle crime and the fear of crime;
- Improvements to our poor and deteriorating roads network;
- New infrastructure to accompany new housing developments;
- Greater social housing to meet our growing need;
- Use of school premises to provide community and youth services.

Our priorities for Belfast

Minimising the rates burden

The outgoing Ulster Unionist group in Belfast City Hall worked hard to drive efficiencies across the range of areas of expenditure. As a result, the Council has on the whole been able to keep any rates hikes to an absolute minimum – including two consecutive below inflation increases.

Ulster Unionist Councillors are committed to maintaining this sensible approach to any future rates changes.

Greater transparency on the use of council funding

The last council term saw numerous examples of the DUP and Sinn Fein using discretionary funding to support groups, events and organisations with major sums of public money. Whilst some of this money ultimately was used effectively, the secretive nature on how and why only certain groups were chosen to receive funding was simply not good enough.

The new Council Term must put an end to these ad hoc allocations being shrouded in mystery.

Respecting cultural diversity

Belfast is a vibrant city that welcomes people from all faiths and communities. Promoting different languages is part of that of course, but to be genuinely inclusive also requires political parties to respect cultural differences.

Sadly, such respect has been badly lacking in Belfast City Hall. The reality remains that the vast majority of cultural events are well organised and supported in the areas that they take place.

Continuing the modernisation of leisure facilities

The Ulster Unionist Councillors in Belfast City Hall were proud to play a role in the investment of £105 million as part of a 10-year Leisure Transformation Programme. It's essential that the momentum is maintained and that ratepayers across Belfast are left with truly outstanding leisure facilities.

Supporting the most vulnerable across our communities

Even before Stormont collapsed it was failing to deliver for some of the most vulnerable people in our society. It failed to deliver a childcare strategy and a poverty strategy. It failed to build enough houses to tackle the growing problem of homelessness and soon it will be failing to ensure that there are even any protections in place for people affected by welfare reform. Belfast City Council – as the next largest democratic vehicle in Northern Ireland - must use its voice to stand up for the most vulnerable across our communities.

Our priorities for Causeway Coast and Glens

Maximise tourism potential

Causeway Coast and Glens is undoubtedly the jewel in the crown of Northern Ireland tourism. Home to an array of both popular and tranquil beaches, the Council can also boast having the internationally renowned heritage site of the Giants Causeway on its doorstep. In 2019 the Borough will once again host the popular Super Cup NI and the North West 200, but will also once more be placed firmly on a global stage when Royal Portrush hosts the 148th Open Golf Tournament.

Ulster Unionist Councillors are committed to building the value of tourism to the local economy

Oppose introduction of parking charges at tourist destinations

The Ulster Unionist Party was pleased to be able to put a halt to the introduction of car parking charges at some of our primary hotspots including Ballintoy Harbour, Ballycastle Marina, part of Portballintrae Beach Road, Portrush Dunluce Avenue, Portrush Landsdowne, Portrush East Strand, Portrush West Strand and Portstewart Convention. There is no doubt whatsoever that had the proposals been passed that the local tourism industry and local residents would have suffered.

Ulster Unionist Councillors will continue to oppose any introduction of parking charges at our popular tourist destinations.

Retaining services at Causeway and Dalriada Hospitals

Causeway and Dalriada hospitals are at the heart of the community across Causeway Coast and Glens. Causeway Hospital in particular provides an invaluable service to people right along the North Coast, not only to the local population but also the large number of visitors to the area every year.

Rather than officials using the absence of Stormont to try to reduce the services on offer – such as the recent announcement on the future of the stroke unit - Ulster Unionist Councillors instead believe that the services should be reinforced in order to tackle the totally unacceptable waiting times.

Keeping check on the rates burden

The Ulster Unionist representatives on the outgoing Council were glad to be able to play a key part in ensuring that the district rate was not increased at all in three years. Even the increase that was announced for this year was below inflation.

Ulster Unionist candidates are committed to ensuring the rates burden imposed upon local homes and businesses is kept to an absolute minimum.

Our priorities for Derry and Strabane

A strong Unionist voice

Unfortunately there have been several examples of the outgoing Council overriding the concerns and perspectives of the local minority unionist population. The decision for instance to snub an invitation to a Buckingham Palace Garden Party was another slap in the teeth for the Unionist people of Londonderry and its hinterland. It was also a clear indication that for a party that preaches equality and respect, that Sinn Fein don't even know the meaning of the words. Ulster Unionist Councillors are committed to ensuring the voice of unionists will be heard in the next council term, even if others try to dismiss them.

Challenging the Sinn Fein narrative on the past

The ongoing unwillingness and failure by Stormont to address the past is crippling our ability to move towards a shared future. As a result the legacy impact of our troubled past remains as prominent now as it was two decades ago. Ulster Unionist Councillors however will never be browbeaten by Sinn Fein's demands for the rewriting of history when they, and former associates of theirs, are the most reluctant to be honest about their own actions.

We will also continue to resolutely oppose the establishment of a flawed Historical Investigations Unit - part of the legacy carve up agreed by Sinn Fein and the DUP at Stormont House.

Support for small and medium sized businesses

Around 88% of companies across the Derry and Strabane Council area employ less than 10 people. Small and medium-sized enterprises such as these are the backbone of the local economy. To continue to grow however requires the right conditions to be put in place. Yet instead of supporting business Northern Ireland now has the highest non-domestic rates in the UK. Local Government reform was meant to lead to massive savings – but these never materialised.

Ulster Unionist councillors support a total revamp of our domestic and non-domestic rating system to ensure that this element of our local economy receives the support it needs to survive and grow.

Strengthening our policing capability

Policing numbers are now lagging around 850 behind the 7,500 recommended by the Patten Report, meaning that an even greater burden is placed on those tasked with protecting and serving the community. This, along with the ongoing threat from dissident terrorism, has had a major impact on morale within the PSNI across Londonderry, Strabane, Castlederg and all the towns, villages and rural areas in-between.

We need a police force with resilience and an increase in visual neighbourhood policing to show that no one, or no area across the Council, is above the law. Ulster Unionist Councillors want to see the recommendation of 7,500 full-time police officers honoured.

Our priorities for Fermanagh and Omagh

A real term freeze in rates

The Ulster Unionist Party representatives on Fermanagh and Omagh District Council were the councillors that actually wanted and voted for a rates freeze. For too long local ratepayers have been left paying for the failures of local government reform. Ulster Unionist Councillors are committed to continuing all their efforts to reduce the rates burden on local homeowners and businesses. That is why we will continue our efforts to secure annual real term rate freezes.

Retaining the SWAH Stroke Unit

The stroke unit at the South West Acute Hospital is the best performing facility in the country. It is ridiculous therefore that some are evidently seeking to close it - of the six options being proposed in the ongoing consultation, only two include the permanent retention of a stroke unit. In the absence of the Stormont Executive and functioning Assembly, Ulster Unionist Councillors will robustly support the retention of the unit.

A fair distribution of public sector jobs

Successive strategies proclaiming to relocate jobs more evenly across Northern Ireland have come and gone with little benefit to either Omagh or Fermanagh. The further loss of DVA and HMRC jobs, as well as broken promises on the number of DAERA Forestry jobs actually created, further illustrates the imbalanced distribution of public sector jobs across Northern Ireland. Ulster Unionist Councillors are committed to ensuring the next Council steps up its efforts of engaging directly with the Northern Ireland Executive Departments to confirm and to influence future staffing strategies.

Improving local road infrastructure

Promises were made long ago to improve several major routes across Fermanagh and Omagh. Yet millions of pounds on planning and consultant fees later, we're still waiting. It's not good enough. The routes that the Ulster Unionist representatives on the next council will demand action on most vigorously are the A32 between Omagh and Enniskillen, and the A4 Enniskillen Southern Bypass.

Supporting our farming community

With all the unknowns of Brexit our farming community is crying out for some certainty on future support. The Ulster Unionist Party wants to see the development of a sustainable agriculture and land-use policy that is good for nature but which also financially supports our farmers. Ulster Unionist Councillors will also continue to call for action to tackle the debilitating problem of TB across Fermanagh and Omagh.

A growth deal for the West

Whilst there has been much publicity and success regarding City Deals for the greater Belfast area and Londonderry, there has been less focus on the three councils covering the south and west of Northern Ireland and that is something the Ulster Unionist Party is keen to remedy. Between them Fermanagh&Omagh, Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon, and Mid Ulster councils represent over quarter of Northern Ireland's population and collectively provide over 200,000 jobs. A Growth Deal, equivalent to the City Deals, would undoubtedly bolster the local economy.

Our priorities for Lisburn and Castlereagh

Reducing the rates burden

Ulster Unionist Councillors are committed to continuing their efforts to reduce the rates burden on local homeowners and businesses. That is why all Ulster Unionist Councillors will vote against any above inflation increase in rates.

A freeze in parking charges

Parking is a hugely important issue, not least to many of our local businesses. With increasing numbers of vehicles it is inevitable that the demand for parking will increase. Yet parking must be kept affordable, especially as easy access is a key economic driver for our villages, towns and city centre. That is why all Ulster Unionist Councillors will continue to advocate for a freeze in car parking charges across the council.

Addressing the challenge of poor mental health

It's a tragedy that more people have lost their lives to suicide since the Belfast Agreement of 1998 than died during the entire Troubles. That makes the fact that our next suicide prevention strategy - Protect Life 2 - has been left waiting on a shelf simply because we don't have a local Minister to add their signature to it, even more disgraceful. We will use the Council's leisure powers to deliver targeted activities to address poor mental health in the council area.

Making planning deliver

According to the Strategic Planning Policy Statement the overall objective of the planning system is to further sustainable development and improve well-being for the people across Northern Ireland. To do that however requires planning decisions that help support communities, both now and into the future. That is why Ulster Unionist Councillors in Lisburn and Castlereagh will ensure that developers make a fair contribution to community infrastructure as a condition of their planning permission.

Maximising our community planning powers

Community planning has given local elected representatives and communities an exciting opportunity to engage in defining the best possible solution to issues that affect their areas, and to challenge statutory agencies to ensure optimum local delivery. The Council's Community Plan launched in 2017 detailed the key themes under which it was going to forge partnerships across our communities, over the next 15 years. Ulster Unionist Councillors are committed to fully utilising these new powers so that all benefits that can be drawn down, are drawn down.

Being a fair voice for across the entire Council area

Whilst there is no doubt that the administrative centre of the new council is Lisburn City we are committed to ensuring that the many other towns and villages across the Borough, including the large urban centre of Dundonald, have their views heard right in the centre of the new Council.

Our priorities for Mid and East Antrim

The Ulster Unionist goal for Mid and East Antrim Borough Council is low rates, economic regeneration and better services.

Best planning system in the Country

The outgoing Ulster Unionist members on Mid and East Antrim Council are very proud that the Borough has the best planning system in Northern Ireland. Planning decisions are made in less time than anywhere else in Northern Ireland, with the average application taking just over six weeks to complete compared to a regional average of 15 weeks. Ulster Unionist candidates, particularly those that will find themselves on the next Planning Committee, will ensure that this title is maintained.

Greater transparency on use of council funds

The revelation that Mid and East Antrim Council spent £1,500 of local ratepayer's money at a political Party fundraiser remains a huge blemish on the professionalism and propriety of the decision making process at the senior levels within the local Council. It is simply not good enough however that instead of assessing whether this was an appropriate use of public money, that some within the Council are now planning to further weaken the already inadequate safeguards in place.

Every single penny of ratepayers' money should be spent appropriately and in a manner that can be properly accounted for. That is why Ulster Unionist Candidates will seek to ensure that the new Council adopts a new rigorous events spending policy

Tackling spiralling council debt

Mid and East Antrim Borough is the second smallest council, but has the second highest business rates and third highest domestic rates. The Council also has the second highest level of debt. There is now an attempt being made to further raise borrowing from £61 million to £125 million. This would inevitably mean raising the proportion of rates used to pay back debt from 15% to 20% of total revenue. The Ulster Unionist Party will oppose this short-sighted accounting as it would almost certainly result in cuts to services, increased charges and higher rates.

Assessing the actual rates benefit of RPA for local homes and businesses

Even though local ratepayers are repeatedly told by some that local government reform has delivered for them, they are yet to see a single benefit in their rates bill. When rates are increased every year at, or above, inflation it is simply not true to claim that efficiency savings are benefiting local people. Ulster Unionist candidates are committed to identifying the true savings that have been realised through the forced amalgamation of the previous Carrickfergus, Larne and Ballymena Councils.

Protecting animal welfare

The outgoing Ulster Unionist Councillors on Mid and East Antrim Council have been to the forefront of highlighting appalling incidents of animal abuse. It's clear however that there is more that could be done to tackle the abuse. That is why the Ulster Unionist candidates want legislative change which would make it much easier to refer unduly lenient sentences for animal welfare abuses to the Court of Appeal.

Our priorities for Mid Ulster

Respecting all cultural identities

Whilst some Parties proclaim to seek equality, respect and integrity – those same representatives have shown themselves to be wholly incapable of demonstrating it in Mid Ulster. The removal of any sign of our national flag, the removal of poppy boxes from council buildings and the preferential treatment being given to Irish over all other minority languages is proof that Sinn Fein don't even know the meaning of the word respect. The Ulster Unionist Party has shown a preparedness to stand up to Sinn Fein on these issues – and it's something we are committed to keep doing until they end their deliberate actions of discounting the local minority unionist community.

Promoting our agri-food businesses

Mid Ulster is home to many of the largest food manufacturing sites in the country – in the council area the industry is 1 of our top 3 sectors. Between the local companies they provide thousands of stable jobs which in turn contribute many millions of pounds to the local economy. Yet whilst Northern Ireland's farmers and food companies have potentially the most to lose from a bungled Brexit deal, our Province still remains by far the least prepared. It's a disgrace. Even after it gets through this phase of uncertainty we believe the future viability of the overall agri-food sector will be dependent on its ability to locate and secure new export markets. That is why we will ensure Mid Ulster Council plays its part through working closely with partners such as InvestNI and CAFRE, as well as presenting the best possible image of the Council area through future trade visits

Whilst the current level of financial support for farmers is supposedly guaranteed up until 2022, with all of the uncertainty and fluidity of Westminster, it is imperative that preparations start now in designing a fit-for-purpose scheme that not only is good for the environment but which also supports our farmers financially.

Tackling poor broadband and mobile phone coverage hotspots

One of the main priorities identified during the consultation on Mid Ulster's Council's Community Plan was the issue of poor broadband connection and mobile phone coverage in certain areas in the district. In fact, Mid Ulster has the second worst broadband access across all 11 councils. Whilst some progress has been made at the top end of the spectrum with superfast broadband, unfortunately too few people across Mid Ulster have seen any real benefits. Ulster Unionist Councillors will be committed to ensuring that those homes and businesses that are crying out for improved connectivity are identified and prioritised.

A growth deal for the West

Whilst there has been much publicity and success regarding City Deals for the greater Belfast area and Londonderry, there has been less focus on the three councils covering the south and west of Northern Ireland and that is something the Ulster Unionist Party is keen to remedy. Between them Mid Ulster, Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon, and Fermanagh & Omagh councils represent over quarter of Northern Ireland's population and collectively provide over 200,000 jobs. A Growth Deal, equivalent to the City Deals, would undoubtedly bolster the local economy.

Our priorities for Newry Mourne and Down

Limit rates increases

Whenever the old Newry & Mourne and Down Councils merged in 2014, local ratepayers were promised that the supposed efficiencies would deliver significant savings. That hasn't happened – instead local homes and businesses have been hit by ever increasing hikes in rates.

It's time the constant rates increases were stopped. The Ulster Unionist Candidates running in this area are committed to reducing the rates burden on local homes and businesses. That is why they will vote to limit any future increases to below inflation. Only then will the supposed benefits of local government reform ever occur.

Good relations

Whilst all the political parties on Newry, Mourne and Down District Council proclaim to wish to improve relations between and within communities, it is no secret that some have taken decisions that have directly heightened distrust and caused serious harm to local community cohesion.

Decisions such as actively choosing to keep a local playpark named after a terrorist, and countless examples of the politicisation of the Irish Language, cause immense and lasting damage. The Ulster Unionist Party believes that the consideration of all communities, including that of the minority local unionist community, must be given greater credence and respect in the incoming Council.

Safeguarding services at the Daisy Hill and Downe Hospitals

Even though there is an unprecedented crisis in the local health service – with more people now waiting for treatment than ever before - some of the most senior hospital managers are deliberately trying to remove services and provision away from the two hospitals in the Newry, Mourne and Down Council area. Whilst Ulster Unionist candidates will never shy away from difficult decisions, on this occasion trying to remove hospital beds just when we need far more of them is just ludicrous.

Encourage investment and opportunities

South Down has some of the worst levels of InvestNI support in the Country, with only £135 per person being invested in the area, compared with neighbouring areas which had over two and a half times that amount. Investment is only part of the solution - our businesses need our planning and regeneration powers to work with them, allowing them to expand and provide for our community

Supporting rural communities

With all the uncertainty of Brexit our farming community is crying out for some clarity on future support. The Ulster Unionist Party wants to see the development of a sustainable agriculture and land-use policy that is good for nature but which also supports our farmers financially.

Ulster Unionist Councillors will also continue to call for action to tackle the debilitating problem of TB across Newry, Mourne and Down.



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