

# ALLIANCE PARTY CONFERENCE 2024

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## 1. CONFERENCE OVERVIEW

The Alliance Party gathered in Belfast on Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> March for their 54<sup>th</sup> annual Spring Conference, returning to the Stormont Hotel to host delegates, observers and the media.

The party reflected on both their growth over the past 50 years and recent successes in the Assembly and local government elections, while also focusing on the upcoming General Election.

During his speech, deputy leader Stephen Farry MP stated that his priority at Westminster has been on public finances and maintaining positive relations with the EU. He also drew attention to the party's ambition to grow the Westminster team.

Reform of the institutions was a key theme throughout the day with party leader Naomi Long MLA stating;

*"We recognise that there are issues which remain both highly contested and sensitive in this community and it is right that on those issues there should be added protections.*

*However, weighted majority voting and reform of the petition of concern, can ensure that those protections are no longer abused by some and denied to others."*

Long also acknowledged her 17-member MLA team and their new roles across the Assembly's committees. She used her speech to highlight priorities across each Executive department including Bengoa reforms, SEN provision, investment in skills, connectivity, and the anti-poverty strategy.

Kate Nicholl MLA chaired the first panel of the day, in which industry experts discussed how to improve childcare. She concluded by referring to the party's Children First paper and reiterated the call for a Childcare Strategy.

Newly appointed Agriculture, Environment, and Rural Affairs Minister, Andrew Muir MLA, took to the stage in a celebratory speech reflecting on his journey into politics and his priorities as Minister. These include climate change, animal welfare and working with the agri-food sector.

A number of fringe events focused on themes including waiting lists, early years, food and farming, and social and affordable housing. In these events, party representatives highlighted party priorities and actions for the remainder of the 2022–2027 mandate.

## 2. KEY POINTS FROM SPEECHES

### Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Andrew Muir MLA

- The Minister stated that the absence of government has had significant consequences, leading public services to the brink of collapse, and that this should not be allowed to happen again.
- Muir said he will prioritise tackling the climate crisis during his tenure, emphasising net-zero goals and the importance of environmental governance.
- He acknowledged the historical division between the agriculture sector and the environment and called for an integrated approach.
- He highlighted farmers' role as "custodians of the countryside" and their contributions to wildlife conservation, food security, economy, and rural communities. He said he would work to deliver on their needs.
- He expressed commitment to supporting the agri-food sector's transition to a greener and more prosperous economy.
- He urged the audience to judge him by his actions rather than assumptions, underscoring his dedication to listening, engaging, and building partnerships.
- The Minister emphasised the urgency of government action, addressing the consequences of the absence of effective governance on public services and citizens' well-being.
- He called for moving beyond binary classifications and embracing diversity in communities, focusing on collectively addressing environmental challenges and opportunities.
- He said on the importance of collaborative efforts in tackling environmental issues and adapting to changes, emphasising the need for investments, policies, and legislation.
- The Minister promised to address animal welfare concerns and make Northern Ireland an exemplar in preventing animal cruelty.
- He affirmed his commitment to being guided by science and evidence to fulfil policy needs. He ended his speech with a determination to lead Northern Ireland towards a greener and brighter future.

### Deputy leader Stephen Farry MP

- Stephen Farry MP highlighted the party's commitment to fostering a functioning Northern Ireland rooted in a shared and integrated society.
- He expressed optimism for a strengthened Alliance team in Westminster after the upcoming General Election.

- He said that Alliance remains supporters of protecting the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, preserving dual market access, and ensuring changes are mutually agreed between the UK and EU.
- Key policy areas that the party is committed to, including:
  - **Reform of public finances and services:** Reforming public finances and public services to improve outcomes and maximise economic opportunities. He acknowledged the recent investment from the Irish Government.
  - **Fiscal sustainability:** Reiterated calls for delivery of a proper fiscal floor.
  - **Economic Policies:** Highlighted support for a Green New Deal and addressing issues including poverty levels, productivity challenges, and underinvestment in public services and infrastructure. He emphasised the need to address the skills pipeline at all age levels as a key priority.
  - **Migration Policies:** Noted that Alliance opposes the UK Government's current position on migration and called for policies that benefit society economically, socially and culturally. Farry criticised recent changes to visa salary requirements and advocated for compassionate migration policies. He said the party believe in a "*just, compassionate immigration system.*"
  - **Legacy Act:** Hew said the Legacy Act is unwanted, unworkable and contrary to European and international human rights standards. Highlighting its negative impact on victims and survivors of Troubles incidents, Farry emphasised the importance of reconciliation, human rights, and the rule of law.

### Party leader Naomi Long MLA

- Party leader and Minister of Justice, Naomi Long MLA celebrated the increase in young people representing the party in local government and thanked representatives at every level.
- She highlighted the positions of MLAs on Assembly committees and the policy issues they will be focusing on in this mandate, which include;
  - **Health:** Advancing Bengoa reforms and investment in early intervention.
  - **Education:** Delivering a Childcare Strategy, improving SEN provision and promoting integrated education.
  - **Economy:** Maximising dual market access and pressing the department to invest in skills and further education provision.
  - **Executive Office:** Human rights and equality issues, redress for survivors of mother and baby homes, and ending violence against women and girls.
  - **Infrastructure:** Active travel, connectivity and planning reform.
  - **Finance:** Prioritising stabilisation and fiscal transformation.
  - **Communities:** Housebuilding, the lack of an anti-poverty strategy and under-investment in the arts and creative industries.
- Stated that the party has been "*the only consistent and unequivocal champion of reform*" of the institutions, and they will continue to make the case for reform.

- Called for weighted majority voting to replace parallel consent votes, addressing the Alliance Party's position as the third largest party in the Assembly.
- She welcomed the opportunity to return to her work as Minister of Justice, despite "*chronic underfunding of the justice system.*" She said there is much to do to "*modernise the justice system, to reform sentencing and to protect victims.*"
- Called for the fiscal floor to be set at a higher rate, enabling public services to be transformed and modernised.
- On the General Election, retaining Dr Stephen Farry MP in North Down is "our top priority" but stated that the party are aiming to increase their representation at Westminster.

### 3. PANEL DISCUSSIONS

#### Panel Debate: Children First: The need for flexible, affordable, high-quality childcare in Northern Ireland (Chaired by Kate Nicholl MLA)

##### Panellists

- Aoife Hamilton (Employers for Childcare)
- Patricia Lewsley-Mooney (NICMA)
- Stuart Buchanan (YMCA Dublin)
- Sheelagh Carville (Principal Lecturer, Stranmillis University College)
- Rebecca Harper, Melted Parents

##### Key points:

- Kate Nicholl MLA opened by speaking of her experiences of campaigning and hearing from constituents about the need for action around childcare. She added that childcare is crucial to social and economic infrastructure and action needs to be taken "in an evidence-based way."
- Patricia Lewsley-Mooney said that childcare is about employment and allowing parents to access quality, flexible, affordable childcare.
- Childminders delivered 70% of childcare to key workers during COVID-19, with little recognition. She called for a start-up grant for overheads and costs of being a childminder.
- Stuart Buchanan said that core funding in the Republic of Ireland is allowing providers to improve quality and sustainability, conditional to freezing fees for parents. Childcare subsidies in the Republic of Ireland are for children aged six months to 15 years.
- During COVID-19 childcare workers were seen as key workers, now many are leaving the industry for other jobs. Staffing challenges must be addressed beyond the rate of pay.
- Rebecca Harper said Melted Parents aims to "shine a light" on the importance of parents' voices on this issue, for short-term interventions and a long-term strategy for Northern Ireland.

- Sheelagh Carville applauded the party for trying to find a way to solve the issues with early learning and childcare.
- Qualifications are necessary for providing quality, child-centred childcare, but there is currently no requirement for childcare workers to have qualifications in this area.
- She would like to see the party challenge the idea of a minimum standard and move to a situation where qualified people are working with children.
- Aoife Hamilton thanked Kate Nicholl MLA and Nick Mathison MLA for their work on childcare, in the APG on Early Learning and Childcare, and on the Committee for Education.
- She highlighted that childcare is recognised as a priority by the restored Assembly and Executive, but optimism is not enough for parents and providers who require immediate action on childcare.
- She called for standardisation of childcare; a universal subsidy for providers to provide affordable and quality childcare; subsidies to support children with additional needs. These proposals benefit children, parents, and providers.
- Employers for Childcare want to see an ambitious Early Learning and Childcare Strategy to deliver transformational investment. In the short term, they wish to see urgent financial support to offset fee increases for parents.
- Kate Nicholl MLA closed by stating there is a crisis in childcare, affecting childminders, families, and providers. The party's Children First paper addresses this, and they are looking to move to supply side funding, rather than the 30 hours model in England. There is a need for immediate support and a Childcare Strategy.

## Alliance Question Time (Chaired by Professor Jon Tonge)

### Panellists:

- Sorcha Eastwood MLA
- Eóin Tennyson MLA
- Nuala McAllister MLA
- Danny Donnelly MLA

### What is the biggest barrier to achieving reform?

- Eóin Tennyson MLA mentioned that the DUP and Sinn Féin have been the most resistant to change, emphasising the necessity of reform. He highlighted that the Tánaiste comments on reform at the party's conference dinner the previous evening were welcomed.
- Nuala McAllister MLA attributed the rising debt in NI to the UK government, stressing the need for reform.
- Sorcha Eastwood MLA expressed Alliance's ambition to lead the conversation, particularly advocating for multi-year health budgets.

- Danny Donnelly MLA identified the two biggest parties as barriers to reform, stressing the importance of a stable future for institutions.

### **What would be the biggest societal change that representatives would like to see?**

- Nuala McAllister MLA stated that the progression of integrated education was a priority, citing over-subscription and the need to eliminate religious divides on the issue. She cast doubt on the current Minister's ability to progress the issue.
- Sorcha Eastwood MLA emphasised the need for more social housing and addressing intimidation issues such as erecting flags.

### **What sets Alliance apart from other parties?**

- Sorcha Eastwood MLA highlighted Alliance's unique position and intentions for positive work. She said the party is determined to secure more seats in Westminster and more Ministers at the Executive table to keep the momentum on creating positive change.
- Danny Donnelly MLA emphasised Alliance's priorities in education and healthcare, stating that these are key priority areas that could transform people's lives.
- Eóin Tennyson MLA highlighted Alliance's ability to draw members from various communities. He said their message as a party has always remained true to its values.

### **How can we restore people's passion for climate change?**

- Nuala McAllister MLA said that Minister Muir's role in the Department for Agriculture, Environment, and Rural Affairs is a key position in tackling climate change and emphasised taking responsibility and leadership in addressing environmental issues.
- Sorcha Eastwood MLA stressed the need for a skilled workforce across various sectors in NI, especially upskilling in areas such as farming, business and those seeking a mid-career change and supporting people getting back into the workforce.
- Danny Donnelly MLA referenced the Green New Deal Policy and emphasised the urgency of ecological crises.

### **Will Casement Park's construction be finished on time?**

- Sorcha Eastwood MLA emphasised the importance of building Casement Park for social change and job opportunities. She noted that there needs to be a serious commitment to the project's vision.

- Eóin Tennyson MLA welcomed the project but was concerned about potential delays in the development and emphasised the importance of Casement Park's timely completion to create jobs and opportunities.

## **Panel Debate: Future Proofing the Good Friday Agreement (Chaired by Paula Bradshaw MLA)**

### **Panellists:**

- Lisa Claire Whitten (Research Fellow, Queen's University Belfast)
- David Ford (Former Party Leader & former MLA)
- Dr Claire Rice (Political Analyst & Researcher)
- Ellen Taylor (Secondary Schools Union President)

### **Key points:**

- Paula Bradshaw MLA said the dual system of designation which the institutions operate on is increasingly unrepresentative of Northern Ireland as it is today. The Alliance Party are arguing for social and political acknowledgement of this new reality.
- Lisa Claire Whitten said that the two-community presumption of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement is “increasingly out of step” with society, which is an unsustainable position. Brexit has catalysed the voice of those who identify as ‘Other’ but has also been divisive. It has forced a refocus on policy due to complexities in “decoupling” the legal systems, trade, and goods standards.
- David Ford said key problems with the Agreement are the designation system for MLAs and the D’Hondt “lucky dip”, where Ministers are appointed regardless of whether they can agree with other Ministers or not.
- Dr Clare Rice said that her research looks at how power sharing institutions can be designed to accommodate a plurality of designations.
- She described power sharing as “exclusionary by design.” Cross-cutting issues which affect all communities become more difficult to deal with and impact how the Executive can work together.
- Ellen Taylor said that young people are not taught about the Good Friday Agreement in schools.
- Dr Clare Rice said that cross-community issues are “subsumed” into conversations about unionism and nationalism. If this is embedded in the institutions, every action is taken on those terms. The ‘Other’ designation can steer conversations in a way that unionist and nationalist parties cannot.
- In answer to a question about moving to a qualified majority voting system, David Ford said that the largest unionist and nationalist parties have veto over the formation of a government and reform of the system. The UK government needs to “take its role seriously” and have discussions about reform.
- Lisa Claire Whitten said that reform and changes have come in a “constitutionally innovative” way through agreements, which is unique to the UK constitution. Civic

dialogue aimed at reform will require governments to take notice of the need for reform.

- On the issue of young people's engagement in politics, Ellen Taylor said that many young people have no stake in Northern Ireland when the government is "always down." There is a low perception of politicians and a lack of political education in schools. Northern Ireland has the worst economic position in the UK, and young people need a reason to want to stay, with a functioning government as a "baseline."

## 4. FRINGE EVENTS

A number of fringe events took place throughout the day, including those held by Royal College of Surgeons & Versus Arthritis, Early Years, University of Ulster and NIFHA & Chartered Institute of Housing.

A summary of the morning fringe event 'Waiting Lists and Waiting Well', hosted by the Royal College of Surgeons and Versus Arthritis is included below.

In Northern Ireland, a significant challenge in the healthcare sector is highlighted by the waiting lists, with 7,000 children awaiting treatment and a substantial increase in waiting times for first outpatient appointments and patient treatment lists.

The Northern Ireland Audit report, published in October 2023, brings these issues to light, alongside concerns about the aging workforce, with 90% of consultants nearing retirement within the next decade.

The healthcare system faces systemic challenges, notably in surgical services. Over 60% face significant challenges in accessing theatres. These issues are compounded by administrative burdens, with healthcare professionals spending a notable amount of time on administrative tasks, detracting from their capacity to deliver direct patient care.

Surgical hubs and overnight stay centres have been introduced as a strategy to mitigate waiting lists, though patient travel and system-wide inefficiencies pose ongoing challenges. There is a clear and critical need for infrastructure improvements, particularly in increasing theatre availability to meet demand.

Social deprivation played a major part of the discussion, such as tackling the link between lung cancer and social deprivation, which was emphasised as essential for improving health outcomes.

Alliance Party Health Spokesperson Nuala McAllister MLA spoke on the importance of transparency in prioritising waiting lists and allocating resources efficiently. Suggestions included supporting medical students towards the end of their training to encourage retention within the local healthcare system.