

# FUTURE POLITICS

## Delivering Effective Government

A platform for ambitious new political ideas, policies and solutions

### Post-Conference Report 2023

Delivered by

**Stratagem**  
part of the Connect Group

**HUME** The John & Pat  
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# Conference overview

## **Hope, trust, stability, leadership, innovation and engagement; key words repeated across five panels at the Future Politics conference in November 2023.**

Bringing together experts from across civil society and politics, the day was an opportunity to reflect on a better framework for long-term, sustainable government.

Building on the inaugural conference and subsequent roundtables convened over the past 12 months, there were three main themes of Institutional architecture: relationships and engagement; and stabilisation and transformation.

Prompted by the need to do things differently, the focus was on optimising existing structures and relationships within the parameters of the devolved arrangements.

The institutions established in 1998 may have created a path to peaceful representative democracy however, 26 years since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement so much has changed.

The UK's exit from the European Union forced a reset of the dynamic of relationships across these islands, creating new layers of challenge for our politicians.

The scale of this challenge is considerable. As global events increasingly impact the context in which we operate, the need to work across sectors and jurisdictions has never been more acute.

Regardless of constitutional preferences, the future of this region will continue to be intertwined with that of our near neighbours. This raises questions about how the devolved institutions should evolve to respond to and reflect change.

This is not just limited to the relationships between political institutions in the different jurisdictions. Engagement with civic society, business, academia and the VCSE sector, as well as with people and communities themselves, was perhaps the most common theme.

This demonstrates the willingness of those outside of the political system to help support and inform politicians and policy makers, and ultimately deliver better outcomes.

The newly restored institutions offer an opportunity to address the fundamental challenges within our political system and to harness the insights, expertise of those outside government and party politics. Future Politics will continue to provide a space for these reflections, with the aim of converting them into actions.

We want to thank all of those who have supported the Future Politics project over the past year and a half.

We look forward to developing the project in support of better politics and governance to help unlock the potential of this place.

# Conference programme

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## Keynote Speaker

**John Swinney MSP**, former Deputy First Minister of Scotland

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### Panel 1: Alternative budget for Northern Ireland: reimagining public finances

- **Sir Robert Chote**, Chair, Northern Ireland Fiscal Council and the UK Statistics Authority
  - **Chris Conway**, CEO, Translink
  - **Tina McKenzie**, UK Policy & Advocacy Chair, FSB
  - **Róisín Wood**, CEO, The Community Foundation Northern Ireland
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### Panel 2: The best of both worlds? A new dawn for North-South/ East-West relations

- **Dr Barry Colfer**, Director of Research, The Institute of International and European Affairs
  - **Jackie King**, Executive Director, Ibec Global
  - **Jess Sargeant**, Associate Director, Institute for Government
  - **Dr Anthony Soares**, Director, Centre for Cross Border Studies
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### Panel 3: Supporting better politics: partnership, challenges and impact

- **Rebekah McCabe**, Head of Northern Ireland, Involve
  - **Mary McKenna**, Tech Entrepreneur and Angel Investor
  - **Professor Duncan Morrow**, Director of Community Engagement, Ulster University
  - **Suzanne Wylie**, CEO, Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry
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### Panel 4: Frameworks for governing: optimising delivery through structures

- **Alison Allen**, Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Local Government Association
  - **Heather Moorhead**, Director, Northern Ireland Confederation for Health and Social Care
  - **Jennifer Wallace**, Director of Policy and Evidence, Carnegie UK
  - **Dr Lisa Whitten**, Research Fellow, Queen's University Belfast
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### Panel 5: Political panel: turning ideas into actions

- **Kellie Armstrong MLA**, Alliance
  - **Colm Gildernew MLA**, Sinn Féin
  - **Claire Hanna MP**, SDLP
  - **Brian Kingston MLA**, DUP
  - **Mike Nesbitt MLA**, UUP
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# Executive summary

## Institutional architecture

### Challenges

**The need for more engagement across the civil services in Northern Ireland, Great Britain (GB) and Ireland on policy development is increasingly evident over the last number of years.**

The UK's decision to leave the European Union combined with the encroachment of GB policy into devolved policy areas during the suspension of local institutions, illustrates the need for the home civil service to be supported to think about the potential impact of Whitehall policy on Northern Ireland.

This is particularly important in areas where there is cross border or all island implications. It is compounded by the absence of consistent substantive cross-parliamentary working on specific policy areas that impact Northern Ireland.

Looking at our devolved structures of governance, the current infrastructure does not enable cross-departmental working or a more equal relationship with VCSE partners who deliver vital services but without the stability afforded to the public sector. Collaboration is disincentivised by the lack of alignment between statutory duties, accountability structures, electoral cycles and public policy ambitions and outcomes.

The relationship between local government, the devolved institutions and Westminster requires structural and financial recalibration. A challenge across all jurisdictions in the UK, there are dynamics in Northern Ireland that if changed, would unlock the potential of the local, as is intended through Community Planning.

From how the block grant is calculated and allocated, changes to existing spending priorities as well as introduction of new revenue raising mechanisms, underpinning all of the conversations was money. With a growing acceptance that Northern Ireland is not funded according to need, current negotiations with the UK Government are

increasingly focused on the Welsh Fiscal Floor as a future model.

How the policy and public service capacity of east/west and north/south structures, including the north south bodies, is re-energised and deployed upon the return of the Assembly and Executive is an important opportunity to recalibrate relationships and policy links stymied by Brexit and suspension.

### Recommendations

- **Review of institutional frameworks**, including and beyond the Northern Ireland Act, to include relationships across different tiers of government.
- **Introduce a statutory duty** to cooperate across Executive Departments.
- **Align Community Plans /local government plans** with Programme for Government outcomes.
- **Establish formal intervention points and democratic innovations** to bring civic and sectoral voices into the policy making process as an equal independent partner.
- **Re-energise north/south, east/west bodies and forums** to facilitate policy development across these islands.
- **Changes to the block grant funding formula and the devolved budgetary process** to stabilise public finances and transform how public services are delivered.

## Relationships and engagement

### Challenges

**COVID and suspension disrupted political life with cross party working and relationships underdeveloped, particularly for the new intake of MLAs either co-opted or elected since 2020. Looking beyond the Assembly, while existing networks and forums have reconvened, there is significant catch up required against the backdrop of fractured political relationships resulting from Brexit.**

Training and capacity building for politicians, particularly in technical areas such as legislation and finance requires continuous and significant investment and needs to be delivered in ways that meets the needs of the wide range of skills and expertise of elected representatives.

Operating in the absence of an Assembly and Executive as well as playing a hugely important role in the response to COVID and matching the ambitions of local elected representatives, the distinction between local government and regional responsibilities can be unclear at times.

It is no surprise that our democratic wellbeing is the lowest of anywhere in the UK. Unequal and uneasy relationships with civic society and a lack of trust in politics and institutions might not be unique to Northern Ireland but it does have particular repercussions in a small, divided post conflict society and economy.

Just as relationships within the region have come under pressure within Northern Ireland following the UK's decision to leave the European Union, relationships within and between the UK and Republic of Ireland have also been missing essential bipartisan support for stability, peace and progress.

### Recommendations

- **Ongoing and mandatory training programmes** to support MLAs fulfil their multiple and sometime competing roles as policy makers, legislators, committee members and representatives.
- **Mentoring for Ministers and SpAds** from other peers across UK and Ireland
- **Improve relationship with civic society** through formal mechanisms and associated cultural changes.
- **UK and Irish Governments investment in and support for capacity, skills and relationship building** for elected representatives, both MLAs and councillors.



## Stabilisation and transformation

### Challenges

**Historic under-investment in infrastructure, public services and public sector pay has been made more acute by the combination of global forces and recent budgets and suspension.**

Putting public finances on a sustainable footing requires moving beyond the UK Government's limited revenue raising focus. Transformation requires stabilisation, substantial investment and innovation.

With pay disparity now at highest ever levels between Northern Ireland and other parts of the UK combined with the disruption of Brexit, workforce stabilisation is a key part of future reform.

The architecture of our institutions including the relationship between departments, permanent secretaries in their role as departmental accounting officers and the budget making process, limits both strategic reform and effective delivery.

### Recommendations

- **Changes to funding model** as proposed by UK Government in recent negotiations on fiscal floor, pay parity and transformation.
- **Future funding reflects the legacy of the conflict**, the specific circumstances of Northern Ireland as the only part of the UK that shares a land border with the EU.
- **Cross-departmental budgeting** supported by cross-cutting policy making bolstered by statutory duty to cooperate.
- **Supporting politicians in strategic space** through established mechanism for civic engagement.









# Panel 1: Alternative budget for Northern Ireland: reimagining public finances

## Reflections on the current context

- Northern Ireland has a unique history and set of circumstances within UK. Extra support is required to stabilise and transform public services.
- Public expenditure management is more difficult here as a result.
- An upward pressure on wage and price inflation is placing further pressure on the decreasing value of the block grant.
- Public services are struggling to deliver. This for the most part is due to the lack of investment in infrastructure and transformation.
- Global challenges such as climate change and the need for climate resilience make transformation more urgent.
- We face the twin challenge of stabilisation and transformation. In the short-term current spending is running higher than resources available. Long term, a sustainable fiscal platform requires stabilisation, collaboration and transformation.
- Collaboration between the public, private and VCSE sector improves policy making, service development and investment through knowledge sharing, innovation and improved practice.
- Business engagement with UK and NI Governments critical in understanding consequences and how to manage divergence.
- Local community organisations know what communities need and how best to deliver it.
- Investing in the VCSE sector is investment in key critical services and should be multi-annual, core unrestricted funding.

## What actions can we take?

- A fiscal floor like the Welsh arrangement needs to form part of a financial agreement to restore institutions, along with cash to meet short term budget pressures.
- Revenue raising mechanisms could be linked to drive reform and transformation of the institutions.
- Changes to current taxation arrangements and the introduction of additional measures
- Others suggested that our focus should be on economic and inclusive growth rather than revenue raising.
- Reflect the real cost of climate change and resilience in current and future revenue and capital budgets.
- Siloed budgeting is inefficient. It doesn't drive the delivery of agreed outcomes such as those in the current draft Programme for Government.
- Alternative funding and investment models including partnerships between public, private and VCSE sectors provide the opportunity to recalibrate our public spending.
- Potential for transformation in how we finance for large infrastructure projects and investment programmes.
- Central to public service delivery and civil society, the value and values of the VCSE sector needs to be reflected in the relationship with the public and private sector and how the sector is funded.

## Panel 2: The best of both worlds? A new dawn for North-South/East-West relations

### Reflections on the current context

- Three new dawns or turning points in recent history:
  - The 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement offered hope built on a full commitment from governments to deliver on new relations, something that needs continuous work and commitment.
  - Brexit is proof that politicians and decision makers draw on the full potential of north south, east west relations.
  - Post-Brexit realities require civic society expertise and insights as people and businesses move across the Island, creating and re-creating cross-border relationships.
- Early engagement by Westminster and Whitehall to better understand policy impact in Northern Ireland is missing.
- This lack of understanding is increasingly problematic given complicated policy making environment in UK and inconclusive on how Northern Ireland will operate due to DUP concerns with Windsor Framework.
- North South implementation bodies have been working since 1998. East West institutions are important but have not been used to their full potential.
- Success often depends on the political will of key individuals rather than robust institutional frameworks. Given the recent fragility of relationships we need to enhance UK government infrastructure focused on east west relationships and the devolved jurisdictions.
- Westminster policy making processes need to identify and manage potential divergence with devolved jurisdictions on more than Brexit related issues.



- The absence of an Executive leaves Northern Ireland at a disadvantage in discussions with central government and other devolved administrations. Its ongoing absence means that the full potential of these relationships remains unrealised.
- Opportunity now for businesses to thrive availing of the new post Brexit arrangements.
- Shared objective to deliver tangible economic benefits and shared prosperity across the region.
- We need to look ahead with joint thinking on policy and implementation frameworks to support ambitions of companies and sectors which are willing to progress.
- There is a need to improve stability of investing in Northern Ireland in particular, and there is potential for business involvement in these relationships through formal and informal engagement.
- Current lack of political leadership increases the need for engagement with all sectors of civic society.
- Local government relationships and networks operate which is particularly important given current funding pressures.
- VCSE sector networks may be active but there is a disconnect between official formal institutions and other forums and platforms.

## What actions can we take?

- Promote citizen engagement through a range of deliberative methods including assemblies, panels and juries. Moving from the current limited consultation model to authentic ongoing engagement will deliver better outcomes.
- Joint engagement and partnerships between civil servants, academics, trade unions, communities and people can embed cooperation at every level of government.
- Shared learning across civil services and civic society partners to build policy development capacity, create an evidence base and measure effectiveness.
- North/south east/west bodies require renewal and investment to ensure they operate effectively in this post Brexit environment.
- Home civil service needs to better understand Northern Ireland.
- Enhance legislative scrutiny processes applying the lessons from recent years and the unintended consequences of accelerated processes.
- Introduce checks and balances to assess potential impacts of new policies on north/south east/west relations and structure.
- Responsibility for civic society to engage with mechanisms established under the protocol and ensure the protocol functions properly.
- Increase cooperation with Scotland and Wales on policy areas of mutual interest and challenge.



## Panel 3: Supporting better politics: partnership, challenges, and impact

### Reflections on the current context

- Crisis of trust in government as highlighted in Carnegie UK report.
- Currently Northern Ireland is neither problem solving nor decision making; there is need for the sense of hope, optimism and momentum experienced immediately before and after 1998.
- The contrast between political and business is evident with businesses positive about the future and prepared to avail of current opportunities.
- Long-term vision needs to include plans for how we become more self-financing.
- Government takes too long to reach decisions and make change.
- Democratic innovation empowers governments to achieve goals, increases long term thinking, improves social cohesion, empowers citizens to hold government accountable.
- Evidence from other countries can secure essential political support for innovative democratic methods and forums.
- We need different infrastructure and regulatory frameworks to support new kinds of businesses with global ambitions.
- A return of the Executive to take quick decisions that will enable businesses to take advantage of the opportunities arising from dual market access and other opportunities that have emerged over the last couple of years.
- Innovation in the public sector has been partially successful but slow.

### What actions can we take?

- Civic referral method to unlock political impasses on key issues.
- A formalised approach between business and government to co-design and co-invest in projects.
- Review of the institutions should include how we innovate to get to better decision making.
- Public deliberation as a tool for identifying common ground on issues in the public interest. This is a more mainstream idea now and is different to the civic forum model created by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.
- Explore the establishment of a second chamber in the Assembly; house of people rather than experts, as experts already have access to the political system.
- Voting age to be lowered to 16.
- Cross-sector collaboration to strengthen civic voice. Existing conversations on collaboration need to evolve into a formal dialogue with politicians and the political institutions.
- Establish meaningful and formalised entry points for engagement with the political institutions.

## Panel 4: Frameworks for governing: optimising delivery through structures

### Reflections on the current context

- Local government continues to work regardless of the political climate and disagreements.
- Councils need to be part of the conversation about stabilisation and future transformation, beyond those areas of statutory responsibility.
- The relationship between central and local government is underdeveloped despite the benefits of place-based interventions.
- Local government and elected representatives are closer to communities so know what is happening. Investing in place-based relationships will improve services and wellbeing.
- Democratic wellbeing is low in Northern Ireland with high levels of distrust in institutions that aren't working to improve people's lives.
- People with disabilities are particularly disadvantaged and excluded.
- Northern Ireland is more cohesive in terms of intergenerational relations than other parts of UK.

### What actions can we take?

- Need for change to the system and a robust strategy for Executive collapse. This could include devolving additional powers to local government.
- All sectors need a seat at the table when it comes to taking decisions which affect them.
- Place building and community area planning are key and could be more central in strategic planning at central government level.
- Targeted strategies are central to improving the wellbeing of key groups, especially people with disabilities.
- Need to revise the petition of concern to its original intention.
- Review the Assembly designation system.
- Budgeting for preventative spend, stabilisation and transformation.
- Need a conversation about where councils sit within the wider context of revenue raising in Northern Ireland.

# Panel 5: Supporting better politics: partnership, challenges, and impact

## Reflections on the current context

- Broad agreement that there is an opportunity for a positive shift in our politics to deal with issues including trade, fiscal arrangements and enhancing local government.
- Relationships based on tolerance and reconciliation underpinned the Belfast Good Friday Agreement; agreement across the panel on moving from tolerance to embracing and promoting diversity.
- Institutional reform as a challenge to the next Assembly; differing views on this however shared commitment to ensuring that politics can deliver for citizens whilst maintaining the balance of safeguards.
- The short-term nature of political mandates and one-year budgets undermines the long term, strategic thinking, planning and investment needed to stabilise politics and devolution.
- The value of local government, VCSE groups and grassroots initiatives was recognised.

## What actions can we take?

- Agreement across the panel on the need to address the fiscal floor; budgetary concerns highlight the necessity for increased funding from Westminster and the Welsh model was explored in discussion.
- A shared commitment to building relationships based on tolerance and reconciliation was central to securing the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Twenty-five years later there is need to move beyond tolerance of difference to promoting diversity.
- The Belfast Region City Deal was discussed as an innovative approach to cooperation, with the involvement of multiple councils and a focus on cities as drivers of regional economies. Opportunity to develop this model into other areas.
- The panel supported cross-party and cross-departmental work, emphasising the need for cross-party collaboration between ministers and committees in their scrutiny of policy.
- Institutional reform debate needs to include non-contentious, structural aspects of the system.
  - Current statutory committee structures need to evolve to meet the challenge of cross-departmental collaboration and outcome-based public policy.
  - Engaging with citizens: Some support for the idea of a citizens' assembly to devise solutions to difficult problems, support political decision making and enhance accountability across government.
- Optimising of North/South East/West political and institutional relationships to deliver on key areas such as waterways, tourism etc.
- Relationships within and between all jurisdictions on the Island of Ireland and the UK need to be renewed through existing and new political, policy and engagement forums and structures.



Community  
Foundation

Achieving  
Impact

Alternative budget for  
Northern Ireland:  
imagining public  
finances

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## Next steps

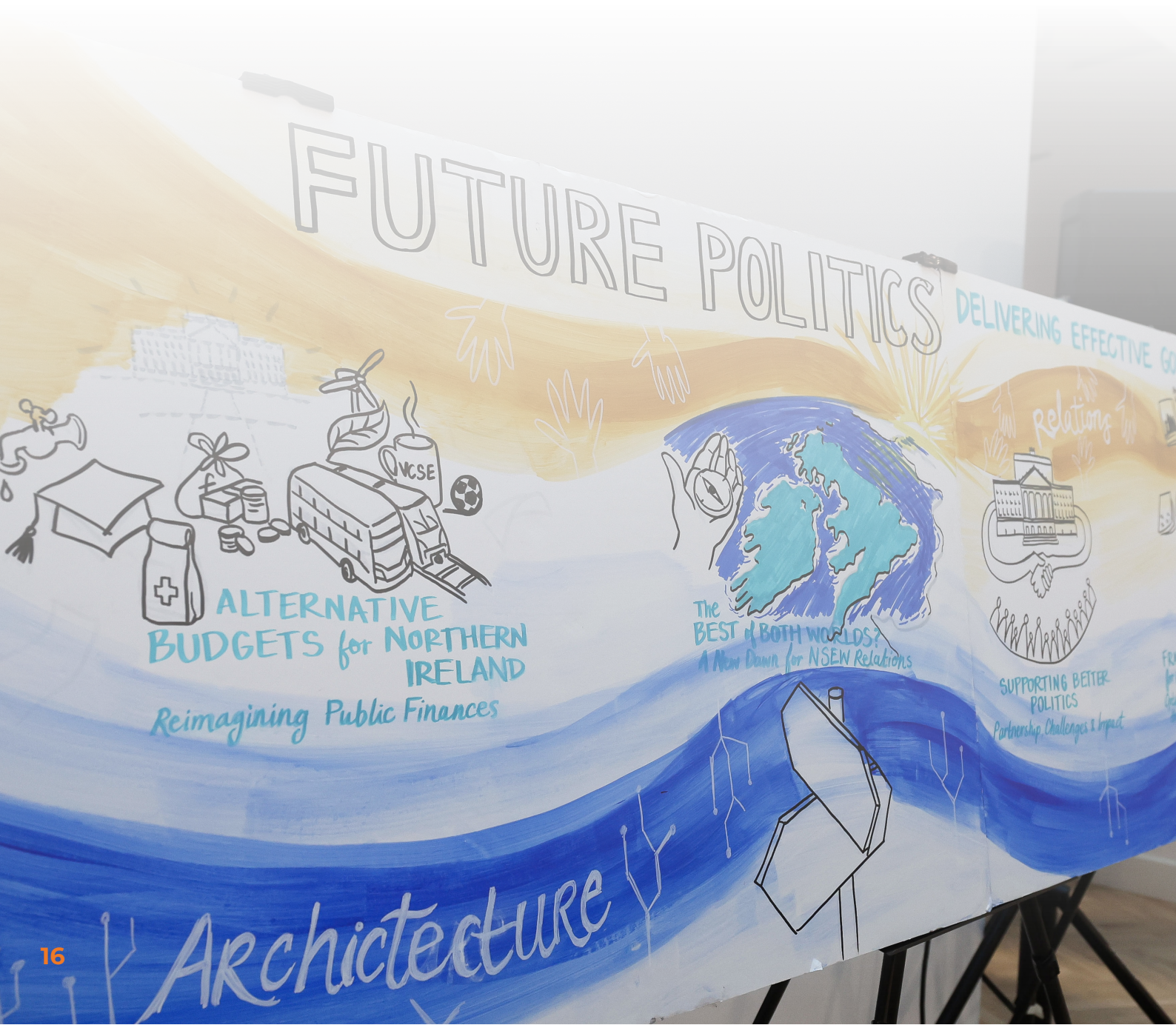
**With so many ideas for how to optimise our politics and governance emerging from the conference and previous events, we want to ensure that conversations continue and develop into tangible outcomes.**

Since the conference in November, the context has shifted with the welcome restoration of the institutions. Some of the themes discussed at the conference can be seen in the deal between the UK Government and local parties, notably in relation to the fiscal floor, increasing financial sustainability of the region and enhanced east west relationships and structures

Whilst these are welcome developments and provide a basis on which to build, it is now even more important that ideas and conversations on how to deliver more sustainable politics and policy are converted into actions.

Future Politics will continue to provide the space for reflective conversations and ideas and collaborate with organisations across the policy landscape to make a positive contribution to this important area of work.

We have developed a work programme which we believe will progress some of the key themes identified from the Future Politics project and are working to put these in motion.









# About us

## About Stratagem

# Stratagem

part of the Connect Group

Established in 1998 as the new Assembly took shape, Stratagem connects organisations with politics, public policy and the media.

In 2019, Stratagem merged with Westminster-based public affairs agency Connect, having led the industry locally for over 20 years.

We work with organisations across the public, private and voluntary sector, taking their issues and messages, applying our strategic, creative and political know-how to provide clients with the tools to deliver meaningful impact.

This includes high level advice, legislative reform, campaigns, strategic communications, political monitoring and training.

Our team of around 50 experts in Belfast and London are part of the fastest growing independently owned public affairs agency in the UK.

In 2022 PRWeek named the Connect Group as one of the top 10 UK Public Affairs agencies.

We are members of the Public Affairs Board of the PRCA.

For more information, visit [www.stratagem-ni.com](http://www.stratagem-ni.com)

**FUTURE POLITICS**  
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ideas, policies and solutions

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## About the John and Pat Hume Foundation

## **HUME** The John & Pat Hume Foundation

The John and Pat Hume Foundation was established in 2020 to honour John & Pat Hume, who worked side by side for decades to bring positive change to the lives of the people of Derry and Northern Ireland. The Foundation supports and inspires Leadership for Peaceful Change using the example of John and Pat's lived experience.

We are guided by the principles drawn from the actions and philosophy of John and Pat Hume:

1. Peaceful Change is a collaborative process that is fully inclusive.
2. Peaceful Change is built on respect for difference.
3. Peaceful Change takes a long-term view and supports evolving perspectives.

The Foundation seeks to:

- Partner with peace leaders, shining a light on their work, standing in solidarity, rewarding their courage, and contributing to their long-term resilience.
- Support and enhance the determined and often unsung community organisations who are dedicated to improving lives in their communities, finding common ground and promoting inclusion.
- Assist reconciliation and long-term sustainable peace in conflict and post-conflict societies worldwide.

We are committed to openness and inclusiveness. Our board is composed of people from diverse backgrounds and communities, who bring a breadth of experience and a range of different viewpoints to everything we do.

For more information, visit [www.humefoundation.org](http://www.humefoundation.org)





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