

**TACKLING
REGIONAL
INEQUALITIES**

Breaking the Barriers to
Employment and Opportunity



TACKLING REGIONAL INEQUALITY





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Introduction

Sinn Féin believes that, for the benefit of both individuals and society as a whole, everyone in our society should be enabled and empowered to improve their skills. This would allow them to fulfil their full potential.

In order to ensure that happens, radical changes are needed.

Economic boom or bust makes little difference to those pushed to the margins of our society. Their lives are characterised by unemployment, underemployment, job insecurity and low wages. These negatively impact upon them, and those around them both physically and mentally.

This lived experience is intra-generational, geographically specific and long-standing. If you live in Derry or Belfast you will continue to suffer the highest levels of multiple deprivation in income, employment and health.

The Foyle Constituency has a high level of working age adults, (25-64) with either low levels of qualifications or none at all. As a Council Area Derry and Strabane have the highest percentage of unemployment anywhere in the North.

Belfast could best be described as a dual economy, because, despite increased investment in the city overall, pockets of deprivation, disadvantage and poverty continue to exist. Indeed, there are places where life expectancy is most accurately predicted by your postcode rather than any other personal attribute.

Decades on, and following numerous government interventions, there has been some improvement in the quality of life of those at the margins.

But this is not enough.

We must ensure opportunities for individuals are fairly distributed, that those pushed to the margins of society are supported effectively so they can access what's on offer. Agencies entrusted with delivering change held fully accountable.

All policies should be evaluated on their ability to deliver change and improve the life outcomes of those in Derry, Belfast and similar areas.

These proposals focus on improving the demand and supply of labour through regional targets for inward investment and employer incentives. They can be supported by buy local and other initiatives such as a Community Work Programme, improved training and wrap-around mentoring support.



THIS SINN FÉIN POLICY SETS OUT THE NEW SOLUTIONS IN RESPECT OF;

- tackling long-term unemployment
- improving skills training and removing barriers which prevent access to training
- how the public sector can support apprenticeships and employment opportunities for those most in need
- incentives for employers through investment and the awarding of public contracts.

Sinn Féin wants to provide everyone within our society with the skills necessary to avail of opportunities and gain meaningful employment, so people can provide for themselves and their families.

This means supporting young single mothers, the long-term unemployed, those struggling with mental health and those struggling with substance abuse and addiction.

This also means bringing about necessary change. Covid and Brexit are huge challenges causing job losses, economic damage and great hardship across many sectors. However, in this time of flux, there is also an opportunity to introduce new approaches in order to break the failed patterns of the past.

Without employment, our citizens cannot contribute fully to the development of the New Ireland envisaged by Sinn Féin.

With increasing levels of unemployment, the minimum qualifications required for new jobs will be more difficult to meet in a labour market where job insecurity is endemic. A new and different approach is needed to help those with no or low qualifications to get work.

In order to bring about the required systemic change, the Executive must work collaboratively across departments, making linkages that change people's lives for the better.

Progress can only be made where those in charge of allocating financial resources put the proper structures in place. These need to ensure that public finances are firmly rooted in supporting an over-arching policy which prioritises the welfare of those marginalised within society for the benefit of the many, not the few.

In other words, Government must invest financial resources based on objective need.



Tackling Long Term Unemployment

Sinn Féin believes that any strategy to tackle regional inequalities must deal with the scourge of long-term unemployment.

Derry, along with North and West Belfast have suffered from consistently high levels of unemployment and joblessness. Indeed, there has not been full employment since Partition.

A historic legacy of deliberate neglect of the long-term unemployed, coupled with regional inequalities has exacerbated a situation where Derry was fractured from its social and economic hinterland of Donegal.

Previous programmes like “Steps to Success” failed to address long-term unemployment and saw those closest, not farthest, from the labour market benefit most.

Proposals being brought forward by the Department for Economy, in light of Covid, are also unlikely to resolve this issue of long-term unemployment. Apprenticeship programmes exclude those over the age 24, and the majority of the skills programmes require the learner to have previous qualifications.

The best way to address the long-term unemployment is to establish bespoke employability programmes, addressing all barriers to employment. They should operate on the basis of voluntary engagement and delivered in partnership through local community groups, technical colleges and council.

It is well known that the long-term unemployed suffer more, insofar as the longer they remain on the unemployment register the more likely they are to stay on it. Covid unemployment suggests that those most recently employed will regain employment first – not the long-term unemployed. Such a polarising outcome is unacceptable.

We must support all on the basis of need.

PROPOSALS

- Government departments DfE, DoF, DfC and CPD should work in an integrated way to improve access to employment for the long-term unemployed; this should include a set of measures, including bespoke training, local labour clauses, amendments to maximise procurement of local services, regional job investment targets (to include quality as well as quantity of employment in urban and rural areas).
- Department for Communities and Economy should establish an employability programme for the long term unemployed, modelled on Community Works Programmes.
- The Programme should be devolved into the community and delivered by local organisations including community groups, technical colleges and council.
- The programme should provide a meaningful pathway to employment.
- All employers partnered with the Programme should apply ‘Buy Social’ where possible.
- The programme should include provision for Education Maintenance Payments and Childcare support in order to support learners.



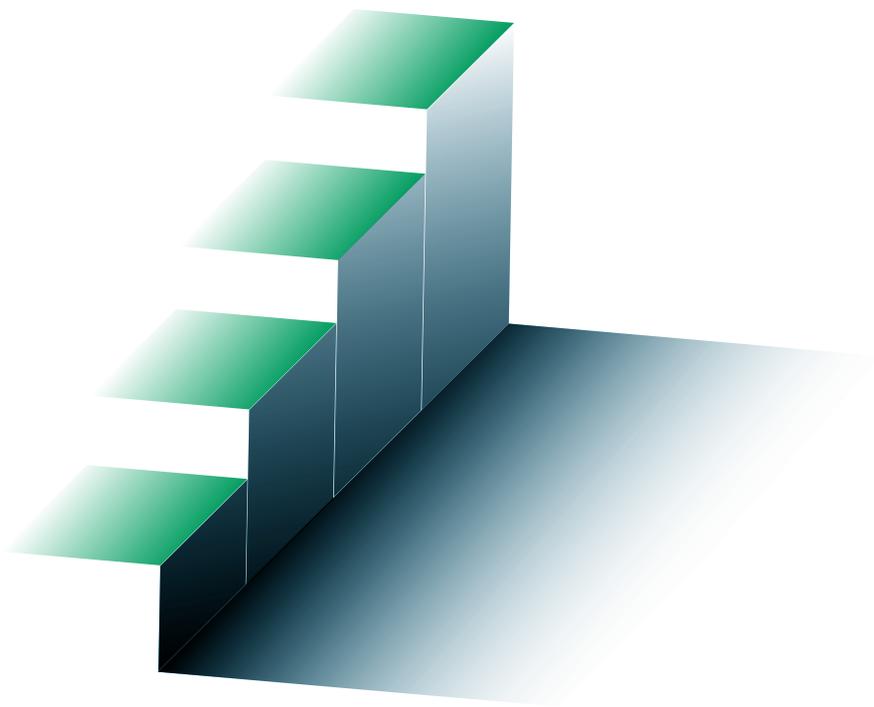
- The Department for Communities should evaluate how Neighbourhood Renewal is delivering on improving individuals access to employment, as part of the evaluation criteria for spending.

The need for adequate oversight, transparency and accountability mechanisms must all be embedded within this employability programme in order for it to be effective.

Measuring the success of the programme should also be based on an improved Matrix that is not defined solely by Hard Outcomes, such as jobs obtained and numbers progressing onto further education and training.

Instead, success rates should also include elements such as improving a participant's personal skills relevant to employment, such as teamwork, critical thinking, communication skills, money management and completing a CV.

In essence, the programme must fully understand the needs of those unemployed, the substantial barriers they face and have empathy for the individuals.



Meeting Local Skill Shortages

In order to effectively address long-term unemployment and deprivation, it is essential that the employability programme is designed and oriented towards addressing the needs of labour markets within Derry, and North and West Belfast.

Local skills barometers, such as those developed by Ulster University, should form a key part of the programme in terms of informing its design and outcomes.

This requires employers to:

- Provide information on the needs of their business, as well as outlining the skills that participants will require in order to access employment.
- Give a commitment to offering decent work experience for participants, including contracted employment and set hours.
- Ensure that the eligibility criteria are reasonable and proportionate.

Incentives will be provided to employers willing to participate in the programme.

These should include:

- 'National' Insurance paid contributions for one year after an employee has worked 13 months.
- Support for redundancy payments (if required).
- Paid training and support for a work coach.
- Rates relief.

While the role of local employers will be instrumental to the success of the employability programme, the role of central and local government will be equally important.

City Deals and Investing Futures Funding for Derry and Belfast, amounting to over £700 million and the Mid South West Growth Deal amounting to £252 million, could be transformative for local communities, provided that local and central government can equip people with the necessary skills and expertise to access the increased employment opportunities that come with this investment.

Belfast City Council already has an Employment Academy Programme. This should be replicated in Derry City and Strabane District Council as well as across all councils, urban and rural.

If council can give people the soft skills required for job interviews, alongside employers providing the relevant work experience, then those in long-term unemployment will have a real chance of accessing the increased employment opportunities that the City Deals present.

PROPOSALS

- The employability programme must provide training up to and including NVQ Level 3.
- The employability programme must be informed by the needs of local employers and skills barometers.
- Employers must give commitments to provide decent work experience and opportunities, implementing 'Buy Social' where possible, in return for incentives.
- Local council must equip people with the soft skills in order for them to attain the opportunities presented by City and Growth Deals.



Transforming InvestNI and channelling Job Creation

Sinn Féin believes that the jobs creation agency in the north, Invest NI, has to be transformed if we are to have meaningful job creation and economic growth in those areas which bear the scars of partition and regional inequality.

The failure, and unwillingness of Invest NI, to attract Investors to areas like Derry and North and West Belfast, has compounded levels of unemployment in these areas.

The table below shows the financial assistance, jobs assisted, and investor visits targeted towards Derry, North and West Belfast, which has been a fraction of the level of support directed towards South Belfast since 2014.

Invest NI Activity from 2014-2019

PCA	No of Offer 2014-2019	Total Assistance £m 2014-2019	Total Planned Investment £m 2014-2019	New Jobs Assisted 2014-2019	Investor Visits 2016-2019
BELFAST SOUTH	2,356	123.86	765.46	9,280	398
BELFAST NORTH	881	23.81	135.23	1,389	97
BELFAST WEST	704	14.03	71.21	739	32
DERRY (FOYLE)	1,153	46.74	283.89	2,723	22

This has to end. Invest NI must be mandated, in line with the Executive’s commitment to Tackling Regional Inequalities, to direct resources into supporting and incentivising job creation in areas of deprivation. This must be accompanied with ring fenced funding.

There needs to be a commitment that the use of public money, to support job creation, can only be done on the basis that those receiving that support pay the Real Living Wage. Figures obtained from Invest NI have shown that since 2014 it has supported 3,950 jobs which pay **below** the Real Living Wage. This must end.

Councils across the north should establish a Job Creation and Steering Unit with a remit for encouraging the incubation of indigenous businesses, as well as targeting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in key growth industries.

Economic development and investment must look beyond partition. Derry/Strabane could do this through the North West Regional Development Group which should bring together Invest NI, Enterprise Ireland and the Industrial Development Authority to build business partnerships that will lead to meaningful job creation and economic growth.

Further development of Derry and the North West City Region can be done through the Irish government delivering on its commitments in the New Decade New Approach.

PROPOSALS

- Transformation of the roles and functions of Invest NI.
- The establishment of a Job Steering Unit in all Councils.
- Supporting the North West as an Economic Region through the North West Regional Development Group, the North West Strategy Growth Partnership and the New Decade New Approach commitments.



Directing Employment through Public Sector Interventions

Interventions by the Executive, in terms of procurement and apprenticeships, can help direct employment into areas of high unemployment and regional inequality.

The Executive's spend of £3 billion per annum could be transformative in addressing poverty and disadvantage. All contracts should include properly enforceable social clauses, particularly in industries such as construction, planning and services

Public contracts should be awarded, not simply on the basis of the lowest bid, but rather on the basis of the most economically advantageous, taking account of the wider impacts on, unemployment, deprivation and inequality. Tenders, which can demonstrate a positive social value impact, should be scored higher.

The Department of Finance should put in place specific policy guidance setting out a range of principles and definitions that would ensure real, tangible, direct and indirect social and economic benefits, not only to those employed, but for all members of the community.

Government Departments should appoint a 'Buy Social' champion, who will have the responsibility for implementing 'Buy Social' at every opportunity, in addition to robustly monitoring its application.

PROPOSALS

- i)** Social value must be embedded and mainstreamed within Public Sector Procurement.
- ii)** Contracts to be awarded on the basis of what is most economically advantageous.
- iii)** Departments to appoint a Buy Social champion.
- iv)** Employers engaged on the employability programme should have their contribution to social value recognised in public procurement exercises.



Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships are a key entry point into the workforce for young people who have followed a vocational path at school.

The employment impacts of both Covid and Brexit are likely to be felt most by those leaving school and following a vocational pathway, with the demand for apprenticeships far exceeding the supply available.

Changes regarding apprenticeships are already underway and, while they are welcome, they do not go far enough.

The Executive, working along with trade unions and employers' organisations should create a joined-up apprenticeship programme which increases the number of apprenticeships available. Using the skills barometer, the Executive would also fund places, even where firms were unable to take on apprentices, because of their own financial circumstances.

Apprentices, not employed by firms, would receive the same training. This would ensure that they had the necessary skill sets to allow them to enter the labour market when opportunities become available.

Trainees in both schemes would be awarded the same qualifications upon completion so as not to devalue the new scheme in any way.

The apprenticeship training would combine school-based and practical training, but with the latter taking place in workshops, managed between the unions and the department.

Alongside this new apprenticeship programme, the Executive should commit to facilitating more apprenticeships within the Civil Service and government departments. Currently only 82 civil servants in the north are under the age of 23, and some departments do not have a single civil servant under the age of 23.

The Department for Finance should explore the establishment of a regional hub for civil servants in Derry and Omagh, allowing civil servants to work closer to home and their families. This would address the detrimental impact on workers' family lives, social circles and work life balance.

PROPOSALS

- The Executive, along with trade unions and employer organisations, should establish an apprenticeship programme which meets the needs of vocational learners transitioning from school to the workplace.
- Apprentices must receive a fair and decent wage.
- The Executive must increase the number of public sector apprenticeships currently on offer.
- Public sector apprenticeships should be based on models of best practice and should ensure that there are maximum opportunities for people to learn and progress.
- The Department for Finance should establish a Civil Service regional hub in Derry and Omagh.



CONCLUSION

Throughout the Covid 19 pandemic we have constantly heard the phrase that things cannot go back to what they were like before. If that is a truly heartfelt belief then we need to invest in people's futures, particularly those who are in, or at risk of, poverty and deprivation.

We are not all in this together. It is those in part-time, zero hours employment, particularly within the service sector, who face the greatest challenge in the short and medium term. They earn least, spend the most proportionally on food, accommodation and energy and are in the most insecure jobs. They must be given the skills to allow them to take care of themselves and their families.

Sinn Féin believes that, if we are to truly tackle the legacy of unemployment,

underemployment, job insecurity and low wages, then we cannot continue with the policies that have failed so many of our society in the past.

If we want to ensure that everyone is enabled to fulfil their full potential, then we have to radically change how we approach meaningful training and skills. This would allow so many of our citizens to escape the clutches of intra and inter-generational multiple deprivation in income, employment and health.

A new framework, between the Executive, businesses, the trade unions and the community and voluntary sector, can set a new trajectory that can change our society for the better.

Our people must be given real training for real jobs and not simply put through a process that



massages unemployment figures but makes no real material benefit to their lives.

Employability programmes must address all barriers to employment. Those charged with delivering them must be held accountable.

We know that Brexit, Covid 19 and the legacy of deprivation and poverty impact negatively on those individuals and households who are already suffering the most.

It is incumbent on the Executive to firmly target resources on those who will be most affected. It should not abandon them to a dysfunctional 'welfare reform' benefit system

which is no longer the 'safety net' but rather has become a stick to discipline those who are unable to find work.

Sinn Féin believes that we can build a better, more inclusive society by investing in our people, particularly those who have been or who are at risk of being left behind.

We are at a unprecedented juncture in the political and economic life and wellbeing of Ireland. Now is the time for everyone on our island to be planning for the future in a positive, inclusive and informed way. The time to start doing that is now.









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