



QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE TO DRAFT PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY NOVEMBER 2024



“We welcome the opportunity to work in partnership with the Executive, business and communities to create a cross-sector ecosystem that can support the Executive’s vision”

INTRODUCTION

Queen’s University welcomes the opportunity to provide our views on the Executive’s draft Programme for Government (PfG) 2024-27.

As outlined by Executive ministers when the draft PfG was agreed, we note the focussed approach taken in the context of a shortened mandate. We welcome the commitment for a broader and more ambitious approach in future mandates. We look forward to the publication of delivery plans outlining the operational detail of how the Executive will achieve the objectives it has set over the next three years and beyond.

We agree with the calls, expressed by many others, of the critical need to align the PfG with a multi-year budget, providing certainty and stability in the delivery of public services. We also share the Executive’s view that many of the challenges set out in the draft PfG will not be solved in one mandate and will require a long-term commitment from government and its partners.

As we enter into our 180th year, Queen’s University is a trusted and proven NI anchor institution and partner for the Executive in the delivery of its priorities and ambitious. We welcome the opportunity to work in partnership with the Executive, business and communities to create a cross-sector ecosystem that can support the Executive’s vision. We believe we are uniquely positioned to identify potential ‘quick wins’ - solutions that have already been researched, validated, and are ready for deployment.

Our staff and students continue to tackle the issues faced by individuals and societies at a local, regional and global level. And, in our position as a convening institution to discuss and solve shared challenges, Queen’s is a central coordinating pivot around which North-South and East-West relationships can coalesce and strengthen – across Northern Ireland, on this island, and in every part of these islands. Indeed, we believe that ‘linking up’ of people, facilities, and resources, collaboration incentivised by governments across these islands, can deliver sustainable economic growth and a progressive society.

OUR ROLE – NORTHERN IRELAND'S GLOBAL RESEARCH AND EDUCATION LEADER

Since 1845, Queen's University staff, students and alumni have made a difference to societies locally, nationally and internationally. With over 25,000 students, 4,300 staff, and over 206,000 alumni in 137 countries, we are one of the UK and Ireland's leading universities and continue to shape and serve the world around us through our research and teaching.

We are committed to continuing to play a leading role in the economic and societal development of Northern Ireland, with our success and the success of this region deeply intertwined. More than education and skills, the value of Queen's University to the economy is over £3 billion per year, which represents an economic benefit to cost ratio of over 8 to 1 (the highest of any Russell Group University).

Over the last ten years Queen's University has taken a number of key strategic decisions to ensure that we grow and develop as a world leading academic institution, a key driver of inclusive economic growth in Northern Ireland, and a place which is responsive to and a partner of local communities throughout the region. The impact of these decisions is now bearing fruit. Through a focus on recruiting some of the best academic talent, retained through academic progression and the creation of an ever-stronger research environment, we are proud of our increased numbers of professorial level colleagues, with clear routes of progression and remuneration for early and mid-career academic staff.

Our academic colleagues are the key drivers of our growth as a university. They are the key drivers of a healthy research and teaching ecosystem in Northern Ireland. And by investing in them as we have over the past decade, we are achieving outstanding results, which if protected and nurtured, will help drive forward the Executive's economic and social priorities in the coming years.

Key metrics which point to the success of this strategy of reward and retention of world leading researchers include:

- An increase in the value of research grants and contracts awarded to the University, rising from under £80m in 2019, to £124.3m in 2023/24.
- Rankings of 1st in the UK for Agriculture, Food and Veterinary Sciences, 4th in the UK for Allied Health Professions, Dentistry, Nursing and Pharmacy and 8th for Law in the most recent Research Excellence Framework.
- 96% of our research in Engineering rated as world-leading or internationally excellent.
- A greater volume of Queen's research is concentrated in our highest performing disciplines. In REF 2014 the top seven scoring areas accounted for 25% of staff submitted; whereas, in REF 2021 the top 6 scoring areas accounted for 48.4% of staff submitted. Simply put, this shows that more of our academic staff are producing more world leading research than ever before.
- 99% of our research environment has been assessed as world leading or internationally excellent. This is testament to our continued strategic investment in research facilities, in our estate, and in the importance we place on ensuring that academic colleagues can work in a world leading research environment.
- The 2024 World University Rankings for Innovation (WURI) also reflects Queen's University's role as a leader of innovation, translational research, and commercialization, placing us at 28 in the world across its key 'funding' metric.
- In the latest THE (Times Higher Education) World University Rankings (October 2024) Queen's moved up a further 11 places to enter the top 10% of academic institutions in the world (208 of 2092).

- The 2024 Times Higher Rankings also reported a major increase in Queen's University's Research Quality with our ranking for that specific metric improving from 142 to 117 in the world – a truly impressive achievement, further consolidating our position as a global research leader.

These points reinforce the point that in order to make real and impactful progress in an increasingly competitive global environment, we must support, develop and retain the academic talent that comes to Queen's University. When we do, the results in terms of economic opportunity, social benefit, research breakthroughs, and international reputational enhancement are clear.

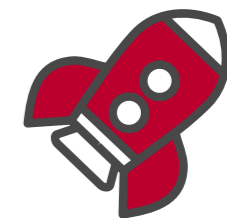
We also believe that we are in a unique position to assist the Northern Ireland Executive deliver its key priorities as expressed in the Programme for Government. We encourage Executive Departments to see Queen's University as partners for delivery. Our strategic pivot towards increasing research quality, and a focus on translation, through recruitment and retention of world leading academic experts can now be utilised by local policy makers to great effect. Already, through the recent Outcomes Agreement with Department for the Economy, we have aligned our strategic priorities as set out in Strategy 2030 with those of the Department. Our recently launched Centre for Public Policy and Administration will work with policy makers locally and globally to bring the best academic expertise to government initiatives. This response to the draft PfG is a further opportunity to highlight breadth of work undertaken by Queen's in identifying and providing solutions to key public policy challenges.

Our mission as a local and global university has seen the University locally lead on three innovation centres of the Belfast City Region Deal – The Advanced Manufacturing Innovation Centre (AMIC), iREACH Health, Momentum One Zero (M1.0) – and also internationally developing more than 120 global partnerships. This builds on not only our research excellence but also our strength in translational research and commercialisation described above. Some of our top global research partners include Harvard University, John Hopkins University, Sorbonne Université, Peking University, University of Cape Town, and the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi.

Regularly ranked as the leading university in the UK for entrepreneurial impact; our current portfolio of 42 active spin out companies currently employ over 3,500 people. Overall, we have developed in excess of 100 companies with an estimated combined annual turnover of circa £500 million.

Our role in society both locally and globally does not end with our economic impact. Inclusive economic growth should be seen as an equal but not greater part of our social, civic and environmental mission. We are proud to have announced recently our commitment to become both a Civic University and University of Sanctuary. We are a member of CARA, the Council for At-Risk Academics network, which provides urgently needed help to academics in immediate danger, those forced into exile, and many who choose to work on in their home countries despite serious risk.

As part of our 2040 Net Zero Action Plan we are committed as a university to achieving net zero emissions by 2040 across our scope 1, 2 and 3 emissions. To achieve this, we must ensure that we integrate climate action into all that we do. Our Net Zero Plan sets out a road map to how we will reach net zero emissions by 2040.



OVERALL, WE HAVE DEVELOPED **IN EXCESS OF 100 COMPANIES** WITH AN ESTIMATED COMBINED ANNUAL TURNOVER OF CIRCA **£500 MILLION**

HIGHER EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND AND CURRENT POLICY PROPOSALS



Queen's welcomes the recognition in the draft PfG that a thriving Further and Higher Education sector is critical for a strong and regionally balanced economy in Northern Ireland. To achieve meaningful, long-term change across Further and Higher Education it is imperative that policy addresses the need to address the skills gap in our local economy and addresses the inequality of access to local Higher Education institutions for young people from Northern Ireland. It is within this context that we reiterate that the current funding model for Higher Education no longer meets the needs of our economy. Current policy measures including the Maximum Student Number (MaSN Cap) mean over 5,000 young people leave Northern Ireland to study in Great Britain every year, with only a third ever returning.

While there will always be a cohort of 'determined leavers', current policy means an increasing number of 'reluctant' leavers, consequently widening the gap between the skills employers want and the talent available within our workforce. To illustrate this, an inquiry by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in 2022 heard from witnesses that the gap is a major issue for investors, particularly in the areas of manufacturing and high-growth sectors such as the digital industry.

Reducing this gap is not only necessary in driving economic growth and providing the skills base for investment, but also in providing our young people with equality of opportunity. To achieve this we believe that we need to employ all our tertiary education assets across NI. Maximising FE and creating clear pathways between FE and HE, to address both the skills gap and to enhance widening participation. This would create an integrated tertiary education system, maximising the use of our assets, enhancing opportunity to young people, and addressing the skills gap for the economy.

We welcome any expansion of Higher Education provision in Northern Ireland, and specifically the policy proposals focused on delivering the expansion of Ulster University's Magee Campus. This expansion is also closely aligned with the ambitions of the Sub-Regional Economic Plan and a reorientation of the work of Invest NI.

Queen's has been consistent for many years in its public support of growing our Higher Education sector, including supporting the ambition to promote regional balance through the expansion of Ulster University's Magee Campus. We recognise and support the opportunities that are being opened up by the further growth of undergraduate provision in the North West, and stand ready to assist the Magee Taskforce in their work when appropriate.

Given the opportunities and challenges that we face coupled with the Department's new approach, we believe that there is now a once in a generation opportunity to discuss the structures, functions and resourcing of Higher Education provision across Northern Ireland, as part of a tertiary education ecosystem and we are currently engaging with the Department to support them.

NI is a small region and we are cognisant of the potential impact of any major change in one institution on others whether in FE or HE. No intervention can be completely independent of the others, each will affect the whole. Thus, we wish to work with the Department to ensure that the Magee Taskforce's call for interventions and 'disruption' to the present status quo to achieve the target of 10,000 students at the Magee Campus, does not adversely impact any other part of the tertiary education sector. This will ensure that the focus is on genuine sector growth rather than displacement. Without this we are concerned of a risk to the exciting opportunities for innovation and growth that exist across the sector.

We are aware of the planned review of Higher Education and would welcome clarity on what aspects are within the scope of this review and associated timelines.

In conclusion, we believe that a wider conversation comprising not only undergraduate provision in the North West but postgraduate and research provision across the region would be invaluable. A triple helix partnership between Government, Business and Universities in this space can supercharge the economic priorities of the Department and the Executive and deliver for businesses and communities in every part of Northern Ireland over the next eight to ten years.

THE MISSIONS

The three core missions – People, Planet, and Prosperity, as well as a crosscutting commitment to Peace – are worthy and encapsulate many of the challenges we face locally and globally. We would however ask for clarity in relation to the following questions:

- Does the Executive envisage these missions forming the basis of the next PfG in 2027 for the purposes of continuity and planning, with new priorities coming onboard and/or existing identified priorities dropping off as progress is made against them?
- Will these missions act as guiding principles for the work of all departments, not only in delivery of the nine priorities identified in the draft PfG, but in all other policy and legislative work?

PEACE

Queen's University has a long history of providing a safe environment for political leaders to have difficult and challenging conversations. In 2018 and 2023, Queen's hosted the architects of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement to mark its twentieth and twenty-fifth anniversaries, with the latter also attended by world leaders in the largest gathering of its kind at any university campus in Ireland and the UK.

The Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice, established in 2018, plays a significant role in proposing solutions to conflict and legacy locally as well as globally. The Executive's commitment to work with partners in embedding peace is welcome, with the Institute currently engaged in a formal partnership with the Department of Justice as well as other parts of government.

The work of Institute's Legacy Fellows continues to deliver tangible outcomes for societies emerging from conflict. For example, Legacy Fellows are frequently invited by policymakers and civil society groups from other parts of the world to share the lessons of the Northern Ireland peace process. This sees Queen's welcome visiting delegations to the

Institute while our researchers are often invited to other world regions to speak to specific aspects of the peace process including legacy, policing, and parades and memorialisation. This is a critical part of ensuring that our story continues to inspire others, and that Northern Ireland continues to stand as a global example in conflict resolution.

Locally, Fellows from the Mitchell Institute have worked with a diverse range of groups on issues including: providing training and trauma-informed approaches in service provision and dealing with victim testimony; tackling paramilitarism; analysing the dynamics of deeply divided societies and exploring circumstances that foster positive social change; and migration and peacebuilding.

PEOPLE, PLANET, AND PROSPERITY

Climate change is arguably the greatest challenge we currently face. In this context, we would caution against the potential for these missions to be viewed in isolation, leading to a siloing of issues, most notably 'Planet', within what is traditionally viewed as the responsible departments of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and to a lesser extent, Economy. If we cannot sustain a liveable planet then, the two other missions of 'People' and 'Prosperity' become very difficult to achieve.

Many of the issues that arise under people and prosperity are directly influenced by the quality of life that is achievable if a healthy planet is not sustained. There is strong evidence demonstrating that globally the indirect drivers of biodiversity loss and environmental degradation are driven by patterns of consumption, production, trade and the policies that incentivise all of these. Food production is a very good example and highly relevant to Northern Ireland. Agricultural intensification has resulted from patterns of consumption, incentivising patterns of agricultural production through policy development (e.g. Going for Growth).

“Climate change is arguably the greatest challenge we currently face”

A mission-oriented approach that advocates for maximising prosperity risks exacerbating inequalities and incentivising unsustainable practices. It also fails to take account that globally there is a recognition that there are limits to economic growth, that a sustainable economy rather than a growing economy are better measures of wellbeing. The issues that are manifest in Lough Neagh reflect the fact that we have exceeded sustainable environmental limits, and we need to avoid perverse future outcomes that a siloed mission-oriented approach might create.

RECOMMENDATION 1:

It would be more appropriate to treat 'Planet' as a cross-cutting theme in the same way that peace is treated. Peace will be impossible to achieve in the face of the existential threats of climate change, biodiversity loss and water quality declines, which have the potential to undermine societal cohesion and the peace that so many in Northern Ireland have worked towards.

THE PRIORITIES

We recognise that many of the nine identified priorities in the draft PfG are not mutually exclusive, with progress in one area dependent on progress in another, or where progress, or a lack in progress in one area positively or negatively impacts another area. We therefore encourage the Executive to adopt a collaborative and cross-departmental approach in its policy development and delivery for the remainder of this mandate and indeed future mandates.

In response to the priorities identified by the Executive, we have set out below the reflections and recommendations of our academics. As outlined earlier, our academic colleagues are the key drivers of our growth as a university. Many also play a leading role in providing advice to government as well communicating the evidence base for policy change, demonstrating the partner role played by Queen's in both the development and delivery of public policy.

For example, in relation to the priority of growing the economy, Professor David Rooney and Dr David Jordan are 'critical friends' to the Economy Minister in the delivery of his economic vision, while Professor Helen McCarthy has been recently appointed as the new Chief Science and Technology Adviser.

GROW A GLOBALLY COMPETITIVE AND SUSTAINABLE ECONOMY

As an anchor institution committed to the social-economic development of Northern Ireland, we fully endorse the Executive's ambition to grow a globally competitive and sustainable economy through the four thematic areas of productivity, good jobs, decarbonisation and regional balance. The commitment to support greater investment in Research and Development by enhancing engagement between universities and business is especially welcome.

While Higher Education plays a key role across all four pillars in this priority, it fits rather awkwardly within the 'Regional Balance' pillar, reflecting the earlier point on the current policy alignment between the Sub Regional Action Plan and the expansion of Ulster University's Magee Campus.

PRODUCTIVITY

We welcome the place productivity has in the draft PFG and strongly believe that improving productivity is vital to the future prosperity and wellbeing of Northern Ireland. Research by Queen's academics in the Northern Ireland Productivity Forum, headquartered at Queen's University Belfast, has helped understand the causes of Northern Ireland's productivity gap as well as identifying solutions.

Productivity cuts across and feeds into the three other challenges in this priority area. Low productivity is closely associated with lower quality jobs. In other words, job quality can't be improved without firstly improving productivity. Decarbonisation and green technology will play an important role in improving productivity. Finally, as the work of the Productivity Institute has shown, there are large variations in productivity across local councils. This means that Northern Ireland's productivity cannot be raised without improving regional balance.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Productivity becomes the core focus within this priority area.

Productivity also cuts across at least three of the other priorities in the draft PFG. First, 'Deliver More Affordable Childcare' will be important in freeing up skilled workers, especially women, to work in the economy. Our low economic activity currently acts as a drag on productivity. Second, the ill health of the population also acts as a major drag on labour productivity. Consequently, the 'Cut Health Waiting Times' priority is a very important feeder into productivity. Third, the 'Reform and Transformation of Public Services' is important for driving the productivity of the public sector and the overall economy. The public sector is going to have to do more with less. This can only be achieved by driving the labour productivity of the public sector and using technology to drive the sector's total factor productivity.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

The ownership for improving productivity should be cross-cutting and not the sole responsibility of the Department for the Economy.

Productive businesses set targets and measure achievement towards these targets. Without these, it is impossible to know if a business is meeting its objectives and priorities. Governments also need targets and measures to indicate performance.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

The Executive should set targets for, and measure labour productivity growth, and total factor productivity growth. The latter measure is important if the Executive wants to understand the effect of innovation and technology adoption on productivity. These measures should be included within the PFG's Wellbeing Framework, and should be published on the associated Wellbeing Dashboard, under the Stronger Economy domain.

Finally, there needs to be a long-term commitment and oversight of this priority area, which extends beyond the current lifetime of this PFG.

RECOMMENDATION 5:

Establish an independent Productivity Commission to both advise and guide the Executive's policy with regards to economic growth and prosperity. Such a commission exists in many countries, with the Republic of Ireland's National Competitiveness and Productivity Council and Australia's Productivity Commission being two very successful examples of this.

GOOD JOBS

The Department for the Economy's Good Jobs consultation identified four themes – Terms of Employment, Pay and Benefits, Voice and Representation, Work-life Balance. One of the seven visions of Queen's University Belfast's Strategy 2030, and a key enabler underpinning all our strategic priorities, is ensuring Queen's is a great place to work – 'A leading employer for equality, diversity and inclusion with an organisational culture that supports and empowers staff to produce their best'.

In 2024 Queen's became an accredited Living Wage Employer. The Real Living Wage is higher than the National Minimum Wage and is the only UK wage rate based on the cost of living, including factors such as housing costs, food prices, and utility expenses. Indeed, we had already been paying our employees the Real Living Wage since 2022, and the recent accreditation officially recognises the University's commitment to ensure employees, and any regularly contracted workers are paid the living wage hourly rate.

We are also proud to have been awarded the prestigious Athena Swan Gold Award in 2024. Queen's is the first university on the island of Ireland and only the second in the UK to achieve an institutional Gold Award for its work improving gender equality. This has been enabled by our recognition of the importance of our staff and the vital role they play in the long-term ambition of the University.

We note that good jobs, as defined in the draft PFG, means workers feel valued and supported in their workplace, but also encompasses better quality jobs and attracting, developing, and retaining this talent. Queen's is a key partner in delivering better quality job and higher education plays a unique and pivotal role in supporting the pipeline of highly skilled researchers needed to meet Northern Ireland's economic goals.

Through our relationship with the business community across Northern Ireland there is clear demand for skilled graduates. Queen's University have for many years called to reduce the number of students that leave Northern Ireland to access higher education provision in Great Britain. Furthermore, provision of postgraduate education and research opportunities attracts international talent to the region and contributes highly skilled workers to sectors outside academia.

RECOMMENDATION 6:

Queen's have submitted a consultation response to the Department for the Economy's Review of the Northern Ireland Postgraduate Award (PGA) Scheme which included a number of views and recommendations, including the University's preference for any outcome that results in continued and enhanced support for the PGA Scheme, while also ensuring the sustainability of QR/HEIF funding.

RECOMMENDATION 7:

Queen's believe that a wider conversation comprising not only undergraduate provision in the North West but postgraduate and research provision across the region should be initiated. A triple helix partnership between Government, Business and Universities in this space can supercharge the economic priorities of the Department and the Executive and deliver for businesses and communities in every part of Northern Ireland over the next eight to ten years.

DECARBONISATION

A common challenge across both the UK and Ireland is the need to decarbonise in ways which protect and strengthen the fabric of society. It is highly complex requiring nuanced solutions which balance multiple requirements and drivers.

Just transition frameworks which address various dimensions of inequality, vulnerability and opportunity and seek to share the benefits of a green economy transition can serve as guide. However, a just transition approach alone fails to sufficiently capture the opportunities for communities and businesses across Northern Ireland and deliver against the four pillars of this priority.

RECOMMENDATION 8:

Move to a 'just evolution' approach which specifically seeks to transition the economy to a state which can thrive within a decarbonised net-zero future. Delivering a just evolution can be enabled by supporting a sequence of complementary interventions which amplify each other to catalyse smart economic transformation and evolution across Northern Ireland. Critical is the enabling ecosystem which enhances cross-community and interdisciplinary research from across the UK, Ireland and international institutions. A research, development and innovation (R&D&I) ecosystem is critical and can address technological and social needs through a targeted portfolio of product and process innovations aligned to decarbonisation and deliver this in a balanced way across the region, creating good jobs with increased productivity.

More broadly, the reality of the decarbonisation challenge is understated in the draft PfG with subsequent investments running the risk of tokenism rather than actions which will unlock longer term growth. Current evidence and data relating to energy generation and usage in Northern Ireland suggests that self-sufficiency in energy is highly unlikely to be achieved. Similarly, being a net exporter of energy is highly unlikely in the short to longer term given constraints.

The counterfactual to increasing renewables on the grid is to significantly lower demand. Efficiencies are increasing (e.g. heat pumps and EVs) but uptake in Northern Ireland is lower than Great Britain. There is a high risk that current energy targets and strategy will increase costs to businesses and consumers thereby limiting growth in the overall economy.

RECOMMENDATION 9:

Significantly increase renewables to evolve Northern Ireland into a higher value green economy particularly in areas such as advanced manufacturing and stronger connectivity to UK, Ireland and EU supplies is necessary. The Higher Education sector is well placed to support in this through the development of smart digital technologies to support energy movements, hydrogen and e-fuels, as well as in construction and planning.

REGIONAL BALANCE

Our response to 'Regional Balance' is addressed within the 'Higher Education in Northern Ireland and current policy proposals' section on page 7.

ECONOMY CASE STUDY: BELFAST REGION CITY DEAL

Our vision as a civic university is to bring lasting economic and social benefits to the people of Northern Ireland and beyond. Through the Belfast Region City Deal, we are working with our partners to deliver a transformational £230 million programme of innovation across three ambitious projects.

The Advanced Manufacturing Innovation Centre, Momentum One Zero and iREACH Health build on the areas where Queen's has demonstrated research excellence.

Collectively, the centres are contributing to the four pillars of the 'Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy' priority in the following ways:

Productivity and Good Jobs: In an environment with limited resources, it is essential that investments in research and innovation are considered hand in hand with where they intersect with development of inclusive approaches to enhancing employability and skills, e.g. through establishment of a new Skills Fund and related academies. Funding and partnerships need to be convened around the mechanisms for delivering and scaling up this growth, interlocking advances in technology, methods and treatments with growing the skills

base. This needs to feed in at all levels of education and training – from primary school to continuing professional development and upskilling.

Decarbonisation: The City and Growth Deal investments can provide test beds for connecting businesses and the public sector with new and emerging technologies, such as those linked to energy and resource efficiency.

Regional Balance: The innovation investments within the City and Growth Deals deliver a further element of the economic infrastructure which transcends geographical location to benefit all people of Northern Ireland. Our sectoral strengths and capabilities that deliver global competitiveness can support delivery of the Sub-Regional Economic Plan.

All three centres will contribute to productivity and creation of high-quality jobs, and leverage funding and investment from outside of Northern Ireland. Examples of these successes to date include:

The Advanced Manufacturing Innovation Centre (AMIC) has leveraged more than £12 million from outside of Northern Ireland and is part of collaborative bids across the UK and Ireland. The Smart Industry Readiness Index (SIRI) pilot has provided an assessment and roadmap to bring Industry 4.0 technology into companies across Northern Ireland. Partnerships with Mid Ulster MEGA (Manufacturing and Engineering Growth & Advancement) and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council support growth of strong clusters of advanced manufacturing. AMIC is equipping students and educators with skills for the future of manufacturing and technology through the Pathways School project.

iREACH Health will provide infrastructure that has been lacking in the past to facilitate trials that are quick to set up and digitally integrated. iREACH Health will make use of thematic registries to match potential patients to trials across Northern Ireland, resulting in better health outcomes. A focus on digital integration of trials will allow remote participation in relevant trials. A significant US-based anchor tenant has committed to investment in Northern Ireland as part of iREACH Health.

Momentum One Zero (M1.0) is increasing innovation activity across the region, undertaking launch projects that bring together industry, government, communities and third sector alongside problem-solving capabilities in secure, connected intelligence, addressing challenges related to e.g. dementia, data analysis skills for environmental health. A £6.5 million grant has been secured to model UK supply chains as complex systems for resilience, with a range of industry partners, and a significant pipeline of further bids is under development. A significant project is underway with Moy Park and McDonalds to bring an AI-powered video analytics solution to animal welfare in chicken farming, which will be operationalised by local small-to-medium enterprise Cattle Eye.

Social value procurement has been undertaken through the Integrated Consulting Teams and contractors, which has already seen increased internships and apprenticeships, investment in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) summer schemes for children from disadvantaged communities.

Queen's University also occupies a unique position in the inclusive economic development and health research ecosystem in Northern Ireland. In the space where health-based initiatives can also have real economic benefits – where improvements in productivity can have real impacts on the health care system, waiting lists, and system efficiencies – we propose the following actions:

RECOMMENDATION 10:

Stimulate productivity and good job creation - the Future Medicines Institute at Queen's, which will be launched in December 2024, will drive cluster development for the life and health science sector in Northern Ireland – specifically in the area of precision medicine. Its focus on transforming the productivity of NI companies through supporting R&D to enhance product development and evaluation will be critical in safeguarding and creating new high value jobs with “deep roots” to the region. It will also act as a beacon for foreign direct investment to the region and help advertise our strengths in precision medicine globally. We urge government to build on its investment and to work with the University on reducing the opportunity risk to support our regional companies in undertaking R&D that will transform their own productivity and competitiveness.

RECOMMENDATION 11:

Promote Clinical Trials - we urge the Department of Health to prioritise Northern Ireland as a hub for commercial clinical trials, which will attract global pharmaceutical investment. Such a strategy will increase income for the health and care system, deliver tangible health improvements, raise clinical standards and contribute to recruitment and retention of health and care staff. We have a generational opportunity to make Northern Ireland a ‘region of choice’ for global pharma to come to recruit to clinical trials – offering patients across NI an equitable access to cutting edge treatments. The Belfast City Region Deal and the iREACH programme in particular offers vital infrastructure to act as a focal point for such an ambition. Investing in making clinical trials process as efficient as possible can substantially boost the return on investment of these high-profile infrastructure investments.

RECOMMENDATION 12:

Support SMEs and Spin-Outs in Life and Health Sciences - Queen's University's spin-outs have demonstrated value, and targeted support for small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) in life sciences will catalyse economic growth. Queen's has routinely appeared in the top three universities in the UK for spinout activity, the majority of which is in Life and Health Sciences. The development of the Future Medicines Institute offers an unparalleled opportunity to help these early stage companies with unparalleled access to expertise, facilities and crucially business experience in company development

RECOMMENDATION 13:

Invest in Biomanufacturing - adding biomanufacturing capabilities would complement the Belfast Region City Deal and the Future Medicines Institute infrastructure, positioning Northern Ireland as a leader in biomedical manufacturing. While we have an excellent track record in starting companies, the next stage in our productivity enhancement will be through transforming our ability to scale (e.g. manufacturing). Investment in scale-up facilities as well as harnessing the expertise that exists within Queen's will accelerate the process of bringing products to a global market. Looking at best-practice elsewhere, such as IBioC in Scotland, can provide a template for growth across the bioeconomy, developing products and processes that deliver solutions to human and planetary health. An important facet of this will be in complex drug manufacture, capturing new emerging markets that are non-replicated in the Republic of Ireland or Great Britain – creating high value expertise and jobs in the region.

“Momentum One Zero (M1.0) is increasing innovation activity across the region”

RECOMMENDATION 14:

Establish a Co-Centre for Precision Medicine - based on the successful Co-Centres in climate and food security at Queen's, and building on our strengths in precision medicine, we advocate for the establishment of a cross-border Co-Centre for Precision Medicine, in collaboration with Irish and UK governments. This would accelerate advancements and promote cross-national research partnerships and attract further inward investment into Northern Ireland. Precision Medicine has been recognised by the Department for the Economy, the Life and Health Sciences Sector Plan and the recent Matrix report as a particular area of strength and so such a Co-Centre would further drive our upward trajectory.

CUT HEALTH WAITING TIMES

As recognised in the draft PfG, increasing funding will not solve the challenges in our health service, particularly the stubborn problem of waiting lists. Instead, an evidence-based transformation of services is required with improvements to performance and productivity through the quality and consistency of healthcare.

Our world-leading researchers focus on the development and treatment of new avenues for the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of major public health problems that affect millions of people globally.

Recommendations in this area include:

RECOMMENDATION 15:

Use AI to Address Waiting Lists - AI solutions can help analyse waiting time data to identify symptoms or conditions manageable within primary care, reducing unnecessary referrals. Expanding clinical trial participation for those on waiting lists would also improve patient outcomes and healthcare delivery.

RECOMMENDATION 16:

Emphasise Prevention in Communities and Primary Care - prioritising primary care and preventive measures is essential for a healthier province. However, we were disappointed by the lack of specific actions within this agenda. Our work in nutrition, green and blue spaces, and public health can play a central role here. Additional measures, such as policies on smoking, vaping, and minimum alcohol pricing, would provide immediate health benefits and reduce demand on secondary care.

RECOMMENDATION 17:

Leverage Real-Time Health Data - Northern Ireland's access to real-time healthcare data enables the tracking of health improvements, even in preventive policies. Evidence from Scotland demonstrates the near-term benefits of such measures, as shown by reductions in cardiovascular and respiratory mortality following smoking bans. Health data can also identify 'hot spots' of high prevalence of key risk factors to support targeted community action on prevention. Queen's has expertise in such approaches. Another important asset is the NI Cancer Registry that has been hosted by Queen's for over 20 years. One important feature of the NI Cancer Registry is the inclusion of pre-malignant states, such as Barrett's oesophagus. Given the emphasis on prevention and early detection within the draft PfG sustained funding and support for the Registry will add to the evidence base to support specific prevention programmes in these high-risk individuals.

RECOMMENDATION 18:

Diversify the workforce to cut waiting times - Northern Ireland needs a wider range of health professionals to deliver timely prevention and treatment. We propose a new training course for oral therapists who can bring primary care dentistry to underserved communities (avoiding extractions under anaesthetic for thousands of children). We want to train more prescribing pharmacists, and other advanced practitioners to provide timely care and reduce waiting times. Health professionals should reflect the community which they serve and we want to widen access to courses in medicine and dentistry to young people from economically disadvantaged communities. This will require subsidised tuition fees but these young people are likely to practice in Northern Ireland when they qualify, justifying this investment. All graduates in medicine and dentistry should have access to a training post in Northern Ireland when they qualify and this, combined with family-friendly contracts, will encourage our graduates to stay in Northern Ireland.

“an evidence-based transformation of services is required”

More broadly, there are several interventions that have the potential not only to reduce waiting lists and deliver efficiencies across the health service, but also feed into the ambition in the draft PfG to transform public services. These include:

RECOMMENDATION 19:

Utilise Big Data for Public Service Evolution - Long-term population studies, like the Northern Ireland Cohort for the Longitudinal Study of Aging (NICOLA) study provide essential insights into health and aging (see below) and is a good example of where, as we develop future plans for public services in NI, we need to generate local data to inform future health and care needs. For example, Queen's is developing solutions to accelerate the time from discovery to deployment of new diagnostics in the health and care system.

RECOMMENDATION 20:

Invest in Interprofessional Training - the future of health and care services relies on multiprofessional teamwork. Our InterSim facility (KN Cheung SK Chin InterSim Centre | KN Cheung SK Chin InterSim Centre) provides cutting-edge interprofessional simulation training; a model that, if supported, could establish best practices across the healthcare system especially in critical areas such as surgical, maternity and mental health emergencies where multi-professional working needs to be fully optimised to avoid adverse events.

RECOMMENDATION 21:

Evaluate Risks of Expanding Private Providers - while private providers could offer rapid solutions, such initiatives must be carefully evaluated to avoid undermining NHS services. Such solutions may destabilise local services where a specialised workforce will be cannibalised into private providers and undermine public services that have grown over many years.

RECOMMENDATION 22:

Address Aging Population Needs - Northern Ireland is one of the most rapidly aging regions in the UK, with projections indicating that by 2040 it will have the highest proportion of people over 65 in the country. The NICOLA study has been instrumental in expanding our knowledge of the aging process and identifying interventions to promote healthy aging. Sustained funding and potential expansion of this invaluable resource will enhance its impact, equipping policymakers and healthcare providers to meet the growing healthcare needs of Northern Ireland's aging population effectively.

**CASE STUDY:
THE ROLE OF iREACH HEALTH
IN REDUCING WAITING LISTS**

The ecosystem created by iREACH Health will allow clinicians and researchers to collaborate to identify the priority healthcare challenges. This will facilitate the design and prioritisation of research that will address these challenges right across the pipeline of studies from discovery through to translation into clinical trials.

By facilitating clinical trials and studies, the centre can have a measurable impact to reduce waiting times for patients participating in research. Patients participating in trials often receive treatment sooner than they would through standard care pathways, especially for conditions where there are limited options. These patients access novel treatments that would otherwise be accessible only after prolonged waits through standard care pathways.

In a recent study, the Northern Ireland Clinical Research Facility conducted clinical trials for Vertex, a therapy for cystic fibrosis. Participants were afforded early-access to a novel drug that has since been confirmed to vastly improve patient quality of life and longevity. The impact of similar novel therapies which have a dramatic improvement on the management of chronic illnesses such as CF, Asthma, Macular Degeneration may also have a downstream impact of relieving pressure on the healthcare service in terms of the time and resources saved compared to conventional methods of management for such illnesses.

The centre will help train healthcare professionals in research skills, which could indirectly contribute to more effective healthcare delivery, improving operational efficiencies and, by extension, waiting times.

An additional impact will be afforded by the fact that iREACH Health will secure Belfast City Hospital's status as a Research-active hospital. Research-active hospitals attract the most expert clinicians and retain them within the NHS-HSC. This will have an additional positive impact on the day-to-day operations of the hospital and help to alleviate waiting times.



DELIVER MORE AFFORDABLE CHILDCARE

The inclusion of affordable childcare as an immediate priority is welcome, with the Northern Ireland Childcare Support Scheme (NICSS) already having a tangible impact for parents of qualifying children since its introduction in September 2024. There is clear and consistent evidence on the labour market barriers faced by women, including return to work and career progression, with significant implications for productivity levels and economic growth. This was most recently illustrated in research carried out by Queen's assessing the impact of parental leave policies on a range of labour market outcomes for both men and women using the UK household longitudinal study for 12 consecutive waves, 2010-2021.

We agree with the intention to collect data, monitor and evaluate interventions such as the NICSS and other policy developments in this area. One of the main barriers to research and evidence-based policy solutions is the lack of data on childcare (especially on the price of childcare), with significant gaps in knowledge around childcare usage, type, demand, supply, and price.

In addition, subsidising childcare often focuses on the demand side of the market (making childcare more affordable for parents to use). This is certainly important, but sometimes the supply side of the market gets neglected. Evidence from other countries clearly shows that subsidising childcare (that makes it more affordable) further increases demand for childcare places, but this must be matched by increased supply of childcare places.

If there is no increase in childcare places (or even a delay) then the increased demand will drive up the price of childcare, thus rendering the subsidy intervention much less effective. Subsidising childcare by itself, without increasing childcare providers and places, may make the situation worse.

RECOMMENDATION 23:

Funding to childcare providers should be linked to increased places to increase the supply of childcare.

More broadly, the draft PfG does not mention the increasing burden on individuals and households related to informal caregiving. The increasing burden of informal care is predominantly falling on women in their mid-40s to mid-50s and constitutes another negative shock to women's labour force participation and labour market outcomes that contribute to the persistence of the gender employment gap.

“significant gaps in knowledge around childcare usage, type, demand, supply, and price”

PROVIDE MORE SOCIAL, AFFORDABLE AND SUSTAINABLE HOUSING

Queen's academics have been involved in driving the policy debate on community wealth building, including shaping recommendations made in the 2022 by the Independent Advisory Panel on Community Wealth Building. Recommendations in this report emphasised the importance of regulatory change including community right to buy legislation, technical support for community housing schemes and brokering access to national social finance.

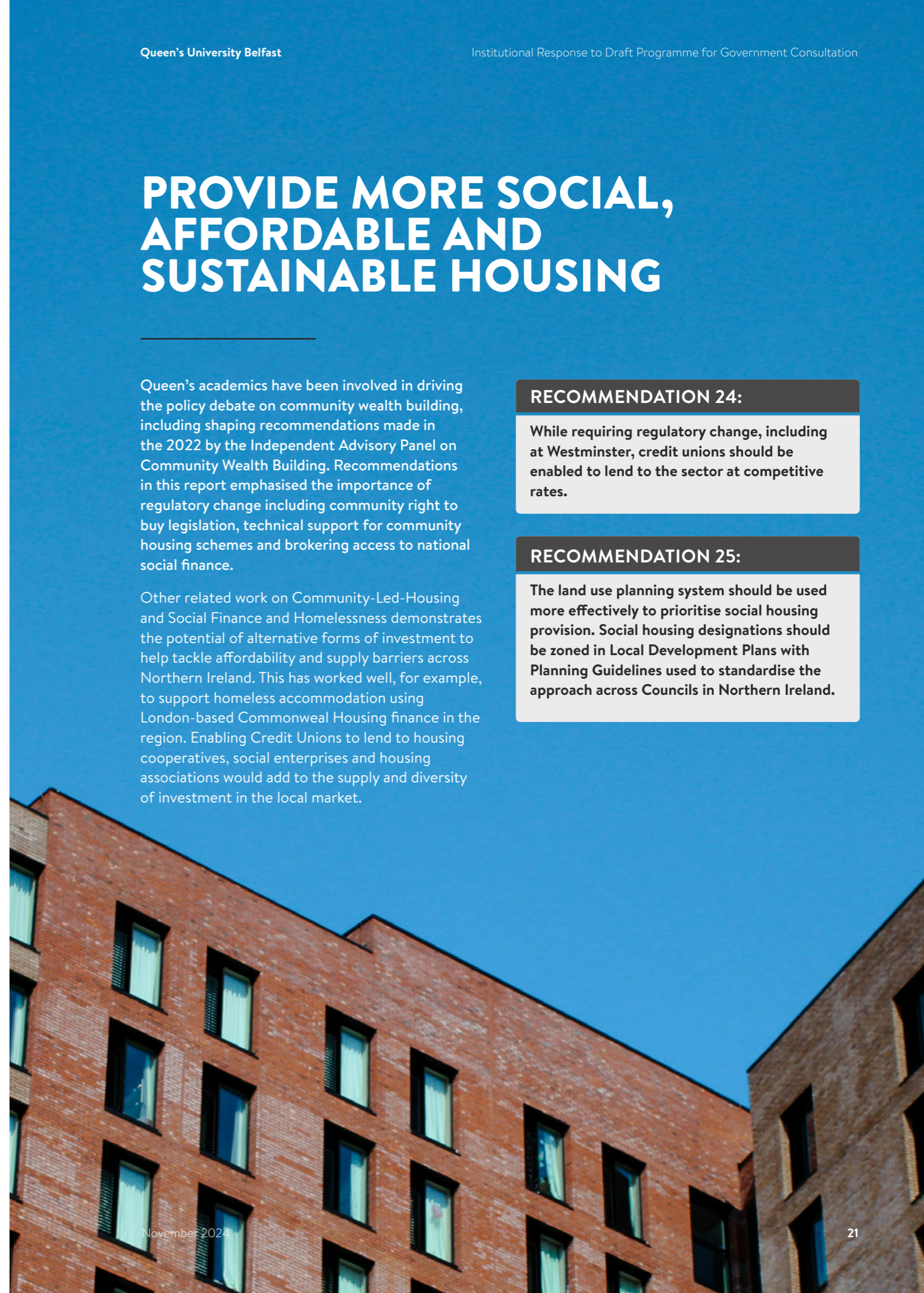
Other related work on Community-Led-Housing and Social Finance and Homelessness demonstrates the potential of alternative forms of investment to help tackle affordability and supply barriers across Northern Ireland. This has worked well, for example, to support homeless accommodation using London-based Commonweal Housing finance in the region. Enabling Credit Unions to lend to housing cooperatives, social enterprises and housing associations would add to the supply and diversity of investment in the local market.

RECOMMENDATION 24:

While requiring regulatory change, including at Westminster, credit unions should be enabled to lend to the sector at competitive rates.

RECOMMENDATION 25:

The land use planning system should be used more effectively to prioritise social housing provision. Social housing designations should be zoned in Local Development Plans with Planning Guidelines used to standardise the approach across Councils in Northern Ireland.



SAFER COMMUNITIES

Queen's academics have been involved in a range of projects that seek to build more cohesive, safer and outwardly mobile communities. Our flagship initiative, Queen's Communities and Place (QCAP), launched in 2021, is a key vehicle in realising the power of higher education in tackling complex local and societal challenges. QCAP uses a 'place-based approach' to create collaborative solutions to persistent challenges such as deprivation and inequality in health and education. This approach enables a model of place-based working that responds to community need, which has as its core the ambition for communities to be safer and attractive places to live and work.

In the draft PFG there is a disconnect between the issues (as they relate to socio-economic deprivation and which are deeply embedded cultural, social, and educational issues) and actions set out to solve them. For example, the 'speeding up justice programme' does not deal with the root causes of domestic violence, paramilitarism or victimisation. Or in other terms, 'faster' justice does not mean more effective justice. Similarly, the idea of investing in digital capabilities is welcome. However, the idea of 'joined up justice' has been advocated for since the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act and its provisions relating to information sharing between government agencies.

RECOMMENDATION 26:

There should be more emphasis on a 'pipeline' approach to information sharing between statutory agencies (and the systems to back that up) about offenders and victims may better identify and provide early interventions for more vulnerable groups.

The proposal to 'ensure adequate resources within our justice agencies' does not take account of the fact there are very limited resources to go round the whole justice system. Therefore, giving more resources in terms of blunt aspirations around police officer numbers, for example, does not fix in the short or even medium term, PSNI investigative abilities to deal with digital crime or domestic violence. In addition, if the finite criminal resources that exist go to PSNI in the main, it doesn't support the courts to process offenders, or probation to manage them, or the prisons to hold them. Current evidence, including the NI Peace Monitoring Report, illustrates that delays in the court system and poor prison conditions are not helping victims or offenders.

RECOMMENDATION 27:

Fully joined-up systems across the criminal justice sector to support above, as well as the proposed cross-governmental strategy to reduce offending and reoffending.

In conclusion, engagement on evidence-informed interventions in the criminal justice sector is currently undertaken in a limited and piecemeal fashion. We would like to see a commitment in the draft PFG to strategic partnerships with universities where so much expertise resides.

PROTECT LOUGH NEAGH AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Many of the actions that are required to address the issues in Lough Neagh will confer co-benefits on issues such as climate action and biodiversity loss. Similarly, these actions will translate into benefits for communities in terms of increases in wellbeing across mental and physical health outcomes, societal cohesion and community development, job and wealth creation, as well as a decrease in the inequalities in society.

The draft PFG quite rightly recognises the vital importance of Northern Ireland in terms of food security. However, agri-food is also problematic from a climate and biodiversity viewpoint and constrains the economy in terms of productivity. Northern Ireland is increasingly becoming a feed importer and protein exporter with wastes accumulating in the region with commensurate pollution impacts. In this context, it is critical that research and development and innovation is supported to deliver new value streams into the agri-food sector to address both these problems. Actions which broadly support the status quo will not deliver on the economic mission or address Lough Neagh.

RECOMMENDATION 28:

The Further and Higher Education sectors are critical, and more action is needed to link with CAFRE/AFBI to support the development of next generation technologies and systems which can support a sectoral transition/evolution.

RECOMMENDATION 29:

Scale up proven solutions such as extensive applied DNA sequencing technologies, using infrastructure developed under the NI SARS-CoV-2 wastewater programme, to identify strains of cyanobacteria responsible for algal blooms, and those other pathogens present within Lough Neagh.

RECOMMENDATION 30:

Implement behavioural change programmes. We propose collaborating with government to develop and implement a behavioural change programme aimed at promoting environmentally friendly agricultural practices. By engaging farmers and local stakeholders in education and support initiatives, we can collectively reduce harmful run-off Lough Neagh, supporting long-term ecosystem health while safeguarding the livelihoods of those who depend on agriculture. Our Agricultural Technology degree in partnership with CAFRE, ranked 1st in the UK, offers the ability to educate future generations of farmers in agricultural and environmental best practice. Through IGFS and through the QUB-AFBI Alliance we can also offer targeted training and workshops on mitigations that can address the core causes of the Lough Neagh challenge - including invasive species and phosphorus cycling.

RECOMMENDATION 31:

Address broader environmental and carbon reduction measures. The Lough Neagh ecosystem does not exist in isolation but is part of a broader environmental landscape impacted by issues like carbon emissions and climate change. To achieve sustainable, long-term health for the lake, broader environmental policies that address carbon reduction and sustainable land use are essential. We recommend a strategic approach that aligns with regional and national carbon targets, thereby enhancing the resilience of ecosystems like Lough Neagh while advancing wider environmental goals. Queen's is ready to collaborate on research and implementation strategies that can integrate these measures into the restoration efforts.

PLANET AS A CROSS-CUTTING THEME

Returning to the recommendation to include planet as a cross-cutting theme along with peace, climate change and biodiversity loss threaten this peace at every level – social, economic, and political. By elevating these issues to cross-cutting themes within the draft PfG, Northern Ireland can ensure that every department, policy, and budget is geared toward mitigating these existential threats. This integrated approach not only supports and increases wellbeing but is also essential for leaving a legacy of peace, stability, and environmental resilience for generations to come.

The rationale for this is outlined below:

CLIMATE AND NATURE AS FOUNDATIONS FOR PEACE

Climate change and biodiversity loss represent existential threats to societies worldwide. If climate and nature are not positioned as cross-cutting themes within the draft PfG, the resulting ecological and societal breakdowns could destabilise communities, amplify inequalities, and strain resources. This directly risks the peace Northern Ireland has worked so hard to achieve, as ecological degradation affects all other societal priorities: health, economic stability, and community cohesion. These effects are manifest in Lough Neagh.

CLIMATE AND NATURE UNDERPIN SOCIETAL STABILITY AND RESILIENCE

The health of natural systems – clean air, water, and a stable climate – are fundamental to societal well-being and security. As climate instability grows as predicted, it will further exacerbate environmental degradation that results from direct human activities, and will fuel economic challenges, food and water insecurity, and health crises. These cascading effects disproportionately affect vulnerable communities, leading to heightened inequality and social unrest, which can increase sectarian divisions. Including climate action and nature conservation as an embedded cross-cutting theme spanning government departments and missions will promote resilience and help communities adapt to these growing pressures.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY LOSS ARE SECURITY ISSUES

Globally, climate change has been identified as a “threat multiplier” by defence and security agencies, and the same applies within Northern Ireland. Rising sea levels, extreme weather, and declining natural resources will exacerbate existing tensions and create new forms of displacement and competition over resources (e.g. low-lying housing estates in areas of social deprivation are likely to be most affected by rising sea levels). In a region with a history of conflict, these environmental stresses have the potential to revive or escalate old grievances, especially as different communities are unequally impacted. Incorporating these issues across all government sectors is therefore necessary to prevent conflict, reinforcing Northern Ireland’s peace efforts.

ECONOMIC PROSPERITY DEPENDS ON CLIMATE AND BIODIVERSITY RESILIENCE

A thriving, resilient economy is essential for lasting peace, and this depends on sustainable environmental stewardship. Biodiversity and climate resilience support essential industries, including agriculture and tourism, which are key components of Northern Ireland’s economy. Without cross-sectoral climate and biodiversity action, these sectors face decline, resulting in economic hardship and job losses, which historically correlate with social unrest. Making climate and biodiversity cross-cutting priorities would drive green innovation

and sustainable job creation, reducing economic vulnerabilities and supporting a peaceful, stable society.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL COHESION RELY ON A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT

Environmental degradation directly impacts health, increasing the prevalence of respiratory diseases, heat stress, and mental health challenges due to climate-related extreme events. These health impacts place additional strain on healthcare systems, exacerbating waiting times and access issues. By integrating climate and biodiversity goals across all departments, from health to housing, Northern Ireland can foster environments that support physical and mental health, which are crucial for social cohesion and reducing community tensions. Healthy, equitable communities are more resilient to the shocks that might otherwise destabilise peace.

CLIMATE AND BIODIVERSITY ACTION CAN UNIFY COMMUNITIES

Incorporating climate and biodiversity as cross-cutting themes can foster a sense of shared purpose and unity across Northern Ireland’s diverse communities. Environmental initiatives, like community-based climate adaptation projects or shared conservation efforts, provide opportunities for people from different backgrounds to work together, build trust, and strengthen relationships. This approach can help bridge historic divides and contribute to peacebuilding by fostering positive, cooperative interactions through common environmental goals.

FUTURE GENERATIONS DEPEND ON IMMEDIATE, INTEGRATED ACTION

Failing to make climate and nature cross-cutting themes risks a legacy of environmental collapse and social disintegration for future generations. Integrating these issues across government departments ensures that every aspect of public policy – education, infrastructure, social services, and beyond – works toward sustainable, long-term solutions. This foresighted approach is essential for establishing a peaceful society that can offer future generations stability and prosperity in an era of climate uncertainty.



REFORM AND TRANSFORMATION OF PUBLIC SERVICES

THE CENTRE FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND ADMINISTRATION (CPPA)

The Centre for Public Policy and Administration (CPPA) has been established to build on the existing and significant impact Queen's has on public policy globally by working in a more structured way with policymakers. We are keen to use our expertise and research to help develop solutions to the increasingly complex policy challenges we face as a society, collaborating with others as part of the wider policy evidence ecosystem. This is consistent with best practice internationally where there are now rich networks and methods of engagement between academia and the public service.

We welcome the formation of the Reform and Transformation Unit, and we are keen to support its work in effecting change and ensuring delivery.

The formation of the CPPA aligns with the transformation agenda in offering new ways of working, improving engagement between academics and policymakers, and optimising the value of publicly funded research for maximum social, economic and environmental benefit. We have expertise in affecting change in the delivery of public services through Professor Muiris MacCarthaigh who has worked closely with the Irish Government on its public sector reform agenda from 2011 onwards.

International evidence also points to the need for a strong central political forum for accountability in the implementation of reform. Best practice suggests this is chaired by the most senior political authority and to whom regular updates on achievement of the reform plan are presented. This was the basis for Tony Blair's successful Delivery Unit (2001-2005), led by Sir Michael Barber. The success of the Delivery Unit was attributed to a couple of key factors including sustained commitment from political leaders and having an effective and trusted change leader. We would add to that, detailed planning, programming and expert resource. Similarly, the Irish Cabinet Committee

on Public Service Reform (2011-16) provided a very useful forum for addressing barriers to reform implementation during that period.

It is acknowledged that we are too often bound by an imperative to develop short-term fixes rather than delivering sustainable change. The new Labour Government has set out its intention for longer-term mission-based plans to avoid such "sticking plaster" policies. This draft PfG provides an opportunity to engage with policymakers in a more sustained, longer-term way.

Harnessing innovation to drive changes in the way citizens and business experience government and public services, will mean reaching out beyond traditional sources of information and ideas, and engaging with researchers to develop new ideas in relation to such issues as digital transformation, responsive or agile governance, the design of policy interventions, and new modes of democratic decision-making. Universities provide a natural home for providing evidence to help with reform and transformation programmes.

Next steps:

As the Executive seeks to develop its reform agenda, the Centre for Public Policy and Administration can offer the following practical supports:

- Access to extensive national and international research networks to identify best practice across the range of government activity
- Utilise the convening power of Queen's to bring together relevant stakeholders for facilitated discussions in a secure, constructive and collaborative environment
- Engage in primary research, data-generation and knowledge synthesis activities
- Produce rapid evidence policy briefs
- Organise and facilitate policy-relevant seminars
- Provide a wide range of education programmes and bespoke training and development programmes

END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Young women experience violence in all forms and in all places. They report significantly higher levels of sexual, psychological and online violence than young men. This violence prevents the fulfilment of their rights under the UNCRC and there is a proactive obligation on governments to prevent violence and the violation of human rights. The inclusion of ending violence against women and girls is therefore welcome and demonstrates the Executive's commitment to a pressing social issue that has for too long been sidelined.

A 2023 research study led by Queen's with 268 girls and young women illustrated the scale of violence girls and young women experience persistently and from a young age (73% reported having experienced violence in their lifetime). Violence was so embedded in their lives and legitimised through routines and cultures of misogyny and denial, that they often did not recognise it. This research, commissioned by The Executive Office, was fundamental in informing the Executive's Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls.

Girls and young women cannot seek support, and violence cannot be responded to if it is not named, recognised and called out. Similarly for boys and young men, education and early intervention is essential. If young men do not recognise the breadth and depth of what we mean by violence against women and girls, they may not recognise attitudes and behaviours as harmful.

Our research has shown that education that is piecemeal, non-engaging and which does not reflect the reality of young people's lives is not effective. That most girls and young women did not remember receiving formal education around healthy relationships and violence, reveals much about the nature of current provision. That which they did remember and find useful tended to be in youth and community settings where discussion, nuance and application were actively encouraged. However, this tended to be directed only towards girls, reinforcing

wider social messages of personal responsibility and that the work of violence prevention is a women's issue.

While it is encouraging that prevention is fundamental to this priority, and that the role of the community and voluntary sector is recognised, the level of funding directed towards this is unclear. Much of the work in this area has been responsive rather than proactive and preventative. This shift in focus is essential to end rather than simply respond to this violence. Community and voluntary sector groups who have the skills to do this work must be adequately resourced.

RECOMMENDATION 32:

A focus on early education, intervention and prevention is critical. In addition, girls and young women experience violence in similar and different ways to adult women. It is important therefore to recognise the intersection of age in gender in information, training, campaigns and resourcing. This work requires sustained funding and inclusion in subsequent Programmes for Government.

RECOMMENDATION 33:

Schools have a vital role to play in not only educating young people about healthy relationships and the meaning and impacts of violence, but in actively calling out 'everyday violence' within the school setting. There is a role for educating adults, as well as children and young people.

BETTER SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

As the draft PFG has identified, the number of children and young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN), as well as the complexity of issues, has grown. Research by Queen's academics has informed the findings and recommendations of the recent Independent Review of Education, especially the experiences of education among minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland as they relate to SEN.

Flowing from this report, the Minister of Education has committed to service reform for children and young people with SEN. Queen's academics are committed to supporting this reform. Our Master of Education (MEd) postgraduate taught course on Inclusion and Special Education Needs is a key support mechanism in future policy delivery and workforce planning in this area, equipping students with an understanding of the diverse needs of learners within today's schools, colleges and universities as well as helping students study and apply an approach to wellbeing that has been developed by some of the world's leading thinkers.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

THE MISSIONS	
RECOMMENDATION 1	It would be more appropriate to treat 'Planet' as a cross-cutting theme in the same way that peace is treated. Peace will be impossible to achieve in the face of the existential threats of climate change, biodiversity loss and water quality declines, which have the potential to undermine societal cohesion and the peace that so many in Northern Ireland have worked towards.
GROW A GLOBALLY COMPETITIVE AND SUSTAINABLE ECONOMY	
RECOMMENDATION 2	Productivity becomes the core focus within this priority area.
RECOMMENDATION 3	The ownership for improving productivity should be cross-cutting and not the sole responsibility of the Department for the Economy.
RECOMMENDATION 4	The Executive should set targets for, and measure labour productivity growth, and total factor productivity growth. The latter measure is important if the Executive wants to understand the effect of innovation and technology adoption on productivity. These measures should be included within the PFG's Wellbeing Framework, and should be published on the associated Wellbeing Dashboard, under the Stronger Economy domain.
RECOMMENDATION 5	Establish an independent Productivity Commission to both advise and guide the Executive's policy with regards to economic growth and prosperity. Such a commission exists in many countries, with the Republic of Ireland's National Competitiveness and Productivity Council and Australia's Productivity Commission being two very successful examples of this.
RECOMMENDATION 6	Queen's have submitted a consultation response to the Department for the Economy's Review of the Northern Ireland Postgraduate Award (PGA) Scheme which included a number of views and recommendations, including the University's preference for any outcome that results in continued and enhanced support for the PGA Scheme, while also ensuring the sustainability of QR/ HEIF funding.
RECOMMENDATION 7	Queen's believe that a wider conversation comprising not only undergraduate provision in the North West but postgraduate and research provision across the region should be initiated. A triple helix partnership between Government, Business and Universities in this space can supercharge the economic priorities of the Department and the Executive and deliver for businesses and communities in every part of Northern Ireland over the next eight to ten years.

RECOMMENDATION 8	Move to a 'just evolution' approach which specifically seeks to transition the economy to a state which can thrive within a decarbonised net-zero future. Delivering a just evolution can be enabled by supporting a sequence of complementary interventions which amplify each other to catalyse smart economic transformation and evolution across Northern Ireland. Critical is the enabling ecosystem which enhances cross-community and interdisciplinary research from across the UK, Ireland and international institutions. A research, development and innovation (R&D&I) ecosystem is critical and can address technological and social needs through a targeted portfolio of product and process innovations aligned to decarbonisation and deliver this in a balanced way across the region, creating good jobs with increased productivity.
RECOMMENDATION 9	Significantly increase renewables to evolve Northern Ireland into a higher value green economy particularly in areas such as advanced manufacturing and stronger connectivity to UK, Ireland and EU supplies is necessary. The Higher Education sector is well placed to support in this through the development of smart digital technologies to support energy movements, hydrogen and e-fuels, as well as in construction and planning.
RECOMMENDATION 10	Stimulate productivity and good job creation - the Future Medicines Institute at Queen's, which will be launched in December 2024, will drive cluster development for the life and health science sector in Northern Ireland – specifically in the area of precision medicine. Its focus on transforming the productivity of NI companies through supporting R&D to enhance product development and evaluation will be critical in safeguarding and creating new high value jobs with “deep roots” to the region. It will also act as a beacon for foreign direct investment to the region and help advertise our strengths in precision medicine globally. We urge government to build on its investment and to work with the University on reducing the opportunity risk to support our regional companies in undertaking R&D that will transform their own productivity and competitiveness.
RECOMMENDATION 11	Promote Clinical Trials - we urge the Department of Health to prioritise Northern Ireland as a hub for commercial clinical trials, which will attract global pharmaceutical investment. Such a strategy will increase income for the health and care system, deliver tangible health improvements, raise clinical standards and contribute to recruitment and retention of health and care staff. We have a generational opportunity to make Northern Ireland a 'region of choice' for global pharma to come to recruit to clinical trials – offering patients across NI an equitable access to cutting edge treatments. The Belfast City Region Deal and the iREACH programme in particular offers vital infrastructure to act as a focal point for such an ambition. Investing in making clinical trials process as efficient as possible can substantially boost the return on investment of these high-profile infrastructure investments.

RECOMMENDATION 12	Support SMEs and Spin-Outs in Life and Health Sciences - the University's spin-outs have demonstrated value, and targeted support for small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) in life sciences will catalyse economic growth. Queen's has routinely appeared in the top three universities in the UK for spinout activity, the majority of which is in Life and Health Sciences. The development of the Future Medicines Institute offers an unparalleled opportunity to help these early stage companies with unparalleled access to expertise, facilities and crucially business experience in company development.
RECOMMENDATION 13	Invest in Biomanufacturing - adding biomanufacturing capabilities would complement the Belfast Region City Deal and the Future Medicines Institute infrastructure, positioning Northern Ireland as a leader in biomedical manufacturing. While we have an excellent track record in starting companies, the next stage in our productivity enhancement will be through transforming our ability to scale (e.g. manufacturing). Investment in scale-up facilities as well as harnessing the expertise that exists within Queen's will accelerate the process of bringing products to a global market. Looking at best-practice elsewhere, such as IBioC in Scotland, can provide a template for growth across the bioeconomy, developing products and processes that deliver solutions to human and planetary health. An important facet of this will be in complex drug manufacture, capturing new emerging markets that are non-replicated in the Republic of Ireland or Great Britain – creating high value expertise and jobs in the region.
RECOMMENDATION 14	Establish a Co-Centre for Precision Medicine - based on the successful Co-Centres in climate and food security at Queen's, and building on our strengths in precision medicine, we advocate for the establishment of a cross-border Co-Centre for Precision Medicine, in collaboration with Irish and UK governments. This would accelerate advancements and promote cross-national research partnerships and attract further inward investment into Northern Ireland. Precision Medicine has been recognised by the Department for the Economy, the Life and Health Sciences Sector Plan and the recent Matrix report as a particular area of strength and so such a Co-Centre would further drive our upward trajectory.
CUT HEALTH WAITING TIMES	
RECOMMENDATION 15	Use AI to Address Waiting Lists - AI solutions can help analyse waiting time data to identify symptoms or conditions manageable within primary care, reducing unnecessary referrals. Expanding clinical trial participation for those on waiting lists would also improve patient outcomes and healthcare delivery.

RECOMMENDATION 16	Emphasise Prevention in Communities and Primary Care - prioritising primary care and preventive measures is essential for a healthier province. However, we were disappointed by the lack of specific actions within this agenda. Our work in nutrition, green and blue spaces, and public health can play a central role here. Additional measures, such as policies on smoking, vaping, and minimum alcohol pricing, would provide immediate health benefits and reduce demand on secondary care.
RECOMMENDATION 17	Leverage Real-Time Health Data - Northern Ireland's access to real-time healthcare data enables the tracking of health improvements, even in preventive policies. Evidence from Scotland demonstrates the near-term benefits of such measures, as shown by reductions in cardiovascular and respiratory mortality following smoking bans. Health data can also identify 'hot spots' of high prevalence of key risk factors to support targeted community action on prevention. Queen's has expertise in such approaches. Another important asset is the NI Cancer Registry that has been hosted by Queen's for over 20 years. One important feature of the NI Cancer Registry is the inclusion of pre-malignant states, such as Barrett's oesophagus. Given the emphasis on prevention and early detection within the draft PfG sustained funding and support for the Registry will add to the evidence base to support specific prevention programmes in these high-risk individuals.
RECOMMENDATION 18	Diversify the workforce to cut waiting times - Northern Ireland needs a wider range of health professionals to deliver timely prevention and treatment. We propose a new training course for oral therapists who can bring primary care dentistry to underserved communities (avoiding extractions under anaesthetic for thousands of children). We want to train more prescribing pharmacists, and other advanced practitioners to provide timely care and reduce waiting times. Health professionals should reflect the community which they serve and we want to widen access to courses in medicine and dentistry to young people from economically disadvantaged communities. This will require subsidised tuition fees but these young people are likely to practice in Northern Ireland when they qualify, justifying this investment. All graduates in medicine and dentistry should have access to a training post in Northern Ireland when they qualify and this, combined with family-friendly contracts, will encourage our graduates to stay in Northern Ireland.
RECOMMENDATION 19	Utilise Big Data for Public Service Evolution - Long-term population studies, like the Northern Ireland Cohort for the Longitudinal Study of Aging (NICOLA) study provide essential insights into health and aging (see below) and is a good example of where, as we develop future plans for public services in NI, we need to generate local data to inform future health and care needs. For example, Queen's is developing solutions to accelerate the time from discovery to deployment of new diagnostics in the health and care system.

RECOMMENDATION 20	Invest in Interprofessional Training - the future of health and care services relies on multiprofessional teamwork. Our InterSim facility (KN Cheung SK Chin InterSim Centre KN Cheung SK Chin InterSim Centre) provides cutting-edge interprofessional simulation training; a model that, if supported, could establish best practices across the healthcare system especially in critical areas such as surgical, maternity and mental health emergencies where multi-professional working needs to be fully optimised to avoid adverse events.
RECOMMENDATION 21	Evaluate Risks of Expanding Private Providers - while private providers could offer rapid solutions, such initiatives must be carefully evaluated to avoid undermining NHS services. Such solutions may destabilise local services where a specialised workforce will be cannibalised into private providers and undermine public services that have grown over many years.
RECOMMENDATION 22	Address Aging Population Needs - Northern Ireland is one of the most rapidly aging regions in the UK, with projections indicating that by 2040 it will have the highest proportion of people over 65 in the country. The NICOLA study has been instrumental in expanding our knowledge of the aging process and identifying interventions to promote healthy aging. Sustained funding and potential expansion of this invaluable resource will enhance its impact, equipping policymakers and healthcare providers to meet the growing healthcare needs of Northern Ireland's aging population effectively.
DELIVER MORE AFFORDABLE CHILDCARE	
RECOMMENDATION 23	Funding to childcare providers should be linked to increased places to increase the supply of childcare.
PROVIDE MORE SOCIAL, AFFORDABLE AND SUSTAINABLE HOUSING	
RECOMMENDATION 24	While requiring regulatory change, including at Westminster, credit unions should be enabled to lend to the sector at competitive rates.
RECOMMENDATION 25	The land use planning system should be used more effectively to prioritise social housing provision. Social housing designations should be zoned in Local Development Plans with Planning Guidelines used to standardise the approach across Councils in Northern Ireland.
SAFER COMMUNITIES	
RECOMMENDATION 26	There should be more emphasis on a 'pipeline' approach to information sharing between statutory agencies (and the systems to back that up) about offenders and victims may better identify and provide early interventions for more vulnerable groups.
RECOMMENDATION 27	Fully joined-up systems across the criminal justice sector to support above, as well as the proposed cross-governmental strategy to reduce offending and reoffending.

PROTECT LOUGH NEAGH AND THE ENVIRONMENT	
RECOMMENDATION 28	The Further and Higher Education sectors are critical, and more action is needed to link with CAFRE/AFBI to support the development of next generation technologies and systems which can support a sectoral transition/evolution.
RECOMMENDATION 29	Scale up proven solutions such as extensive applied DNA sequencing technologies, using infrastructure developed under the NI SARS-CoV-2 wastewater programme, to identify strains of cyanobacteria responsible for algal blooms, and those other pathogens present within Lough Neagh.
RECOMMENDATION 30	Implement behavioural change programmes. We propose collaborating with government to develop and implement a behavioural change programme aimed at promoting environmentally friendly agricultural practices. By engaging farmers and local stakeholders in education and support initiatives, we can collectively reduce harmful run-off Lough Neagh, supporting long-term ecosystem health while safeguarding the livelihoods of those who depend on agriculture. Our Agricultural Technology degree in partnership with CAFRE, ranked 1st in the UK, offers the ability to educate future generations of farmers in agricultural and environmental best practice. Through IGFS and through the QUB-AFBI Alliance we can also offer targeted training and workshops on mitigations that can address the core causes of the Lough Neagh challenge - including invasive species and phosphorus cycling.
RECOMMENDATION 31	Address broader environmental and carbon reduction measures. The Lough Neagh ecosystem does not exist in isolation but is part of a broader environmental landscape impacted by issues like carbon emissions and climate change. To achieve sustainable, long-term health for the lake, broader environmental policies that address carbon reduction and sustainable land use are essential. We recommend a strategic approach that aligns with regional and national carbon targets, thereby enhancing the resilience of ecosystems like Lough Neagh while advancing wider environmental goals. Queen's is ready to collaborate on research and implementation strategies that can integrate these measures into the restoration efforts.
END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS	
RECOMMENDATION 32	A focus on early education, intervention and prevention is critical. In addition, girls and young women experience violence in similar and different ways to adult women. It is important therefore to recognise the intersection of age in gender in information, training, campaigns and resourcing.
RECOMMENDATION 33	Schools have a vital role to play in not only educating young people about healthy relationships and the meaning and impacts of violence, but in actively calling out 'everyday violence' within the school setting. There is a role for educating adults, as well as children and young people.





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