Annual Report

2026

Centre for democracy & peace

Building a better tomorrow



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Chairperson's Remarks

The past year has been an important one for the Centre for Democracy and Peace (CDP), with the fifth anniversary of the Fellowship Programme. It is a milestone worth celebrating, but also an opportunity to reflect on why we started this journey and what we want to achieve in the years ahead.

Northern Ireland has no shortage of talented, ambitious and committed leaders. What we have often lacked are the opportunities to bring those individuals together, across sectors, communities and political traditions, to build relationships and tackle the challenges we share. That is what makes the Fellowship so valuable. It creates the space for people to step outside their everyday responsibilities, challenge their assumptions and develop a greater understanding of the people and perspectives around them.

This year's Fellowship cohort has continued to build on that success, with Fellows developing innovative proposals addressing some of our most pressing societal challenges, including health inequalities, economic inactivity, online safety and public engagement with government. Encouragingly, over 80% of Fellows are already applying what they have learned in their professional or community roles. For me, that is where the real value of the programme lies: not simply in the experience itself, but in the actions, relationships and opportunities that follow. Our fifth anniversary gala dinner in February was also a particular highlight. Bringing together Fellows, alumni, partners and friends of CDP was a powerful reminder of the community we have built over the past five years.

Of course, none of this happens without the commitment of a great many people. I want to thank Eva Grosman and Zachary Hutchinson for their hard work and determination throughout the year. My thanks also go to my fellow Board members, the Fellowship Advisory Board, our corporate partners, funders and the many individuals who generously contribute their time and expertise. I would particularly like to recognise Baroness Ritchie for her leadership of the CDP Board as well as Derek Hynes and Gordon Parkes for their significant contributions to the Fellowship as they step down from the Advisory Board.

As I complete my first year as Chair, I am proud of what we have achieved and excited by the opportunities ahead. We should be ambitious about what the Fellowship and CDP can contribute to Northern Ireland's future. The relationships we are building, the ideas we are generating and the leaders we are supporting all have the potential to make a lasting difference. Our task now is to build on that momentum, strengthen our impact and continue demonstrating what is possible when people work together towards a shared and prosperous future.

Darragh McCarthy
Chair, Centre for Democracy and Peace



Acknowledgments

Our work would not be possible without assistance from many public, private, and community partners. We are truly grateful for all the support we have received this year.

A special thanks to

- Allstate Northern Ireland
- The Embassy of the United Kingdom in Dublin
- Brown O'Connor Communications
- Camlin Group
- Department of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Ireland
- FinTrU
- Fujitsu NI
- Irish American Partnership
- Irish Museum of Modern Art
- Northern Ireland Electricity Networks
- Northern Ireland Office
- Notre Dame Dublin
- The MAC, Belfast
- Trinity College Dublin
- Ulster Carpets
- University of Oxford
- U.S. Consulate General Belfast



About the Centre for Democracy and Peace

The Centre for Democracy and Peace is a charity based in Northern Ireland. Its purpose is to uphold and share the values and principles of democracy in order to build peace, stability, and reconciliation. CDP is committed to supporting the peace process; changing attitudes; building a normal society; and sharing our experience with others in conflict.

CDP's mission is to provide innovative programmes and solutions, based on lessons from the Irish peace process, that enable leaders from across society to respond effectively to social, political, and economic challenges across the globe.

The charitable objectives of the Centre for Democracy and Peace are

- To advance citizenship and community development by upholding and sharing the values and principles of democracy in order to build peace, stability, and reconciliation; and to support leadership within civil society and political parties to address grievances and to build confidence in political institutions.
- To advance human rights, conflict resolution, and reconciliation by the removal of fear from and the offering of hope to divided communities and to create a society with a shared sense of responsibility, opportunity, community, and above all a shared sense of humanity, based upon respect for and tolerance of diversity; and to empower and enable communities to develop bespoke solutions that address and remove the causes of division and violent conflict.
- To advance education by providing a knowledge exchange platform in democracy and peace building to facilitate research and discussion in partnership with government and civil society on the development and implementation of policies and programmes that build a shared and united community; to host a fellowship programme to pass on learning from the peace process generation to current and future leaders; and to capture and document the lessons and experiences from Northern Ireland and other places which have experienced violent political conflicts.

Directors and Executive Team

Chairman Emeritus
- Lord Alderdice

Chair
- Darragh McCarthy

Directors
- Professor Harvey Maylor
- Christina Bates

CEO and Company Secretary
- Eva Grosman

Programme Manager
- Zachary Hutchinson

Website and Graphic Designer
- Irka Laskowska

Fellowship Programme Advisory Board
- Darragh McCarthy
- Nick Coburn
- Dalreen Buchanan
- Derek Hynes
- Gordon Parkes
- Peter Cunningham
- Christina Bates
- Melanie McMordie

Fellowship Forum
- Lord Alderdice
- Baroness Ritchie
- Baroness Goudie
- Lord Hay

Fellowship Programme 25/26

Since 2021, the Fellowship Programme has provided the opportunity to reimagine complex political, business, and civic leadership in Northern Ireland through innovation and capacity building to address the challenges of today for the prosperity of tomorrow.

The 2025/26 Fellowship Programme delivered a strong and transformative experience, strengthening its role in developing civic, political, and business leadership across Northern Ireland. The Class of 2026 engaged deeply with over 80% of Fellows already applying their learning in professional or community contexts. All participants reported a strengthened commitment to driving positive change in Northern Ireland.

Feedback points to significant personal and professional growth, including increased confidence, clearer purpose, and more intentional leadership. With continued refinement, the programme is well-positioned to further expand its role in fostering civic leadership and cross-sector collaboration.







We are once again truly grateful for the support of our partners and sponsors.

Principal funder

An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha
Department of Foreign Affairs
RECONCILIATION FUND

Corporate patrons

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FinTrU
FUJITSU
Northern Ireland Electricity Networks
ulster

Sponsors

Allstate Northern Ireland
IRISH AMERICAN PARTNERSHIP

The programme would also not be possible without the vital support of our Advisory Board:

- Darragh McCarthy – CEO, FinTrU (Chair)
- Nick Coburn – Managing Director, Ulster Carpets
- Dalreen Buchanan – Business Support Manager, Ulster Carpets
- Derek Hynes – Managing Director, NIE Networks
- Gordon Parkes – Executive Director, People & Culture, NIE Networks
- Peter Cunningham – CEO, Camlin Group
- Christina Bates – CFO, Allstate NI
- Melanie McMordie – Managing Director, Fujitsu NI

A special mention this year must go to Derek Hynes and Gordon Parkes who will be stepping down from the advisory board before the 2026/27 programme. Both have been a vital part of the Fellowship's development, and as we celebrate the Fellowship's fifth year with over 120 Fellows part of the alumni network, we are truly grateful for their leadership and friendship. We wish them well as they both embark on new chapters.

To learn more about the Fellowship Programme, please visit our website, Instagram and LinkedIn page to keep up to date with programme announcements.

Design Thinking in action

This year's Design Thinking module featured four group projects:

Change the Odds: Brain Health Strategy

The Red Team's project addresses a central challenge for Northern Ireland: expanding social and economic opportunity so that no family is excluded from prosperity. It proposes Change the Odds, a prevention-first, life-course approach to brain health that tackles rising inequality, economic inactivity and growing pressure on public services. Dementia and related conditions already cost Northern Ireland around £1 billion annually, yet evidence suggests up to 45% of cases are preventable through action on modifiable risk factors. The project identifies a fragmented and reactive system in which effective initiatives operate in silos and intervene too late. The solution is a proactive, 10-year, TEO-led Brain Health Strategy that acts as a unifying framework across health, education, communities and the economy. By aligning existing action and enabling prevention to compound over time, the strategy reframes brain health from inevitability to agency. Even modest progress could reduce caring pressures, support workforce participation and deliver substantial long-term savings. Brain health is positioned not only as a health issue, but as a people-centred prosperity strategy grounded in prevention and equity.

ALIGN: Strategic governance tool

Northern Ireland faces severe health inequalities driven by social determinants beyond healthcare access. These impact on all elements of social and economic progress. Despite significant investment in sound, data-informed intervention programmes, the life expectancy gap between the wealthiest and most disadvantaged people hasn't closed. ALIGN is a strategic governance tool designed to integrate reporting across government departments, which would support a more cohesive approach to planning, leading to better population health outcomes through coordinated, data-driven decisions. If adopted now, ALIGN could be implemented to support a new programme for government from May 2027.

True North: AI-enabled safeguarding initiative

True North is an AI-enabled safeguarding initiative designed to tackle the growing influence of toxic online male role models and the risks they pose to young people, women's safety, and social cohesion. It offers a platform-agnostic algorithmic framework that detects, disrupts, and redirects harmful influence patterns while amplifying positive male role models and healthy identity narratives, without resorting to censorship or covert surveillance. Delivered as a digital plug-in, True North supports platforms, schools, and safeguarding bodies with intelligent content filtering, media literacy support, and constructive guidance, helping young people engage online safely and critically. The initiative is preventative, proportionate, transparent, and educational, aligning protection with respect for young people's autonomy and cultural diversity. It is built in line with the UK Online Safety Act, the EU Digital Services Act, and leading global child online protection and digital wellbeing frameworks, enhancing compliance while addressing algorithmic risk at source.

The People's Portal: Transforming bureaucracy

Northern Ireland's BUILD project offers a revolutionary blueprint to bridge the gap between citizens and power. BUILD is founded on seven core components: Building Evidence, Connection, Consensus, Accountability, Ownership, Trust, and Transparency. Introducing The People's Portal, a cutting-edge digital platform that transforms frustrating bureaucracy into genuine two-way dialogue. Imagine submitting concerns via video, witnessing real-time progress on a transparent dashboard, and seeing your voice directly shape policy. Moving beyond tired consultations, BUILD is designing trust into the very fabric of governance, promising a more responsive, accountable, and collaborative democracy. Discover how this innovative approach can redefine public engagement and spark civic renewal.

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The Class of 2026



Eilís Adamson
Regional Prosecutor, Public Prosecution Service NI



Brian Armstrong
Restorative Practitioner, Northern Ireland Alternatives



Wendy Blemings
Art Fund Assistant Curator, The National Gallery



Rhyannon Blythe
Director (Legal), Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission



Michael Boyd OBE
Director, MB Consulting and Coaching



Joanna Braniff
Strategic Communications Lead NI, National Lottery Community Fund



Emma Cairns
Head of Policy and Business, Ulster Unionist Party



Sarah Carlisle
Chairwoman, Queen's Orange Society



Corrina Grimes
Founder, MemoryTell



Gillian Hamilton
EastSide Partnership Manager, EastSide Partnership



Claire McBride
Social Value Manager (NI), Fujitsu



Anna McClung
Deputy Principal, Department of Justice



Róisín McCreesh
Corporate Planning Manager, Education Authority



Gerard McDonald
Party Organiser, SDLP



Lisa McGinley
Director, The MAC Belfast



Cllr Kathleen McGurk
Sinn Féin Councillor, Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council



Kyle McMullan
Meter Reading Manager and part of the Senior Management Team at NIE Networks



Sean McQuade
Head of Quality Improvement, Northern Health and Social Care Trust



Lewis McVitty
Senior Press Officer, Ulster Unionist Party



Steven Mills
Chief Operating Officer, Northern Ireland Football League



Meadhbha Monaghan
Chief Executive Officer, Patient and Client Council NI



Cllr Micky Murray
Alliance Party Councillor, Belfast City Council



Dr Matthew O'Neill
Climate Project Lead, Institute of International & European Affairs



James Redmond
Head of Transport Planning, Modelling & Data Analytics, Department for Infrastructure



Jonathan Rogan
Managing Director, SQC Digital



Ola Sobieraj
Project Manager, the3million



Aoibhinn Treanor
Clerk to the Education Committee, Northern Ireland Assembly



Gareth Wilson MLA
DUP MLA for Newry and Armagh












FinTrU





Fellowship Alumni Series

Now in its fifth year, the Fellowship Programme has over 120 alumni across five cohorts, including several MLAs and local councillors, as well as senior public sector and civic leaders.

The Fellowship alumni network held multiple events this year including:

- An alumni music night in partnership with Belfast's Oh Yeah Music Centre, with a live performance on their rooftop space.
- Attending the launch of the 2025/26 programme at Stormont.
- Our annual reception hosted by Joint Irish Secretary Laurence Simms at his residence in Belfast.
- The launch of a new initiative, The Alumni Lunchtime Series. This once-a-month webinar series seeks to revisit and deepen some of the core themes from the programme. So far we have been delighted to have many friends of the Fellowship explore various topics within leadership.
- Our annual NI Assembly networking breakfast featuring a presentation on the Assembly's legislative system.
- Marking the Fellowship's fifth anniversary with a tree-planting initiative at the Connswater Community Greenway, creating a lasting environmental and community legacy to celebrate the milestone.







Gala Dinner 2026

The Centre for Democracy and Peace Fellowship Programme marked its fifth anniversary with a gala dinner held at the Titanic Hotel Belfast.

The evening featured a guest performance by Belfast-born, Northern Irish–Ghanaian pop singer and songwriter Winnie Ama, a welcome address from Darragh McCarthy, and a series of special guest contributions, including a Q&A session led by host Tara Mills with Fellowship alumni.

Established in 2021, the Fellowship Programme brings together political, business and civic leaders from across Northern Ireland, providing a space to reimagine leadership through innovation, collaboration and capacity-building. The programme is built on the belief that the most pressing challenges facing Northern Ireland can only be addressed when leaders from different sectors work together, share expertise, and innovate collectively.

Reflecting on the anniversary, the Centre noted that while the Fellowship has grown over the past five years, its core purpose remains unchanged: nurturing inclusive leadership and creating small but meaningful actions that contribute to lasting positive impact for communities across Northern Ireland.











Chapman Visit 2025

CDP hosted an inspiring group of students and faculty from Chapman University in late June for an immersive academic and cultural journey across the island of Ireland.

Over the course of the week, the group engaged with political and community leaders, peacebuilders, and educators. From Parliament Buildings in Belfast to the streets of L'Derry and Dublin, to the coastline at the Giant's Causeway, the trip brought the academic into the tangible. A huge thank you to all who made the week possible!







Contact Details

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The fellowship

