

Northern Ireland elections 2016 – Response from Alliance

Ahead of the 2016 Northern Ireland elections, the Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE) wrote to the leaders of all political parties with at least one MLA, inviting them to set out their party's policies on science and engineering.

Below is the response from the leader of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland

Dear CaSE,

Investment

Thank you for your letter regarding science and engineering policy in Northern Ireland. Alliance has been a supporter of investment in science and technology as we perceive it to have a central role in the future development of the economy. It also has a major role to play in a wide range of public policy areas such as healthcare, climate change and education. As a result, we support the aims of CaSE in trying to ride the profile and status of science and engineering amongst policy-makers.

In the Executive, Alliance has prioritised investment in science and engineering. For example, Stephen Farry, Minister for Employment and Learning, increased the number of additional STEM Undergraduate places has by 1,400. This increase remains in place, notwithstanding the wider reduction in the sector due to Executive Budget cuts.

He has also tried to address the underrepresentation of women in the crucial STEM areas which are most important to the future of the economy and will offer the most lucrative opportunities in the future. In order to best maximise life chances and to maximise the deployment of the marketplace of talent, gender issues have been a particular focus of reform of careers policy and guidance, with some particular interventions to promote women in STEM.

This should highlight our commitment to these issues. However, we recognise that the Executive as a whole has more to support science and engineering.

Investment

We support CaSE's calls for greater investment in science and engineering. Although public investment in research and development is a matter for the Westminster government, we have regularly called for greater investment in this key economic driver. We have also supported Northern Ireland's universities to develop strong cases for research and development grants, both to the research council and at a European level.

We would encourage science and engineering companies to locate to and remain in Northern Ireland through working to make Northern Ireland the most dynamic regional economy in Europe by 2030. Skills and infrastructure are an essential part of this.

A crucial part of this will be through skills development. If, as looks certain, corporation tax is lowered in Northern Ireland, then the Executive will also need to invest heavily in skills. Alliance are proposing to invest £85 million per annum in skills. Science and engineering skills should be a significant part of this.

Secondly, we believe an audit of Northern Ireland's science infrastructure, so that we can establish what specific needs exist in Northern Ireland.

These are combined with a wide-range of other business-friendly proposals in our manifesto which will make Northern Ireland an attractive place for all businesses, not just science and engineering.

In relation to a plan for research and development, we would support such an initiative and would work with Northern Ireland's universities and businesses to examine it.

Education & skills

Your correspondence highlights a significant number of proposals to improve the quality of science education.

We believe that these proposals have merit. Our manifesto contains a specific proposal to undertake a full and comprehensive review of the curriculum to ensure that a wide-range of academic and vocational options is available. We anticipate that this would cover your proposals. However, we have specifically also committed to:

- Investing in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) within schools and advancement of pupils' awareness of these subjects is important from an early stage. We will aim especially to increase uptake amongst female pupils.
- Providing a wide range of computer programming training available in schools at all levels.

Science, Engineering & Policy-Making

Alliance is proud of its record on delivering evidence-based policy-making. In the Executive, we have listened to scientific advice on issues such as abortion and drugs treatment in prisons. We have also relied on scientific advice when voting on issues relating to the environment and health.

As a result, we believe that it is possible to ensure the NI Assembly and Executive both reflect scientific advice in their work.

We would seek to ensure this goes much wider throughout the executive. For example, we would like to see more specific laying out of evidence by Ministers in their consultations and proposals. It would also require a much wider use of external scientific advisors.

In relation to a Minister for Science, we are aware that the power-sharing arrangements in Northern Ireland do not facilitate the creation of new ministries, so we are unable to support this proposals. However, the proposal for a Chief Scientific Advisor is interesting and we would consider it.

I hope this letter answers your questions and demonstrates Alliance's support for science and engineering.

Yours sincerely,

David Ford
Leader

Alliance Party of Northern Ireland