

After the Good Friday Agreement

Since the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement of 1998, more talks and a number of other agreements have been needed:

- to resolve political difficulties; and
- to refine how the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive operate.

From October 2002 to May 2007, the Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended, and Direct Rule from London returned. The Assembly was restored following the 2006 St Andrews Agreement, which required all Executive ministers:

- to support the new policing arrangements in Northern Ireland; and
- to participate fully in all the institutions set up by the 1998 Agreement. These included the North–South Ministerial Council and the British–Irish Council.

The agreement also changed how the First Minister and deputy First Minister were appointed. Instead of being elected together by the Assembly, the largest party of the largest designation would nominate the First Minister, and the largest party of the second largest designation would nominate the deputy First Minister. The 1998 Agreement specified the three designations as being ‘nationalist’, ‘unionist’ and ‘other’.

And the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006 also repealed the law which allowed the UK Parliament to suspend the Assembly.

The Hillsborough Agreement in February 2010 allowed for the devolution of policing and justice powers, by changing these powers from being reserved to the UK Parliament to being devolved to the Assembly. The devolution of policing and justice powers was a sensitive matter, and parties agreed that the Assembly should elect the Justice Minister with cross-community support. Now, after the First and deputy First Ministers are nominated, the Justice Minister is elected before the D’Hondt formula is used to appoint other ministers.

In 2014, the British and Irish governments organised talks at Stormont House about political, social and economic issues that still needed resolved.

Some issues, such as continuing paramilitary activity and how to support victims, related to the past.

Other issues were about identity and culture, for example flags, parades, and language.

The talks also aimed to resolve a dispute about reform of the welfare benefits system and to balance Northern Ireland's budget.

In the end, there were two agreements:

- the Stormont House Agreement in December 2014; and
- the 'Fresh Start' Agreement and Implementation Plan in November 2015.

These meant big changes for the Assembly and Executive. In 2016 the number of government departments was reduced from 12 to 9, and in 2017 the number of MLAs was reduced from 108 to 90.

Another change was to allow parties who were entitled to be in the Executive to form an Official Opposition instead. They would do this at the start of a mandate by opting out of the Executive when the government was being formed. Fresh Start also sought to reform the Petition of Concern mechanism, though by consensus rather than by changing the law or Assembly rules. This mechanism, which allows 30 MLAs to force a cross-community vote on an issue, has been controversial.

Due to political disagreements, the Northern Ireland Executive fell in January 2017 for three years.

In January 2020, the British and Irish Governments published the New Decade, New Approach Deal – 'NDNA' – which resulted in the power-sharing Executive and Assembly being restored.

The UK Parliament passed The Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Act 2022. This aimed to make the Assembly and Executive more stable and less likely to collapse. For example, it gave parties 24 weeks to form a government after an election, instead of two.

This act also formally changed the rules on the Petition of Concern. Now:

- at least 30 MLAs from two parties must sign a Petition of Concern; and

- the vote will take place after 14 days – instead of on the next day the Assembly sits – to allow time to reach compromise.

And, to make government more transparent and accountable, new codes of conduct were introduced for ministers, their special advisers, and civil servants.

New Decade, New Approach also resulted in a change of Assembly rules, called Standing Orders, to provide for a stronger official Opposition to the Executive. Now, for up to two years after an election, any party that gained 8% or more of the vote can decide to become part of 'The Opposition'.

Parties in 'The Opposition' will have:

- extra resources to carry out their role;
- more speaking rights in the Chamber; and
- more opportunities to question ministers.

In the area of identity and culture, it was agreed to create a new Office of Identity and Cultural Expression, with commissioners to promote both the Irish language and Ulster-Scots.

And, to address an outstanding issue from the original 1998 agreement, an Ad Hoc Committee was established to consider creating a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights.

Parties also agreed to prioritise health, education, the economy and climate change.

The road since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement has not been easy, especially when it comes to issues of culture, identity and how we deal with the past – with further talks and agreements needed along the way.