Northern Ireland Assembly

Elections Manifesto 2027

Nexus

Breaking the Cycle of Sexual Abuse
and Abusive Relationships

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Executive summary

Nexus is the region's leading specialist provider of trauma-informed services for people impacted by sexual abuse and abusive relationships. In 2025/26 alone, the organisation delivered over **16,000 counselling sessions**, supported young people and their families, trained professionals, educated thousands of 11-25-year-olds on healthy relationships, and operated the **Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline**, handling more than **24,000 contacts**. Alongside frontline services, Nexus plays a key role in policy development, research, and advocacy.

The scale of harm is significant and persistent. Recorded data shows **4,244 sexual offences** in 2024/2025, low prosecution rates, and a sharp rise in **child sexual abuse imagery**. Violence is widespread, with **98% of women reporting lifetime experiences** of abuse and increasing evidence of harm affecting men, young people, and marginalised communities. However, under-reporting and fragmented data mean the true prevalence is likely much higher.

The reality on the ground includes preventative initiatives being given greater priority than specialist interventions, unequal access to services (particularly for children and marginalised groups), long justice system delays **(averaging 630 days per case)**, and an evolving threatening landscape driven by **technology-facilitated abuse.** Historic abuse remains under-recognised, while rape myths continue to underpin public understanding and perpetrate harm to victims.

This election manifesto sits within the five core pillars of the Domestic and Sexual abuse strategy which are designed to drive coordinated action and long-term change. The pillars are: **Partnership, Prevention, Children and Young people, Support and Provision, and Justice**.

Nexus identifies five key areas for reform:

1. **Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (CSAE)** – requiring investment, better data sharing, and early intervention.
2. **Abuse of Power and Trust** – strengthening legal protections and institutional accountability.
3. **Support for Marginalised Groups** – ensuring inclusive, culturally competent services.
4. **Online Harms** – addressing growing digital forms of sexual abuse, including AI-generated content.
5. **Justice Reform** – tackling delays, improving victim experience, ensuring robust outcomes, and closing legislative gaps.

Our manifesto calls for a **preventative, lived experience - centred approach**, underpinned by legislative reform. Core proposals include abolishing "good character" references in sexual offence trials, introducing offences for the creation and dissemination of sexualised deepfakes of adults, implementing the Gillen Review Recommendations in full, advocating for investment in a lived experience advisory group for Domestic and Sexual Abuse, and strengthening legal, media, and safeguarding frameworks.

Nexus offers to work in partnership with elected representatives to provide expertise, shape policy, and amplify lived experience. The manifesto positions the upcoming election as a pivotal opportunity for political leadership to deliver meaningful, long-term change.

Nexus: who we are

Nexus is the leading organisation within Northern Ireland supporting individuals impacted by sexual abuse and abusive relationships. The supports and services that we provide are primarily focused on enabling positive change for those impacted by sexual abuse and abusive relationships.

Every year in Northern Ireland there are thousands of sexual abuse and abusive relationship offences reported to police, with many more going unreported.

Our team of counsellors, project officers, administrative staff, volunteers and Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline operators work tirelessly to provide care and support to clients and their families impacted by sexual abuse and abusive relationships through a variety of trauma-informed services such as:

- **Trauma processing counselling** for adults aged 16+ and children and young people aged 8-16 years
- **Specialist therapeutic interventions** e.g. EMDR
- **Aftercare support**
- **Education and training** for professionals, children and young people

Since 2019, we have also hosted the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline for Northern Ireland which provides free, anonymous and confidential support 24/7.

In addition, we are committed to informing policy and practice to ensure it better meets the needs of those impacted by sexual abuse and abusive relationships. This involves responding to public consultations, engaging in research and lobbying elected representatives on all related subject matter.

Across the 2025/2026 financial year, Nexus:

Delivered **16,319** trauma-informed counselling sessions to individuals directly impacted by sexual abuse and violence

Supported **113** young people and their families to recover from sexual abuse

Educated **5,177** young people aged 11-25 on Healthy and Respectful Relationships

Facilitated the accreditation of **326** professionals in Level 1 and Level 2 CSE training programme

Managed **10,812** phone calls, **13,384** web chats and **733** emails received to the DSA Helpline

Prevalence: reported statistics

- **98% of women in Northern Ireland** have experienced at least one form of violence or abuse in their lifetime.
- The PPS reported that in 2024/2025 they received **1615 files** involving a sexual offence.
- **4,244 sexual offences*** were recorded by the PSNI in 2024/2025 (*no change from previous year).
- **One third** of sexual offence cases in Northern Ireland proceed to prosecution. The primary barrier is evidential insufficiency.
- Crimes involving images of child sexual abuse in NI have almost doubled in the past five years, with a **rise of 98%** to a total of 859 offences.
- Sexual offences make up **6% of domestic abuse crimes.**
- **30 women have been murdered** in Northern Ireland since 2020.
- According to the PSNI, the majority of victims of Sextortion are young men, aged **between 18 and 23.**
- **1 in 18 men** have been raped or sexually assaulted as an adult.
- UK wide around **23,000 girls** are at risk of FGM.

The reality in Northern Ireland

- **Under-reporting and lack of joined up data sets** means that accurate prevalence rates of recent and non-recent sexual offences do not exist.
- **Historic clerical and institutional abuse in Northern Ireland is widespread**, systemic, and significantly undercounted- affecting thousands of people across the province.
- **Preventative initiatives being given greater priority** than specialist interventions, meaning limited support services for those that have experienced harm.
- **Inconsistent access to trauma-informed support** for children and young people impacted by sexual abuse across region.
- **Extensive delay across the justice system**, impacting outcomes for those with lived experience.
- **The growing use of technology to facilitate sexual abuse,** compounding harm.
- **Rape myths continue to underpin public understanding** and perpetuate harm to victims across our communities.

Key issues for Nexus (Nexus Strategic Plan 2026-29)

1. Child sexual abuse and exploitation
2. Proliferation of abusive relationships: abuse of power and trust
3. Unmet needs of marginalised groups
4. Tackling online harms
5. Reforming justice for victims

1. Child sexual abuse and exploitation

Aligned with the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy Pillar: **Children and Young People**

Child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSAE) remains a growing safeguarding crisis in Northern Ireland. Offences involving indecent images of children have nearly doubled in recent years, reflecting both increased prevalence and the shift toward online abuse. Notably, **55% of all recorded sexual offences involve victims under 18**, demonstrating the disproportionate impact on children. Offences relating to sexual activity where the victim was under 16 years of age has trebled between the introduction of new sexual offence legislation in February 2009, with the peak recorded of 618 offences recorded in 2016-2017. Moreover, number of sexual offences recorded where the victim was under 18 years of age at the time of the offence was committed more than doubled between 2007-2008 and 2023-2024.

Despite some progress, gaps remain in safeguarding implementation and investigative capacity, limiting the ability to disrupt perpetrators effectively.

Policy priorities include:

- Investment in specialist investigation, support and recovery services for children and young people
- Improved data sharing across agencies, particularly on online abuse
- Expansion of early intervention and trauma-informed support and psychoeducation
- Review the age of consent, calling for changes to the law relating to sexual activity between adults (18+) and young people aged 16-18, particularly where there is a significant age difference

2. Proliferation of abusive relationships: abuse of power and trust

Aligned with the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy Pillars: **Prevention, and Justice**

Abuse rooted in power imbalances and positions of trust remains under-recognised. Roles such as teachers, care workers, and faith leaders carry inherent authority, yet gaps persist in legal protections and safeguarding oversight.

Disclosure is often suppressed due to the status of perpetrators, which can normalise coercion and deter accountability. Organisational cultures that prioritise reputation over safeguarding continue to enable harm.

Policy priorities include:

- Embedding "positions of trust" legislation and practice across all relevant bodies to:

  a) enhance risk assessment and safeguarding protocols to include reducing the risk of professional status or institutional standing being used to downgrade or dismiss identified risks
  b) ensure all roles involving unsupervised contact with children or vulnerable adults are managed within a regulated safeguarding activity framework, with regular, mandatory oversight rather than one-off vetting at the point of hire
- Ensuring independent oversight of institutions working with vulnerable groups to strengthen mandatory safeguarding accountability and whistleblowing
- Implementing the findings and recommendations of the MARAC review, to ensure risk assessment and mitigation is robust, consistent and adequately resourced and information sharing between agencies is supported

3. Unmet needs of marginalised groups

Aligned with the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy Pillar: **Support and Provision**

Evidence consistently shows that marginalised groups (including those from minoritised ethnic groups) experience compounded barriers to accessing support and justice following sexual violence. UK research identifies structural barriers including language, immigration status, stigma, discrimination, and lack of culturally competent services.

Studies also demonstrate that Black and Minoritised communities, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and disabled individuals face additional access barriers and lower visibility within mainstream service design, despite comparable or underreported prevalence rates. Underreporting is a critical issue, meaning official statistics likely underestimate the true scale of harm.

Policy priorities include:

- Investment in specialist "by and for" services
- Embedding intersectional approaches in commissioning
- Improved data collection on the experience of those with protected characteristics and intersectional challenges

4. Tackling online harms

Aligned with the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy Pillar: **Prevention**

Online environments are now a primary context for sexual exploitation and abuse. Grooming offences have risen significantly, with perpetrators exploiting social media, private messaging, and anonymity.

Recent cases in Northern Ireland highlight the scale of harm, including offenders targeting thousands of victims globally. Image-based abuse is widespread, with many victims never disclosing their experiences.

Emerging threats include AI-generated abuse material and deepfake sexual content. While the Online Safety Act represents progress, gaps remain in enforcement and platform accountability.

Policy priorities include:

- Strengthening regulatory enforcement and Ofcom powers
- Mandating safety-by-design from technology companies
- Investing in digital literacy, prevention, and victim support
- Ensuring under 16's have the right to access on-line platforms free from abuse and fear of criminalisation

5. Reforming justice for victims

Aligned with the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy Pillar: **Justice**

People with lived experience face persistent barriers across the justice system. Underreporting, case attrition, and long delays undermine accountability and confidence. In Northern Ireland, sexual offence cases take an average of 630 days to conclude. Those with lived experience frequently withdraw due to delays, re-traumatisation, and lack of support.

The use of "good character" references in sexual offence cases is also problematic. These can shift focus away from evidence and reinforce assumptions about who commits abuse, potentially influencing outcomes.

Policy priorities include:

- Embedding trauma-sensitive approaches that protect those with lived experience
- Reducing delays and case backlogs
- Strengthening advocacy and support services
- Improving transparency and data collection
- Prohibiting "good character" references in sexual offence cases
- Ensuring robust sentencing outcomes

Legislative reform must move towards a preventative framework centered around those with lived experience that addresses gaps in protection and inconsistent responses.

Key commitments for parties and candidates to endorse:

Abolishing Good Character References
Prohibit their use in sexual offence cases to ensure decisions are evidence-based and not influenced by social status or reputation.

Specific Offence for Deepfake Abuse
Introduce clear legal protections against AI-generated sexual images, addressing a growing gap in current legislation.

Full Implementation of the Gillen Review
Complete outstanding recommendations, particularly on delays, trauma-informed approaches, and access to specialist support.

Non-Fatal Strangulation in pornographic material
Review how non-fatal strangulation is depicted, hosted, and moderated in pornographic material.

Lived experience advisory group
Advocating for investment in a lived experience advisory group for Domestic and Sexual Abuse.

Statutory Duty for Accommodation-Based Support
Introduce a legal duty to provide safe accommodation for victims, strengthening their ability to leave abusive situations.

Legal Aid Reform
Ensure faster, simpler access to legal aid and protective orders for abuse victims.

Media Standards Reform
Strengthen ethical reporting through mandatory training and updated editorial codes to reduce sensationalism and victim-blaming.

Enhance Safeguarding through Regulation and Monitoring of Practice
Regulate counselling provision and monitor safeguarding activity across all bodies who have a duty to safeguard children and vulnerable adults.

Strengthen Sentencing Consistency Through Independent Oversight
Implement a Sentencing Council to provide independent oversight of sentencing outcomes

Our offer

Nexus NI will work in partnership with elected representatives to:

- Provide expert insight and evidence
- Support policy development
- Amplify lived experience
- Deliver practical, effective solutions

Conclusion

This election presents a critical opportunity for change.

We urge all candidates to prioritise ending sexual abuse and abusive relationships—not only through commitments, but through meaningful action.

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