BUILDING SERVICES AROUND PEOPLE'S LIVES

Extern's Manifesto for the 2027 Northern Ireland Assembly Election

About Extern

Extern is a leading community and voluntary organisation working across Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland to support people facing some of the most difficult challenges in life. Our services are commissioned by public sector bodies and government departments from across Northern Ireland.

For almost 50 years, Extern has stood alongside children, young people, adults and families affected by issues such as family breakdown, homelessness, substance use, poor mental health, trauma, poverty, offending, exclusion from education, and wider social disadvantage.

At the heart of our work is a simple belief: everyone deserves understanding, dignity, and practical support to move towards a better tomorrow. We deliver trauma-informed services that meet people where they are, build trust, reduce harm, strengthen families, and help individuals regain confidence, safety and hope.

Our experience offers important insight into the pressures facing communities and the practical action needed to respond. We are committed to working constructively with elected representatives, councils, statutory partners, and communities to ensure that local policy reflects the realities people face and helps create places where everyone has the chance to be safe, supported and valued.

Extern's Five Year Strategy Vision 2030

Why Extern's Manifesto Messages Matter

Extern's manifesto for the Northern Ireland Assembly Election 2027 is grounded in almost five decades of frontline experience supporting children, young people, adults and families across health, justice, education, housing and community settings.

Every day, Extern sees how poverty, trauma, mental ill-health, addiction, homelessness, family pressure, offending and exclusion from education often overlap in the lives of the same people. These are not separate problems, and they cannot be solved by separate systems working in isolation.

The next Assembly mandate will be shaped by rising demand on public services, constrained budgets and the need to deliver better outcomes for people and communities. The Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government 2024–2027, Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most, commits government to making a real difference to people's lives. Extern's experience shows that this ambition will only be achieved if public policy shifts further upstream: preventing crisis where possible, making support easier to navigate, and investing in trusted community and voluntary services that already reach people whom statutory systems can struggle to engage.

At Extern, we see the cost of late intervention, disjointed services, and short-term or unstable funding. We also see what works.

That is why our three key manifesto calls for the next Executive are:

1. Intervene Earlier: Prevent crisis before it starts.

2. Make Support Seamless: One person. One plan. One pathway.

3. Sustained Partnerships: Multi-year funding in organisations people trust.

Intervene Earlier

Prevent Crisis Before It Starts.

Too often, people and families receive support only when difficulties have escalated into crisis. By that point, the human cost is higher and the response required is more complex, more expensive, and less likely to deliver lasting change.

Early intervention means identifying risk sooner, responding before problems become entrenched, and supporting people in the places where they live, learn, and build relationships.

For Extern, this means trauma-informed help for children, young people and families; practical support for people at risk of homelessness or offending; and community-based services that build safety, stability and resilience before crisis becomes inevitable.

Our Manifesto Asks:

- Make prevention and early intervention a cross-government priority.
- Invest in community-based support before problems escalate.
- Shift resources from crisis response to prevention.

EXTERN IN PRACTICE: PATHWAYS SERVICE

For more than 20 years, Extern's Pathways service has supported young people outside mainstream education through smaller classes, community-based learning and trusted adult relationships. The service shows that when support is available early enough, young people can re-engage with learning, gain qualifications, strengthen relationships and build positive futures.

Early intervention through this service has reduced future demand across education, social care, health and justice services, while improving outcomes for young people and their families.

> *For the first time, I felt as though I could bring my whole self to the classroom. I felt supported and began to feel confident enough to work on my own self-development. I started to work on my Maths and English GCSEs … I felt as though the staff genuinely wanted me to succeed and even through challenging times …I knew they were there for me. Today, I am studying Politics and International Studies at university. If you had told me in my teens that I was capable of achieving this, I don't think I would have believed you!*
>
> ***Pathways Student***

The earlier we act, the more we change.

Make Support Seamless

One person. One plan. One pathway.

People's lives do not fit neatly within departmental or organisational boundaries. A young person may need education support, mental health help and family intervention at the same time. Someone leaving prison may need housing, addiction support, healthcare, employability support and community connection.

A family in crisis may be known to several agencies but still feel that no one is holding the whole picture.

Seamless support means reducing duplication, avoiding repeated retelling of traumatic experiences, and ensuring that services work around the person rather than expecting the person to navigate a fragmented system.

Our Manifesto Asks:

- Establish joined-up pathways across departments and services.
- Ensure people with complex needs have one co-ordinated support plan.
- Improve continuity of support during key life transitions.

EXTERN IN PRACTICE: MULTI-DISIPLINARY HOMELESS SUPPORT TEAM (MDHST)

The MDHST reflects Extern's call to make support seamless by bringing housing, health, social care and specialist voluntary sector support around people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness who are also facing complex and overlapping needs.

Working in partnership with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, MDHST provides compassionate, trauma-informed advocacy, guidance and floating support for adults and families affected by challenges such as mental health concerns, substance use, physical health issues, justice involvement, learning disabilities and family difficulties.

By coordinating practical and emotional support around the whole person, rather than expecting individuals to navigate multiple disconnected systems, the service helps reduce duplication, improve continuity, and create a clearer pathway towards stability, safety and sustained wellbeing across Belfast and wider regional areas.

> *"The best part of my job is working with the service users, developing relationships, and providing support. It's so rewarding when you have built a relationship with a service user over time and you can see them achieving the goals they wanted to work towards."*
> ***Senior Practioner, Extern MDHST***

Built around people, not departments.

Sustained Partnerships

Multi-Year Funding in Organisations We Trust

Trusted community and voluntary organisations are often the bridge between people in greatest need and the wider public service system. They bring relationships, local knowledge, flexibility and credibility that cannot be quickly rebuilt when funding is short-term or unstable.

Sustainable funding is not simply about protecting organisations; it is about protecting the relationships and services that help keep people safe, connected and supported.

Longer-term, fair and enabling funding would allow community and voluntary partners to plan ahead, retain skilled staff, measure impact, and work with government to deliver prevention-focused outcomes.

Our Manifesto Asks:

- Move from short-term projects to multi-year investment.
- Commission services around people's lives, not departmental boundaries.
- Invest in community and voluntary organisations as strategic delivery partners.

EXTERN IN PRACTICE: REACH OUT

Reach Out reflects Extern's call to fund trusted local support by showing how locally rooted, relationship-based services can reach people whose lives have been affected by substance or alcohol misuse, suicide, self-harm, trauma, poor mental health, family stress, and wider wellbeing challenges.

Delivered in Greater Belfast and funded by the Department for Communities, the service offers accessible, compassionate and trauma-informed help through drop-in and one-to-one support, counselling, systemic family work, complementary therapies, NADA acupuncture, wellbeing sessions, and community outreach.

Its strength lies in its flexibility, local credibility and ability to meet people early, in ways that feel safe and practical to them, helping to build resilience, reduce risk and connect individuals and families to the right support before problems escalate.

> *"I didn't think anyone would really get it, but from the first time I walked in, it didn't feel like a service — it felt like people who actually cared. No forms first, no judgement, just someone willing to sit with me while things were bad."*
>
> ***Service user, Greater Belfast***

Fund trusted support that lasts.

EXTERN IN PRACTICE | PRISONER SUPPORT PROJECT (PSP)

Extern's Prisoner Support Project (PSP) demonstrates all three of our election asks in practice: intervening earlier, providing seamless support, and investing in trusted, relationship-based services.

The PSP supports people with co-occurring, complex needs before and after release from prison, helping them to access housing, health services, benefits, education, employment and community support through one coordinated plan.

> *"They're always there. They always answer the phone no matter what, and that's what I like, that support. Because I think that would save a lot of lives."* ***Prisoner Support Project Participant***

An independent evaluation by Queen's University Belfast found that PSP demonstrated positive outcomes in relation to reducing reoffending, health, and community:

> *"Extern's extensive and holistic approach meets its aims of contributing to reductions in offending behaviour and greater stability for a group that typically faces significant barriers to rehabilitation and integration"* **(Butler et al., 2026)**

Public Value

✔ Reduces reoffending and pressure on the justice system
✔ Improves health, wellbeing and community integration
✔ Increases housing stability and employability
✔ Delivers benefits across Justice, Health, Communities and the Economy

Cost Saving of Breaking the Cycle of Reoffending

PSP
£10.50
per person/per day

VS

CUSTODY
£156
per person/per day

WHEN SERVICES INTERVENE EARLIER, WORK TOGETHER AND ARE BUILT ON TRUSTED RELATIONSHIPS, PEOPLE ACHIEVE BETTER OUTCOMES AND PUBLIC MONEY GOES FURTHER.

Extern's Message to the Next Executive

Northern Ireland needs services that are built around people's lives, not disconnected responses to connected challenges.

Extern's experience across health, justice, education, housing, communities and social care shows that people facing complex circumstances need support that starts earlier, works together, and is trusted, local and sustained.

Extern's work demonstrates that one intervention can deliver multiple benefits: for example, helping someone maintain housing, improve their mental health, and avoid reoffending contributes to better outcomes for Communities, Health and Justice at the same time.

When services are designed around people rather than organisational boundaries, outcomes improve, duplication reduces, and public resources are used more effectively.

Taken together, Extern's manifesto messages offer a practical basis for reform: start earlier, join up support, and invest in the community-based services that people trust.

Extern is ready to work with the next Executive to deliver Programme for Government priorities through practical, evidence-informed and person-centred solutions that reduce avoidable crisis, ease pressure on statutory services and help build stronger, safer and more inclusive communities across Northern Ireland.

Intervene earlier. Make support seamless. Sustained partnerships.

Get In Touch

Extern is committed to working constructively with elected representatives, councils, statutory partners, and communities to deliver services that are built around people's lives.

If you have questions about this manifesto, would like to discuss our policy asks in more detail, or want to explore how Extern can work with you and your constituents, please get in touch.

Contact Us

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