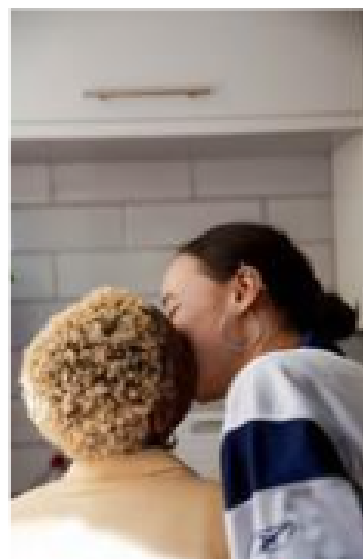


Relate NI



The Relationships Manifesto 2022

Policy & Legislative asks ahead of the
May 2022 NI Assembly Election

About Relate NI

Relate NI is passionate about enabling good quality relationships and that's why our mission is to make expert information and support for healthy relationships available to everyone. Through our experience of working with parents and children throughout Northern Ireland for 75 years, we've come to understand that relationships not only give our lives meaning, they are of vital importance to our happiness.

For the last 75 years, we have been supporting the health and wellbeing of children & young people, individuals, couples, and families through our therapeutic services because we know how important our relationships are to our health and wellbeing.

We know that relationships matter, and are at the heart of a thriving society. For example, evidence shows that good quality relationships can prevent, delay or minimise the effects of certain health conditions such as dementia.

We also know that relationships are not always at the heart of public policy, despite the evidence that they are 'The Best Medicine' for many of the issues which we as a society in NI grapple with each day, including family conflict, living with disabilities, loneliness & mental health issues.

In fact, a 2014 evaluation of Relate's Couples Counselling Service alongside Westminster's Department of Education found that for every £1 invested in Relate couple counselling, £11.40 benefits accrue. Subsequently, the cost of relationship breakdown to the UK State in 2016 was estimated at £48 billion.

The 'Relationships Manifesto NI' sets out our key policy asks for decision makers. It gives political candidates an insight into importance of healthy relationships, allowing them to champion relationships at the centre of campaigning and public policy.



@relateni



@RelateNorthernIreland



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Reach & Impact 2022/23

36026

People directly helped

3474

Indirectly benefitted

86%

of people rated their counsellor as 'good' or 'excellent' in helping them work through presenting issues

No Fault Divorce

Parents and other married couples should be supported to separate and/or divorce amicably, rather than required to apportion blame for the purposes of legal proceedings. We believe this approach supports the direction of the Review of Civil and Family Law undertaken by Sir John Gillen.

As the law stands parties cannot issue immediate divorce proceedings when they separate, unless they want to blame the other.

In Northern Ireland married couples can divorce only after being married for one year, and on the ground of 'irretrievable breakdown'. This will need to include at least one of the following;

- adultery
- unreasonable behaviour
- two years desertion
- two years' separation (with partner's consent).
- Five years' separation.

In the instances of adultery or unreasonable behaviour, a divorce can be triggered immediately because they are 'fault based'. However you have to wait a minimum of two years after separation before you can activate a non-fault based divorce. Is that fair?

At Relate NI, we believe that it is not. Especially considering that unhappily married people are at greater risk of poor health than divorced people.

There is an appetite in Northern Ireland for separation agreements entered into voluntarily, without court proceedings that can often be stressful for all involved.

Of course this does not apply to everyone; separations can be explosive and unpredictable, but it may be helpful to the many couples who wish to resolve financial issues amicably.

If both parties agree that there is no prospect of reconciliation, should they be forced to blame the other just to achieve a speedy divorce?

Children who grow up with parents who have low parental conflict, whether together or separated, enjoy;

- Better physical & mental health and emotional wellbeing,
- Higher educational attainment,
- A lower likelihood of engaging in risky behaviour.



Relate NI's Ask:

That all incoming Executive or opposition MLA's work towards legislating for No-Fault Divorce during the upcoming Assembly Mandate

Relationships & Sexuality Education (RSE)

Currently, children and young people are missing out on equal access to standardised, high quality, age-appropriate relationships and sexuality education.

While all schools have been required to develop their own policy on how they will address RSE within the curriculum since the 2007/08 school year, the statutory curriculum is designed to give schools and teachers flexibility in what they choose to include, or leave out.

A 2019 report from the Belfast Youth Forum highlighted that young people were more likely to learn about sex and relationships from their friends or peer groups (62%) or from social media (55%) than they were to learn about it through lessons at school.

This can lead to a spread of misinformation among young people which can result in unrealistic expectations, normalisation of abusive behaviour and increased anxieties around relationships and sexual health. Research commissioned by the Department of Education into the experiences of LGBT children and young people found that 90% of respondents said that no discussion ever took place about LGBT relationships, and 67% said the sexual health education they received was either “unhelpful” or “very unhelpful”.

Giving children and young people age-appropriate relationships and sexuality education is essential to improving outcomes across the life course.

Doing so provides children and young people with a safe space to explore issues around relationships, including what healthy relationships look like so that they can recognise and negotiate unhealthy relationships.

High quality and evidence based RSE is about empowering children and young people to develop confidence and self-esteem by promoting healthy relationships and providing information on issues like puberty and consent.

It is also about protecting children and young people by teaching them how to stay safe online; how to tackle inappropriate behaviour and to develop coping strategies.

It also allows opportunities for young people to receive age-appropriate information about sexual health. By teaching young people about consent for example, we can protect them from sexual abuse and exploitation.

Relate NI's Ask:

That the incoming Education Minister work in consultation with the Education Authority as well Youth, Women's and LGBTQ+ organisations to develop a compulsory syllabus of RSE that is age-appropriate, LGBT inclusive & Sex Positive



Early Intervention Approaches to Reducing Parental Conflict

It is well documented that relationship quality between parents, including the prevalence of conflict that is frequent, intense and poorly resolved can result in negative outcomes for children and young people who witness it. .

This is especially true during the first 1001 days, from antenatal to age 2 years, which lays the foundations for both physical and mental wellbeing throughout the lifespan.

This is particularly relevant in light of the fact that partners are more likely to experience conflict at times of significant transitions such as the birth of a baby, particularly your first child.

While many programmes and much support is rightly available to support parents in their parenting role, the importance of the relationship between parents is often overlooked by those designing and developing services to support parents in bringing up their children.

During the upcoming NI Assembly Mandate, Relate NI would like to see the introduction of a programme which seeks to reduce unhelpful parental conflict, similar to the Reducing Parental Conflict programme which has been running in England since 2017.

A Reducing Parental Conflict Programme for Northern Ireland might consist of some of the following;

- Developing an evidence base on what works to reduce parental conflict, which can inform future commissioning practice
- Providing training and relationship support for professionals with a focus on identification of parents in conflict, building the skills and confidence to work with, or refer parents in conflict.
- Help local areas integrate support to reduce parental conflict in local services for families.

A person experiencing relationship distress is most likely to turn to someone that they are already in routine contact with such as a midwife, health visitor or frontline practitioner.

The development of the Regional Family and Parenting Strategy offers the opportunity to focus on developing early intervention approaches to reducing parental conflict

Relate NI's Ask:

That the incoming Health Minister introduce a programme which seeks to reduce unhelpful parental conflict, thus giving children the 'best start in life.'



Increasing Access to Relationship Support

Relate NI has been highlighting the importance of healthy relationships as a vital foundation to our health and wellbeing. Evidence indicates that good quality relationships are a crucial protective factor which can shield us from the effects of long term health conditions and poor mental health; aid our recovery, and can even prevent illness in the first place.

Conversely, poor quality relationships are risk factors for poor health and wellbeing. Not only do people in poor quality relationships have worse health than those in happier ones, but poor quality relationships are also worse for our health than none: unhappily married people are at greater risk of poor health than divorced people.

Strong personal relationships are recognised as an important protective factor in terms of suicide prevention. Conversely, relationship and interpersonal difficulties are a risk factor for individuals.

Indeed in research undertaken in 2015 such difficulties were noted as the ‘most common adverse event experienced by the deceased’, with the report noting that this included romantic as well as peer relationships.

In a 2015-2016 Annual Report on the use of IAPT services, The Health and Social Care Information Centre outlines the effectiveness of couple therapy. The report indicates that that couples therapy for depression demonstrated the highest recovery rate for both depression, anxiety and stress-related disorders.

Relate NI's Ask:

That the incoming Executive recognises growing evidence of the effectiveness of a relational approach to supporting mental health and wellbeing, and subsequently increases access to couples therapy and other relationship support services.

Relate NI strongly advocates for high quality relationship support being available as part of a care pathway for people experiencing poor mental health and wellbeing . Currently, Primary Care Talking Therapies contracts, also referred to as Emotional Health and Wellbeing Hubs, refer only individuals for access to appropriate therapies. We believe that this needs to change.

We believe that individual access to talking therapies should be complemented by access to couples and family therapeutic services in light of the available evidence with regards to risk factors, protective factors and the efficacy of the treatment.



Implementing the Mental Health Strategy

As a society still working to address the impact which our recent history has had on the health and wellbeing of our people, as well as the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic and associated public health restrictions, we believe that an effectively resourced and robustly implemented mental health strategy can offer a framework for improving the health and wellbeing of our society as a whole, as well as supporting the specific needs of individuals experiencing mental ill health and poor mental wellbeing.

Through our casework over many years, we are aware of the impact of poor mental wellbeing and mental ill health on individuals, family systems and wider communities.

Priorities contained in the document in terms of maternal mental health; infant mental health; access to talking therapies and a focus on prevention and early intervention require attention in terms of policy, services and funding in order to improve outcomes for individuals and communities right across Northern Ireland.

Relate NI's Ask:

That the Minister for Health prioritises the delivery of the Mental Health Strategy in terms of resourcing and coordination.



Implementing a Healthy Relationships Strategy

In March 2022, Relate NI Commissioned Ulster University to carry out evidence based research on healthy relationships and their importance to a range of areas to provide recommendations for improved public policy commissioning. Across the life course, our experiences in pre-natal and perinatal life, infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age are shaped by the quality and nature of our relationships with others. This knowledge is the basis of attachment theory, an integral component to many mental health interventions. Further, research on environmental systems, indicates that the quality of relationships in one system of life (e.g. the family) will influence and be influenced by the quality of relationships on other systems (e.g. school, the workplace). Thus, our experiences of relationships directly influence our quality of life, wellbeing, and also our capacity to fulfil our potential and be more productive in education, employment and other domains. Developing and sustaining healthy relationships is integral to the functioning of all social systems in which we live, including but not limited to, families and communities, education, health and social care, employment, and criminal justice. Therefore, developing and sustaining healthy relationships in all spheres of life is critical to the prosperity of everyone in society.

While the role of healthy relationships is understood by many, particularly those working directly to promote them, and to prevent and intervene on relationship-based crises, the fundamental role of relationships is not explicitly identified in public policy, which in turn affects commissioning priorities. As such, a key recommendation of this research is the development of a Healthy Relationships Strategy, which would involve a centrally driven, structural approach to embedding the role of relationships within government policy. This research found that the role of relationships is not a single policy issue but transverses multiple policy domains. Importantly, this research found that relational approaches are already a fundamental part of many existing policies however there lacks the guidance of an explicit strategy that can provide a cohesive and consistent approach to policy, commissioning, and practice. This overarching Healthy Relationships Strategy would reduce siloed and fragmented approaches that can create or exacerbate system inadequacies and inefficiencies.

Relate NI's Ask:

That all incoming Executive or opposition MLA's work towards legislating for a Healthy Relationship Strategy, which can positively inform government policy, support public policy objectives, and promote the wellbeing and life chances for everyone in society.

What Next?

If you are a candidate or representative of a political party who is willing to endorse this manifesto, and take a 'relationships matter pledge' to work towards achieving the goals set out in this manifesto, please contact our Marketing, Communications & Engagement Lead on caramcveigh@relateni.org or by calling 028 9032 3454 to arrange a meeting or alternatively, post a picture of yourself using this hashtag #relationshipsmanifesto and tag @RelateNI on Facebook, Twitter and/or LinkedIn.

Relate NI Services

- Family Counselling
- Adult Relationship Counselling for Couples
- Adult Relationship Counselling for Individuals
- Sex Therapy
- Teen Counselling
- Kid's Counselling
- Relationship MOT
- One at a Time Therapy
- Relationships & Sexuality Education (RSE)
- Golden Threads
- Sustaining Healthy Relationships

Relate NI

we can Relate