# Stormont officials spark controversy with £470,000 spent on overseas trips amid budget cuts



Ministers and officials from Stormont have come under scrutiny for their extensive overseas travel since the restoration of Northern Ireland's devolved government in February 2024. The total expenditure has reportedly reached £470,000, reflecting a significant investment in international conferences, training, and other official engagements across 24 countries. Notably, the figures emerge amidst budget austerity at home, leading critics to label the spending as excessive.

Among the most conspicuous instances of travel was a £10,000 trip by two officials from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to New Zealand. This journey was part of a visit to placement students from the agricultural college, CAFRE. Equally eye-catching was the department's £11,000 investment for attendance at New York Climate Week, aimed at addressing pressing environmental issues. In total, the Department of Agriculture has accounted for over £78,000 in foreign travel expenses within the year, which also includes attendance at various international conferences such as the European Veterinary Emergency Congress in Sweden.

The Department of Justice also recorded a notable travel tally, with officials journeying to 33 different locations and accruing costs totalling £42,847. Notably, while Justice Minister Naomi Long did not personally partake in any trips, her department's travel was justified as essential for training and collaboration, particularly in forensic science, where ongoing education and exposure to the latest scientific methods are deemed crucial.

The Department for the Economy led the charge in spending, with £109,740 expended on six significant trips to cities like New York, Washington, and Berlin, involving numerous officials. This level of spending raises questions about fiscal responsibility, especially as local services face pressures and budget constraints. Indeed, the first and deputy first ministers, Michelle O’Neill and Emma Little-Pengelly, incurred costs exceeding £97,000 largely attributed to their trip to Washington for St Patrick's Day celebrations.

Debate surrounding these expenditures has intensified, with opposition MLA Timothy Gaston expressing outrage at what he termed "shameful" spending. He emphasized that the sums spent on distant travels starkly contrast with the pressing issues confronting constituents at home, such as burgeoning hospital waiting lists. He remarked that the extravagant nature of these trips—often costing more than the annual earnings of many citizens—has led to increased public discontent.

Critics from various political factions, including the SDLP and TUV, have echoed concerns about the justification for such lavish spending in the current economic climate. Matthew O'Toole from the SDLP stated that the costs incurred were "impossible to justify," particularly given the prioritisation of public funding for essential services. In light of ongoing debates about government accountability and value for public money, these travel expenses have raised critical questions about the priorities of Northern Ireland's Executive.

As those in Stormont continue to embark on long-haul flights and stay in expensive hotels, the contrast between ministerial travel and the realities facing taxpayers cannot be ignored. The scrutiny on these overseas expenditures may call for a reevaluation of travel policies, aligning more closely with existing economic challenges and public expectations.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/from-paris-to-new-zealand-jet-setting-stormont-officials-clock-up-470k-on-overseas-trips-in-last-year-ZQXBSDAT3BC7XIPS7WXLDKSKTY/), [[2]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/from-paris-to-new-zealand-jet-setting-stormont-officials-clock-up-470k-on-overseas-trips-in-last-year-ZQXBSDAT3BC7XIPS7WXLDKSKTY/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/from-paris-to-new-zealand-jet-setting-stormont-officials-clock-up-470k-on-overseas-trips-in-last-year-ZQXBSDAT3BC7XIPS7WXLDKSKTY/), [[2]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/from-paris-to-new-zealand-jet-setting-stormont-officials-clock-up-470k-on-overseas-trips-in-last-year-ZQXBSDAT3BC7XIPS7WXLDKSKTY/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/from-paris-to-new-zealand-jet-setting-stormont-officials-clock-up-470k-on-overseas-trips-in-last-year-ZQXBSDAT3BC7XIPS7WXLDKSKTY/), [[4]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/politics/stormont-assembly-chief-executives-18000-bill-for-trips-to-australia-canada-and-another-to-a-remote-island-in-the-south-atlantic-KQUAK5A7UBGG5BIA5FSBSYGLVU/), [[7]](https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/revealed-220000-cost-of-foreign-travel-over-last-year-for-stormont-ministers/a1721136548.html)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/from-paris-to-new-zealand-jet-setting-stormont-officials-clock-up-470k-on-overseas-trips-in-last-year-ZQXBSDAT3BC7XIPS7WXLDKSKTY/), [[3]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/czd406zve53o), [[6]](https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/politics/cost-of-ni-executives-overseas-travel-impossible-to-justify-says-opposition-leader-matthew-otoole/a1962098710.html)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/from-paris-to-new-zealand-jet-setting-stormont-officials-clock-up-470k-on-overseas-trips-in-last-year-ZQXBSDAT3BC7XIPS7WXLDKSKTY/), [[5]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/politics/mlas-overseas-jet-setting-to-obscure-conferences-cost-almost-19000-this-year-DYKMSUOXIVGSBMPZMC4FM3X5FE/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[3]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/czd406zve53o), [[6]](https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/politics/cost-of-ni-executives-overseas-travel-impossible-to-justify-says-opposition-leader-matthew-otoole/a1962098710.html)
* Paragraph 7 – [[6]](https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/politics/cost-of-ni-executives-overseas-travel-impossible-to-justify-says-opposition-leader-matthew-otoole/a1962098710.html), [[7]](https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/revealed-220000-cost-of-foreign-travel-over-last-year-for-stormont-ministers/a1721136548.html)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/from-paris-to-new-zealand-jet-setting-stormont-officials-clock-up-470k-on-overseas-trips-in-last-year-ZQXBSDAT3BC7XIPS7WXLDKSKTY/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/from-paris-to-new-zealand-jet-setting-stormont-officials-clock-up-470k-on-overseas-trips-in-last-year-ZQXBSDAT3BC7XIPS7WXLDKSKTY/> - Stormont's nine departments have spent £470,000 on foreign travel since February 2024, attending conferences and official events across 24 countries. Notable trips include a £10,000 visit to New Zealand by two Department of Agriculture officials and a £11,000 trip to New York Climate Week. The Department of Justice's officials visited 33 destinations, costing £42,847. The Department for the Economy was the highest spender, with £109,740 on six trips to cities like New York, Washington, and Berlin. Opposition MLA Timothy Gaston criticised the spending, calling it 'shameful' amid local service cuts.
3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/czd406zve53o> - Since the restoration of Northern Ireland's devolved government in February 2024, Stormont ministers have spent almost £35,000 on business-class flights, more than doubling the amount spent on economy air travel. The Executive Office, led by First Minister Michelle O'Neill and Deputy First Minister Emma Little-Pengelly, accounted for £19,872 of this expenditure. Critics have described the spending as 'completely out of touch' with the public. ([bbc.co.uk](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/czd406zve53o?utm_source=openai))
4. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/politics/stormont-assembly-chief-executives-18000-bill-for-trips-to-australia-canada-and-another-to-a-remote-island-in-the-south-atlantic-KQUAK5A7UBGG5BIA5FSBSYGLVU/> - Lesley Hogg, the chief executive of the Northern Ireland Assembly, has accumulated over £18,000 in travel expenses over the past three years. This includes a six-night trip to Sydney, Australia, for a Commonwealth Parliamentary Association conference costing £7,482, and an eight-night visit to the remote South Atlantic island of St Helena for another conference at £1,345. Hogg has spent a total of 43 nights away on business during this period. ([irishnews.com](https://www.irishnews.com/news/politics/stormont-assembly-chief-executives-18000-bill-for-trips-to-australia-canada-and-another-to-a-remote-island-in-the-south-atlantic-KQUAK5A7UBGG5BIA5FSBSYGLVU/?utm_source=openai))
5. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/politics/mlas-overseas-jet-setting-to-obscure-conferences-cost-almost-19000-this-year-DYKMSUOXIVGSBMPZMC4FM3X5FE/> - Overseas travel by five MLAs to various conferences in 2024 has cost the Northern Ireland Assembly almost £19,000. Destinations included Australia, Malaysia, and the South Atlantic island of St Helena. The Assembly's chief executive, Lesley Hogg, attended the same Sydney conference, adding £7,482 to the total. Critics argue that such expenditures are unjustifiable amid local service cuts. ([irishnews.com](https://www.irishnews.com/news/politics/mlas-overseas-jet-setting-to-obscure-conferences-cost-almost-19000-this-year-DYKMSUOXIVGSBMPZMC4FM3X5FE/?utm_source=openai))
6. <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/politics/cost-of-ni-executives-overseas-travel-impossible-to-justify-says-opposition-leader-matthew-otoole/a1962098710.html> - SDLP Opposition leader Matthew O'Toole has criticised the Northern Ireland Executive's overseas travel expenses, which total nearly £220,000 in the past year. He described the spending as 'impossible to justify' and questioned the prioritisation of such expenditures over local public services. ([belfasttelegraph.co.uk](https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/politics/cost-of-ni-executives-overseas-travel-impossible-to-justify-says-opposition-leader-matthew-otoole/a1962098710.html?utm_source=openai))
7. <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/revealed-220000-cost-of-foreign-travel-over-last-year-for-stormont-ministers/a1721136548.html> - Stormont ministers and their staff have incurred nearly £220,000 in overseas travel expenses over the past year. This includes stays in five-star hotels, raising concerns about the justification of such spending amid financial constraints. ([belfasttelegraph.co.uk](https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/revealed-220000-cost-of-foreign-travel-over-last-year-for-stormont-ministers/a1721136548.html?utm_source=openai))