

## Northern Ireland Executive needs action, not just aspirations – now is the time for delivery

*When the Executive returned in February 2024 after a prolonged collapse, Ministers were united in saying they would work together to boost failing public services for the benefit of all. However, 18 months later it increasingly appears that many of these positive words have not been followed by decisions or actions that will make a real difference. A step-change is required - Ministers need to both address Northern Ireland's persistent challenges and deliver tangible improvements in people's daily lives, according to a new report from Pivotal.*

The restored Executive has been praised for its stability – which continues despite some tense political moments – and ministers' seemingly constructive approach to working together to address local problems.

Previous lengthy periods of collapse caused huge harm to Northern Ireland's public services and the return of government has provided some leadership and direction. A Programme for Government (PfG) was published and budgets agreed. Some significant announcements have been made, including the Health and Social Care Reset Plan, the Childcare Subsidy Scheme and efforts to expand Ulster University's Magee Campus.

However, there remain major shortcomings in many areas, including few tangible improvements in day-to-day services, according to **18 months of the Northern Ireland Executive: a review**, published today [Monday, 1 September] – the latest biannual tracker report reviewing governmental performance from Pivotal, the independent think tank focused on Northern Ireland. Health waiting lists remain unacceptably high and accessing GP services is still difficult, efforts to boost affordable housing remain below the necessary levels, and policing numbers are still below what is required.

The Programme for Government is ambitious about change - but there is insufficient funding and a lack of specific actions to underpin many of its aims. Recent months have exposed a lack of substance behind some headline policy aims, for example the anti-poverty strategy, the housing supply strategy and the hospital reconfiguration framework.

There are also significant concerns about how the Executive plans to tackle some of our biggest long-term challenges. The decades-long underinvestment in wastewater systems has resulted in an infrastructure crisis that has reduced or eliminated new building capacity in large swathes of Northern Ireland.

Low productivity has been a challenge for the economy for decades and there are as yet no clear plans for change. Poverty remains an issue and, while an Anti-Poverty Strategy was published, it has been met by widespread criticism from the third sector and others.

The root of many of these problems is the continued failure of the Executive to reach collective agreement on difficult decisions, to work across departmental silos, and to be honest with the public that choices are needed between different policy aims. It is concerning that the longer-term Investment Strategy, which was due to sit alongside the Programme for Government, has still not been published.

Unresolved tensions have also emerged between different policy objectives and plans. A court intervention halted redevelopment of the A5, which is a key part of rejuvenating the western transport corridor, based on recent climate change legislation. A solution needs to be found. There has been little movement on addressing the blue-green algae crisis in Lough Neagh. Politicians from all but one of the Executive parties are opposed to the Nutrients Action Programme despite improving water quality being a Programme for Government priority.

Pivotal concludes that a step-change is needed in how the Executive meets local challenges. Ministers must show unity of purpose and have the courage to make tough choices for the benefit of everyone. The latest tracker report makes several specific recommendations to carry this forward:

- **Focus on delivering improvements that impact people's lives.** Despite some action towards improving services, little of this has fed through to the frontlines. The public needs to see and feel the benefits. The Executive must have a relentless focus on delivering improvements.
- **Credible plans to address the biggest policy challenges.** Many vital policy areas still lack concrete, long-term plans. Challenges with wastewater infrastructure, productivity, poverty and affordable housing cannot be fixed overnight, but doing nothing is unsustainable. Without real leadership – that will inevitably involve some tough choices – these long-term issues will get worse rather than better. The Executive must refocus on the biggest problems rather than the smaller issues that often dominate day-to-day political discourse.
- **Multi-year budget to enable planning and reform.** The Executive is in a position to draw a line under the repeated financial crises of recent years

and agree the first multi-year budget for over a decade. An emphasis on long-term strategy, rather than short-term fixes, provides the best chance to address huge local challenges.

- **Public service transformation.** Reforming the structure of public services is essential for them to be affordable now and in the future. The new Transformation Fund provides some finance but change is required right across the public sector, not just areas helped by the fund. The aim has to be effective, efficient services that improve people's lives.
- **Resolve tensions between priorities and find a shared way forward on the Climate Change Act.** The landmark A5 ruling exposed one of the conflicts in the current policy landscape. Disputes over how to address the Lough Neagh crisis are another. Ministers must work together to find a way to protect the environment – a legislative requirement and PfG priority – while driving other necessary policies forward.
- **Prepare for the ageing population.** Governments everywhere have seen health and social care take up growing proportions of their budgets. This will continue as the population ages – estimates suggest the number of people aged 85+ will increase by 122% in the 25 years following 2022 – and the Executive must prepare with transformation of services, improved population health, early intervention, prevention, use of technology and AI, and more efficient delivery of services.

**Ann Watt, Director of Pivotal, said: “The return of a stable Executive following significant periods of collapse has certainly been welcome. However, the Executive has not truly followed up its positive messaging and ambitions for courageous, cooperative government with real action.**

**“Efforts to improve public services have been slow and in many cases, such as health and social care and housing, the general public's experience of those services has seen no tangible improvement from a year or two ago.**

**“Perhaps more worrying is the deeper lack of progress on some of Northern Ireland's most difficult and most important challenges. There is little sign of agreement from Ministers on wastewater infrastructure, real plans to address poverty, or how to fix Northern Ireland's historically low productivity.**

**“It is increasingly clear there are conflicts between some of the government's stated priorities. Development of the A5 was stopped because of a court ruling on climate change legislation. Cleaning up Lough Neagh is a clear aim but there is significant opposition to the Nutrients Action Programme.**

**“These are huge challenges and meeting them requires political bravery and unity from the Executive. Tough decisions need to be made – and ministers need to present a united front. So far, we have not seen that they are prepared to make the collective decisions needed. Unfortunately doing nothing is not an option - without a step-change, we can expect many of these issues to get worse.**

**“Transforming public services will not be easy. Improving people’s lives is going to involve prioritisation, trade offs and in all likelihood taking some measures that are unpopular. We need politicians to be honest with the public about the difficult decisions that are needed.”**

Pivotal’s report analysed progress on each of the Executive’s stated PfG priority areas, as well as giving a run down on work done – and work still to be done – for each individual department. Much of that work is summarised below:

## **EXECUTIVE’S PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES**

### **1. Grow a globally competitive and sustainable economy**

The Economy Minister is continuing with the four pillar vision for the economy: productivity, good jobs, regional balance and reducing carbon emissions.

City Deals and Growth Deals will aim to improve NI’s ongoing low productivity but there remain doubts about the details for these plans. Some investment has been made in skills and apprenticeships schemes.

The central action on regional balance has been the expansion of Ulster University’s Magee Campus, while the Department has also published its Sub-Regional Economic Plan which commits £1.3bn investment outside Belfast. On decarbonisation, the PfG promised £15m in an Energy and Resource Support Scheme to help businesses reduce bills, alongside other schemes.

### **2. Deliver more affordable, accessible, high-quality early learning and childcare**

An Early Learning and Childcare Strategy has yet to be published. However, the ongoing Childcare Subsidy Scheme has saved £6.5m for families. So far £25m has been invested towards standardised provision of 22.5 funded hours per week of pre-school for all children, but this still needs to be rolled out to all settings.

### **3. Cut health waiting times**

The PfG commits to improving performance, productivity and quality of care through elective care centres, rapid diagnosis centres, and Mega Clinics. However, Emergency Department waits are at a five-year high and over 57% of people wait more than a year for a first consultant-led outpatient appointment.

A consultation has been held on reforming adult social care, while £215m has been ringfenced to address waiting times, most of which came from existing Department funds.

#### **4. Ending violence against women and girls**

The Executive has launched a detailed strategic framework and delivery plan to end violence against women and girls. A £1.2m regional change fund was announced for the voluntary sector and a £2m fund was shared across the 11 council districts to support relevant organisations.

The Departments of Health and Justice published a joint Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy and Action Plan.

#### **5. Better support for children and young people with SEN**

The Education Minister committed to using more technology to assist with early interventions and cross-departmental working. The SEN Capital Programme will fund up to eight new special schools, upgrades for existing schools, and in-school supports. Announcements were made about improving post-19 transitions although campaigners say this does not go far enough.

The PfG states that all children should attend an appropriate setting but the EA may still instruct mainstream schools to take SEN pupils without required supports being in place – a symptom of the fact there are still issues with enrolment. In June, 164 SEN pupils were without a school place. Efforts throughout the summer reduced this number to six.

#### **6. Provide more social, affordable and sustainable housing**

The planning system has been amended to help delivery of projects. The Executive published its Housing Supply Strategy, committing to 100,000 homes over 15 years, a third of which should be social homes – although new starts still lag behind targets.

Work continues on allowing the Housing Executive to borrow money and the Minister announced £153m in FTC funding for co-ownership. However, the main issue – as the Minister has said – is supply. Issues with wastewater infrastructure continue to create major obstacles to building.

#### **7. Safer communities**

A £200m package has been requested to boost police numbers from 6,200 to 7,000 but this would still leave the PSNI significantly below the PfG commitment of 7,500 or the 8,000 figure the Chief Constable said is required.

The Speeding up Justice programme will focus on getting serious cases to court quickly and try to deliver digital efficiencies within the courts system.

The Department has worked on a draft Victims and Witnesses of Crime Strategy and a Victims and Witnesses Charter to support people through the system. Its Ending the Harm campaign ran across NI in a bid to reduce the influence of paramilitarism.

## **8. Protecting Lough Neagh and the environment**

The Lough Neagh Action Plan was published last year but so far only 14 of its 37 actions have been implemented. DAERA's Nutrients Action Programme has become controversial and the subject of friction between different parties within the Executive.

The Department is consulting on its Climate Action Plan, and has completed consultations on third Climate Change Adaptation Programme and Just Transition Commission. The Green Growth Strategy has been sitting in draft form since before the Executive was restored.

The PfG promises to "continue to implement the Environmental Improvement Plan". Its 2024/25 targets include the development of an ammonia strategy and consulting on a clean air strategy, although these are yet to appear.

## **9. Reform and transformation of public services**

A Delivery Unit has been set up in the Executive Office to assist with delivery of the Programme for Government priorities and transformation. However there has been little information provided on its staffing, resources, and remit. £129m of the £235m Transformation Fund has been released for projects including Multi-Disciplinary Health Teams, SEN reform, speeding up the criminal justice system and planning reform.

The Department of Finance worked closely with the Treasury to agree a Budget Sustainability Plan, which commits to multi-year funding where possible, consideration of income generation, and future work on securing finances. An Interim Fiscal Framework was agreed, ensuring a 124% fiscal floor for Northern Ireland.

## **DEPARTMENT BY DEPARTMENT**

## **Health**

Actions delivered:

- Initiatives to reduce waiting lists
- Health and Social Care Reset Plan published
- Transformation funding approved

Priorities ahead:

- Significant reductions in waiting lists and times
- Publish specific details for hospital reconfiguration
- Stay within budget while agreeing pay settlements

## **Education**

Delivered:

- SEN Reform Agenda and Delivery Plan
- Childcare Subsidy Scheme
- Publication of TransformedED Delivery Plan

Priorities:

- Ensure SEN reforms lead to sufficient places in appropriate settings
- Publish Early Learning and Childcare Strategy
- Act on findings from the curriculum review

## **Justice**

Delivered:

- Published Enabling Access to Justice reforms
- Consulted on actions to speed up justice
- Transformation funding approved

Priorities:

- Increase PSNI officer numbers
- Reduce court backlog
- Move Justice Bill through the Assembly

## **Economy**

Delivered:

- Published Good Jobs Bill
- Regional Balance Fund

- Announce new post-19 SEN supports

Priorities:

- Move Good Jobs Bill through the Assembly
- Respond to US tariffs and global volatility
- Improve productivity levels

## **Infrastructure**

Delivered:

- Consulted on developer contributions to fund water connections
- Transport Strategy consultation
- Some planning times have improved

Priorities:

- Respond to A5 ruling
- Improve wastewater capacity
- Meet planning waiting times targets

## **Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs**

Delivered:

- Sustainable Agriculture Programme published
- Bovine TB eradication plan produced
- Mobuoy Strategy consultation delivered

Priorities:

- Resolve issues with the Nutrients Action Programme
- Work with Infrastructure Minister on response to the A5 ruling
- Respond to the report of the Independent Panel on Environment Governance's report

## **Communities**

Delivered:

- Established the Intermediate Rent scheme
- Published the Anti-Poverty Strategy
- Published Housing Supply Strategy

Priorities:

- Work with stakeholders to improve the Anti-Poverty Strategy



- Meet housebuilding targets
- Take action on the development of Casement Park

## **Finance**

Delivered:

- The ability to produce multi-year budgets has been secured
- 2025-26 Budget agreed
- Transformation funding announced

Priorities:

- Deliver multi-year budgets
- Finalise the Fiscal Framework
- Continue to emphasise transformation, including the second round of the Transformation Fund

ENDS

## **Notes to Editors**

**For further information or to schedule an interview, contact Ryan Miller on 07789 552 340 or [ryan@millercomms.co.uk](mailto:ryan@millercomms.co.uk)**

1. Pivotal is an independent think tank launched in September 2019. Pivotal aims to help improve public policy in Northern Ireland
2. Pivotal's published reports are available [here](#)
3. Pivotal's Board of Trustees provides oversight of its work. They are David Gavaghan (Chair); Sarah Creighton; Judith Gillespie; Rosalind Skillen; Andrew McCormick; Seamus McAleavey; Alan Whysall
4. Pivotal's Director Ann Watt is a former senior civil servant with 25 years' experience in public policy development and delivery. Most recently Ann was Head of the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland (2014-2019)
5. Pivotal has received funding and in-kind support from Belfast Harbour Commissioners, The Community Foundation Northern Ireland, the

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, NICVA, Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University

6. For further information about Pivotal see <https://www.pivotalpolicy.org/> or contact Pivotal's Director Ann Watt on 07932 043835
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