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The Executive must work together to take on local challenges

Northern Ireland faces a series of severe policy challenges as well as unprecedented budgetary pressures. Now more than ever, good government is required – an Executive that demonstrably works together, finds common cause, and takes collective responsibility for the tough choices that are required. After a positive start when the Executive returned two years ago, in recent months relationships between ministers of different parties appear to have soured, alongside a slowing down in progress on policy issues. Unless this changes, the issues we face will continue to deteriorate.

Executive ministers have made some good progress in recent months on issues like childcare, expansion of the Magee campus and public sector pay awards. But they face an immense challenge to address Northern Ireland's long list of policy crises. Many local issues require both short- and long-term plans in order to stabilise services today and ensure their viability tomorrow. Priorities have to be identified and tough choices have to be made.

This can only be achieved if the Executive agrees to work together, is honest with the public about the size of the problems, and resolves to jointly find solutions despite the difficulties. However, in the past six months relationships between ministers from different parties have deteriorated, making it much harder for progress on difficult issues to be made.

In its latest Stormont tracker report, ***Two years of the restored Northern Ireland Executive***, published today [Thursday, 29 Jan], Pivotal, the independent think tank focused on Northern Ireland, emphasises that this is a vital time for the Executive. The report, the latest in Pivotal's biannual series looking at the performance of government in Northern Ireland, outlines how big decisions are needed about spending, investment and reforms, and that this will require pragmatism, cooperation and good faith.

Since its restoration in February 2024, the Executive has made certain progress in some important areas like education reform, skills development, health waiting lists and more. Magee expansion is a Programme for Government (PfG)

commitment and in 2025-26 the number of students enrolled there exceeded departmental targets.

Other actions on PfG priorities included the provision of £3.2m funding through councils for local groups aiming to tackle Violence Against Women and Girls, and the proposal of a £1.7bn capital investment programme to build capacity in Special Educational Needs (SEN) – albeit currently some children with SEN remain without a school place.

Despite extreme strain on public finances, the current opportunity to set a multi-year budget provides a chance to stabilise and transform public services through long-term, strategic planning. However, this requires agreement and the Finance Minister's proposed budget has been met with immediate opposition, including from within the Executive.

The last six months have seen relationships deteriorate between the Executive parties. When more energy goes into party-political arguments rather than finding constructive common cause, opportunities to make policy progress are missed.

Vital areas like wastewater infrastructure and hospital reconfiguration still have no plan for change, the 30-year Investment Strategy is yet to be published – which is particularly concerning, given this should help steer the multi-year budget – and the proposed anti-poverty strategy was roundly dismissed by campaigners.

Although some of the longest health waiting lists have been brought down, in 55.6% of all cases waiting times are still longer than a year (the target is that no one should wait more than 12 months). A review into the ten-year Mental Health Strategy found that only 16% of the necessary funding was allocated, leading to severe failures in delivery.

Pay disputes within Health and Education were resolved, although as a result the Executive is forecast for an overspend of around £400m in 2025-26. The average time to complete a Crown Court trial continues to rise, sitting at over two years. The NI Audit Office found “significant flaws” in the Energy Strategy, which is “lagging considerably” despite a spend of £107m since 2020. Two of its three key targets are set to be missed, and in one case, only 1% of the energy saving target has been achieved.

Although some progress has been made with Lough Neagh, the ecological crisis there continues. Toxins were found in fish in the lough for the first time, while fines were enforced in only 16% of the total number of pollution cases where this was an option.

The immense and unprecedented financial pressures that government will face in the coming years makes the Executive's job much more difficult – but also, as Northern Ireland's public services crisis deepens, more important. Over the past decade or so, services have decayed significantly despite rising spending.

Transformation of public services, which has so far been slow and piecemeal, needs to be a top priority for the Executive and Senior Civil Servants. However, effective transformation will be impossible without some sense of political unity, with parties pragmatically focusing on how they can cooperate on major issues rather than pouring energy into disagreements.

Working within a mandatory coalition is undoubtedly challenging, even in more straightforward times for government, but politicians here need to show leadership, operate in good faith, and accept that working together within an Executive means they are jointly accountable for the governance of Northern Ireland.

Ann Watt, Director of Pivotal, said: “This is a crucial time for Northern Ireland. Government faces crises on multiple fronts and the Executive has to try and address these alongside unprecedented pressures on budget allocations.

“This is an incredibly difficult task and there should be no doubt about the scale of the challenge facing ministers. They have to strike a balance between, on one hand, the need for short-term improvements to tackle areas like health waiting lists and SEN provision and, on the other, the need to invest in transformation and reconfiguration to ensure the long-term viability of the public sector.

“The chance to craft a multi-year budget is crucial. Despite tight finances, this still offers an opportunity for strategic planning and to kickstart reforms of public services so they are fit for the future.

“Realistically this will mean the new budget cannot simply mirror what previous ones have said. Tough decisions need to be made – including on efficiencies and savings, as well as options about extra revenue raising.

“The only way this can be taken forward is with an Executive that focuses on finding common ground on the biggest challenges facing Northern Ireland, rather than the places where there are disagreements. Without a doubt it is difficult to get a mandatory coalition to function effectively, but ministers must show leadership, commitment and pragmatism to make it work as well as it can.

“With that in mind, it is dispiriting to see the weakening of relationships between ministers of different parties over the past six months, which makes it harder for meaningful progress to be made. A change of direction is required, otherwise Northern Ireland’s issues will only continue to grow.

“Given the scale of the challenges we all face as a society this cannot be allowed to happen. All Executive ministers need a relentless focus on improving public services in a way that helps people in their daily lives.

“Finally, it remains difficult to properly assess how well the Executive is achieving its priorities, since there still has not been any public information about how the Programme for Government will be reported on or scrutinised, despite a promise of annual reporting.”

Pivotal’s report contains six key recommendations for the Executive:

- 1. Prioritise delivering improvements for the public.** Public services continue to fall short of what people need, and this is particularly true for those on lower incomes and/or facing other challenges. Retreating into party politics might be tempting, especially with elections getting closer, but that will not help the public in their day-to-day lives. Ministers’ focus should be on delivering on the agreed priorities in the Programme for Government, and on demonstrating how those actions are helping people in a meaningful way.
- 2. Use the multi-year budget to plan strategically for the future.** Despite tight finances, the first multi-year budget in years represents a chance to begin addressing long-term problems. This opportunity cannot be missed. The lack of Executive agreement before the draft budget went for consultation is disappointing. Huge changes will be required to manage within next year’s funding allocation. Continuing with existing spending patterns could lead to an overspend of £1bn or more. The Executive has to consider both cost savings and efficiencies, where possible, and local revenue raising.
- 3. Accelerate transformation across public services.** While the public needs to see short-term improvements to services, it is just as important to rapidly increase the pace of transformation, or services will ultimately continue to decline. Public services are unaffordable as currently configured, and this will only get worse if transformation is slow or piecemeal. To expedite progress, a senior figure with a well-resourced team and a track record of delivery should be appointed – rather than just a Transformation Board with a ring-fenced allocation – together with cross-

cutting support from the Executive and departments to lead transformation on the scale that is needed.

4. **Publish credible, funded plans for long-standing challenges.** Some of Northern Ireland's biggest and most persistent challenges still have no visible plans for change. Health service reconfiguration, waste-water infrastructure and low productivity are massive issues applying huge downward pressure on local health and prosperity. An Anti-Poverty Strategy was published but immediately dismissed as worthless, the Investment Strategy is long overdue, while other areas like redevelopment of the A5, climate legislation and Lough Neagh remain in limbo. Ministers need to commit to work together to find pragmatic solutions to these difficult issues.
5. **Ensure progression of key government legislation.** A number of bills proposed in this mandate are either moving slowly – such as the Sign Language and Justice Bills – or have yet to be introduced. Key legislation such as the Good Jobs Bill and the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill must be introduced with appropriate time for scrutiny and voting before the Assembly dissolves ahead of the next election.
6. **Regain the public's trust and confidence.** Ongoing divisions risk reinforcing the view that Northern Ireland's system of government is ineffective or even unworkable. The Executive has joint responsibility for the governance of Northern Ireland and ministers must display that joint responsibility through leadership, building relationships and common ground, and acting with unity of purpose.

Pivotal's report also contains a breakdown of the work done by each individual department since the last tracker report in September 2025, alongside immediate priorities for 2026, as well as a review of what has been delivered against the Programme for Government priorities. Some of the main points from these analyses are outlined below, alongside selected key statistics:

Health

Headline actions since September 2025: *There has been some progress on reducing waiting lists, £200m has been allocated for staff pay awards, and the Cancer Research Strategic Framework was launched.*

Priorities for 2026: *Pay increases need to be accounted for at the start of the financial year, implementation of the refocusing of services towards primary care, and publishing a plan for hospital reconfiguration.*

Although some of the longest surgical waiting times have been reduced, in general waits are still too high – with 55.6% of cases involving waits of over a year despite the target of no one waiting more than 12 months.

Despite being crucial to planned Bengoa reforms, there has been little progress on hospital reconfiguration and no published plan for change. Emergency Department waiting times are still long, with only around a third of cases seen within four hours of arrival against a target of 90%.

A review into the ten-year Mental Health Strategy found that only 16% of the necessary funding was allocated leading to significant failures in delivery.

Education

Actions: *Early Learning and Childcare Strategy published, Minister's positions on integrated schools and RAISE endorsed by court rulings, progress made on the TransformED strategy.*

Priorities: *Ensure SEN provision is available and adequately funded, reduce maintenance backlog in the schools estate, continue delivery of TransformED.*

The School Uniforms (Guidances and Allowances) Bill passed its final Assembly stage and awaits Royal Assent, with guidelines already shared with schools ahead of the 2026-27 academic year. However, some MLAs criticised the legislation for being watered down.

TransformED includes plans to support teachers and raise standards but, as with much of the programme, a £31m fund to aid teacher development still needs to be rolled out operationally alongside various other schemes to boost skills.

A backdated 4% pay-rise for teachers was announced, although this contributes to a forecast £253m overspend by the Department this year. More work must be done by the Minister to ensure financial stability. However, it should also be noted that the Minister was heavily critical of the draft multi-year budget, saying it would leave him unable to fulfil some core functions.

Justice

Actions: *Money received for PSNI recruitment and police pay awards, funding for domestic and sexual abuse services launched, a decision was made to allow broadcasting of courts.*

Priorities: *Fund compensation for the PSNI data breach, continue to progress the Justice Bill and bring forward a Sentencing Bill and Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill, publish plans to reduce reoffending.*

The PSNI remains under significant financial and staffing pressures, while also having to manage costs of around £227m due to the 2023 data breach and other “exceptional pressures”. The Police Federation has called on the Secretary of State for a bailout of the Department, although the Treasury has previously rejected the Executive’s request for financial assistance to cover the costs of the data breach compensation.

Following outbreaks of racist disorder in NI, the Minister reiterated her commitment to tackle hate crimes through a number of pieces of legislation. Each of these will need to be tabled to allow sufficient time for proper scrutiny and voting before the end of the mandate.

The Minister’s approval for the broadcasting of judge’s sentencing remarks, subject to judicial discretion, will not be finalised until the next mandate. Meanwhile, the average time to complete a trial remains significantly higher than pre-Covid, with Crown Court times in 2024-25 at 752 days – 50 days higher than the previous year.

Economy

Actions: Skills Action Plan published, consultation published on increasing postgraduate loans, the One Year On report from the Magee Taskforce was published.

Priorities: Energy Strategy needs to progress, the Good Jobs Bill should be introduced to the Assembly, a plan to improve productivity needs to be developed.

The Minister says her Skills Action Plan will underpin the Department’s four-pillar economic vision of good jobs, raising productivity, decarbonisation and regional balance. Progress will be necessary, given productivity is both low and stagnant, economic inactivity is consistently high, and one quarter of all jobs vacancies are due to skills shortages.

The Good Jobs Employment Rights Bill is a flagship piece of Executive legislation and needs to be introduced in good time to ensure proper scrutiny before the end of the mandate, particularly given the concerns raised about it by some employers.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) found “significant flaws” in the Department’s Energy Strategy, which is “lagging considerably” despite a spend of £107m since 2020. Two of its three key targets are set to be missed, and in one case, only 1% of one energy saving target has been achieved so far.

Infrastructure

Actions: *Improvements in planning times, approval for the late night public transport pilot, Hill Street pedestrianisation moved forwards.*

Priorities: *Prepare for the A5 appeal, take action on wastewater infrastructure, respond to the NIAO Active Travel report.*

Despite some extra funding, wastewater infrastructure remains one of the biggest challenges for Northern Ireland, with a huge negative impact on housing and other development due to the blockages it has created for construction. While funding in the draft multi-year budget is welcome, long-term solutions are urgently needed for how NI Water will be adequately funded.

A damning NIAO report on active travel found that the Department's track record is poor. Delivery of key infrastructure has been lacking and the travel targets for cycling remain unmet, with only 2% of people cycling to and from work.

Redevelopment of the A5 is a flagship policy and preparatory work must take place to ensure this can move forward following court-imposed delays.

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Actions: *Environmental Governance Review published, Peatland Strategy published, Environmental Principles Policy Statement published.*

Priorities: *Improve relations with farming bodies on Nutrients Action Programme and other issues, deliver on Lough Neagh Action Plan, established independent Environmental Protection Agency.*

Although there has been some progress with the Lough Neagh Action Plan, the crisis has continued to grow, with only 16% of the total number of pollution cases where fines could be issued being enforced and toxins found in fish in the Lough for the first time.

The Ulster Farmers' Union Executive unanimously voted no confidence in the Minister and Department over their unhappiness with the Nutrients Action Programme, tackling bovine tuberculosis, sustainable farming, climate change and Lough Neagh. This relationship must be improved to build a path forward on these issues and general sustainability within the sector.

In order to be effective, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) – a New Decade New Approach commitment – needs to exist as a Non-Departmental Public Body, while an independent panel established to review plans for the EPA said the regulator must be accompanied by “broad and meaningful changes” to tackle the climate crisis. These reforms face some opposition inside the Executive.

Communities

Actions: *Disability and Work Strategy published, Housing Association Grant was reconfigured, the NI Football Fund was announced.*

Priorities: *Increase housebuilding to meet targets, work with Treasury to agree borrowing powers for the Housing Executive, provide clarity and leadership on the Local Growth Fund.*

The grants given to housing association to build new homes were reduced from 54% to 46%, with the Minister saying this will allow the Department to invest in a greater number of homes, in light of the PfG's "challenging" target of 5,850 social housing starts. Starts were 30% below targets in 2024-25, and many housing associations say the reductions raise concerns about the future viability of many projects.

Northern Ireland has amongst the highest rates of economic inactivity in the UK, and almost 40% of that rate relates to ill-health or disability. The Disability and Work Strategy aims to support 50,000 disabled people into the workforce and increase the disability employment rate to 50% by March 2036. However, the UK Government significantly cut funding to third sector organisations tackling economic inactivity through their plans for the Local Growth Fund.

Negotiations are ongoing with the Treasury around devolution of borrowing powers to the NIHE.

Consultation on the Executive's Anti-Poverty Strategy closed in September with significant criticism from campaigners and pressure to drop the strategy entirely.

Finance

Actions: *The December monitoring round allocated funds for pay awards and other pressures, the consultation launched for the proposed draft multi-year budget, additional transformation funding was announced within those proposals.*

Priorities: *Work with Executive ministers to agree a multi-year budget before the start of 2026-27, ensure the cost of pay awards is factored into allocations, manage within budgets for the next financial year.*

Currently the Health and Education departments will be significantly over-budget this year, while total overspending among all departments is projected to total around £400m. Work must continue to minimise this overspending.

It is vital that the Executive uses the chance for a multi-year budget to begin addressing some of Northern Ireland's core, long-standing problems. This has to

be the Minister's priority, especially given the negative reaction from several Executive colleagues at the budget proposals which are currently out for consultation.

Work is also ongoing with the Treasury to agree a final Fiscal Framework, which could include the devolution of more tax-raising powers to Northern Ireland.

ENDS

Notes to Editors

Ann Watt is available for interview. To schedule a discussion, or for any other queries, contact Ryan Miller on 07789 552 340 or 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; Barry Byrne; 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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