

Research Report

Improving the institutions

Suggested reforms to the Northern
Ireland Assembly and Executive

pivotal

There is a growing debate about reforming the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive. This report suggests a number of potential changes short of removing the 'single-party veto' which could make a positive difference to the functioning of the institutions.

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Executive summary

Dysfunction at Stormont has opened a debate about reform of Northern Ireland's system of government. Pivotal undertook ten new research interviews on the functioning of the Assembly and Executive with former Senior Civil Servants, former Ministers and MLAs, former SpAds and senior public officials. The headline findings were that poor relationships in the Executive get in the way of progress, difficult decisions are delayed or ignored, legislation brought forward by ministers is rare, and the Assembly often focuses on non-binding motions rather than scrutiny of the Executive.

Across the Assembly and Executive, this report suggests a number of practical, achievable reforms which seek to increase scrutiny of ministers, unblock the persistent logjams which have plagued decision-making, and put collaborative policy generation at the heart of government.

These changes are the introduction of Bill Committees, resourcing the Official Opposition, changing the Assembly Business Diary and the election of the Speaker, changes to the D'Hondt process (including Justice, running the process as one for ministers and committee roles, and setting an Executive threshold), greater use of Executive sub-committees, enforcing the three-meeting rule on Executive business, and reinforcing the importance of the PFG, Budget and legislative programme.

These are changes around which we think there could be broad agreement. The report does not consider the removal of the 'single-party veto', which allows one of the two main parties to prevent the formation of or to collapse the Executive. While this veto does have a significant impact on the way the institutions operate, the lack of consensus between the main parties at present means this is unlikely to be a realistic option.

The most consistent message from our interviewees was not about the structures at all. Time and again, they returned to culture, behaviour and leadership. Many pointed to previous Executives where there was a sense of goodwill between the parties, an ability to compromise and negotiate, strong leadership, and a shared determination to improve outcomes for people. Unfortunately, not all Executives have shown these same qualities. Any structural changes to the institutions must go hand-in-hand with a more collaborative culture.

This report seeks to encourage deeper conversation and discussion about reform, by highlighting achievable changes to the institutions. The proposals are suggestions rather than recommendations, which we hope will help politicians find common ground.

Of the suggestions for reform made in this report, Pivotal proposes three changes which could be agreed ahead of the upcoming Assembly Election, allowing them to be embedded for the beginning of the next mandate:

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- Reinforcing the importance of the Programme for Government, budget and legislative programme

 - Enforcing the three-meeting rule on Executive business

 - Increased resourcing of the Official Opposition

These reforms would improve good governance, reduce blockages and delays at the Executive, and improve scrutiny of ministers in the Assembly.

Pivotal's research is normally focused on policy challenges and improved decision-making, and so making suggestions about changes to the institutions is an unusual area for us. However, we recognise that effective policy-making relies on the institutions functioning properly, and that has not been the case in recent years. We therefore offer this analysis and these ideas as a contribution to discussion about reforms which would make Stormont work better.

Introduction, rationale and methodology

Institutional reform is high on the agenda of politicians, commentators and academics. Reports of difficult relationships around the Executive table, and of an ineffective Assembly, have raised its profile further, as has a lack of delivery, frequent collapses, and declining trust in the institutions.

Given the lack of political consensus about major reforms, this paper focuses on changes short of removing what has become known as the ‘single-party veto’ on Executive formation. This veto allows one of the top two parties to collapse the institutions or stop them from functioning. The suggested reforms have been developed with the aim of contributing to improved decision-making and commanding widespread support.

There is no consensus among the main parties about reform. The [DUP is opposed](#) to the removal of the veto. Sinn Féin recently published a policy paper on reform, [supporting its removal](#) and other changes. The [UUP](#) have said reform must protect cross-community consent. The [Alliance](#) Party (the largest party of the ‘Other’ designation, whose MLAs don’t count in cross-community votes) and the [SDLP](#) (the Official Opposition), have been the most vocal champions of reforming the institutions.

As there is no shared way forward on removing the veto, the debate on institutional reform often loses momentum. While repeated collapses and failed starts of the Executive have been hugely detrimental to good government and public services here, without the support of all the main parties, reforms of any kind are unlikely to be adopted. Pivotal is concerned that the removal of the veto, as recently endorsed by Sinn Féin and advocated by Alliance and SDLP,

would encounter a range of practical and political barriers with the potential to generate significant difficulties.

Furthermore, [there is no public consensus](#) about alternative systems of governance. The majority in Northern Ireland still support the [principle of a power-sharing government](#) as set out in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Having said that, [public dissatisfaction with the Assembly and Executive](#) is high.

This report, therefore, looks in detail at reforms short of the removal of the veto that could contribute to improved government here, drawing on interviews with ten experts with first-hand experience of the operation of the institutions. It aims to explore reforms that are achievable, acceptable to the main political parties, and which can make a positive difference. By engaging in-depth about these other options for reform, we hope to contribute to finding common ground among the parties ahead of the upcoming election.

Methodology

There have been various high-quality reports looking at reform of the institutions in recent years, from government, academia and beyond. [UCL’s Constitution Unit](#) published a comprehensive report providing a technical analysis of a number of potential reforms, and a [recent follow-up](#) considered how reform can impact good government. The [Northern Ireland Affairs Committee](#) in the House of Commons looked into this topic and called for a formal independent review into reform. Academics have engaged in deliberative forums with members of the public, hearing their opinions on [reforming the institutions](#) and [power-sharing](#). There is a growing body of literature on this topic, as well as frequent debates in politics, the media and civic society.

We undertook a review of this literature, engaging with the arguments for and against, the suggested options, their strengths and weaknesses, public opinion and the history of previous attempts to reform the institutions.

This was followed by ten new in-depth, semi-structured research interviews with former senior civil servants, former ministers and MLAs, former special advisers (SpAds), academics and public officials which were recorded and transcribed. Most of our interviewees had first-hand experience of the day-to-day working of the institutions. Interviewees have been anonymised, offering those with experience and expertise the opportunity for greater candour. The findings from the interviews and our literature review inform this research and our suggestions.

As with all Pivotal reports, we offer this independent analysis and these ideas as a contribution to improved policy-making in Northern Ireland.

Reforming the institutions: Background

The institutions of politics and government in Northern Ireland, namely the Assembly and Executive, have their basis in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (B/GFA). The B/GFA was designed to bring peace, but in the words of Interviewee G, it has not brought “good governance”. 28 years on from the signing of the Agreement, and looking ahead to the next Assembly election in 2027, should there be changes to the way they operate?

Discussion about reforming or changing the institutions is common in policy circles, the media, politics, and the institutions themselves. Many point to repeated collapses, frequent stalemates, persistent dysfunction, and struggling public services as evidence that the current structures are not fit for purpose.

The B/GFA itself includes provision for reform of the institutions to be considered. The Assembly and Executive Review Committee was established under the St Andrews Agreement and is currently holding an inquiry into reform of the institutions.

There have been agreements in the past which have brought forward or proposed various reforms to both the structures of and behaviours in government. Some of these reforms have been implemented, many others have not. A consideration of previous settlements can be found in Annex. These have come about through negotiations between the main parties in the Assembly, as well as between the British and Irish governments. These reforms have had varying levels of success and longevity. There was a general consensus among our interviewees that future conversations around reform should include all the main parties and the two governments.

Much of the reform debate has focused on the ‘Strand One’ institutions: the Assembly and Executive. This research falls within this category. While outside the scope of this report, there should, in time, be due consideration of the operation of Strands Two and Three (North/South and East/West relationships), particularly as the UK’s relationship with the European Union, and therefore Ireland, continues to change post-Brexit.

It is important that, at this juncture, any debate around reform of the institutions maintains the core principles of the B/GFA: “[partnership, equality and mutual respect](#)” as set out in the Declaration of Support. Proposals for reform should ensure the improved functioning of the institutions in a fair and equitable manner, and not for party political gain. The B/GFA codified these principles of peace and set up the basis of our power-sharing institutions. While we can examine their effectiveness in the present and offer suggestions for change, those core principles must be central.



The case for reform

The Executive has been sitting for over two years now since its restoration in February 2024. This followed two long periods of collapse within the last ten years, where political leadership was absent, policy challenges continued to build, public services deteriorated, and confidence in the institutions declined. Now, with an upcoming Assembly election in less than 12 months, reform is on the minds of many.

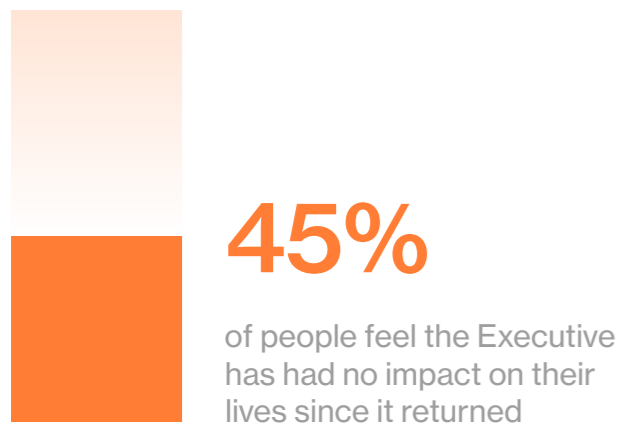
Having the institutions back up and running is much better than the alternative of collapse. However, merely being there is not enough. Poor delivery from the Executive over the last two years has been a significant challenge and [public confidence in MLAs to make a positive difference in Northern Ireland is low](#): 45% of people feel the Executive has had no impact on their lives since it returned, 26% feel it has made life worse.

Significant strategic challenges remain for the Executive: despite some progress, hospital [waiting lists](#) remain extremely long, over 100 towns cannot connect new developments to the [wastewater network](#), there is no agreed long-term plan to [tackle poverty, childcare costs remain high](#) even with government interventions, and [SEN provision](#) is outstripped by growing demand. Funding and [budgetary crises](#), along with significant [skills gaps](#) and

persistently [low productivity](#) mean our fiscal and economic outlook is concerning. An inability to deliver on these issues is reflected in the lack of trust in the institutions. One former MLA we interviewed recognised all these shortcomings and said the need for reform was therefore “greater than ever”.

There was a consensus across many of our interviewees, however, that the need for reform should not be considered a structural one only. A former SpAd said “we blame structures for cultural issues”, while others advocated for stronger leadership from the Executive as a way of driving delivery and so increasing trust in the institutions. Pivotal has [previously highlighted the 2007-2011 Executive](#) as one which worked effectively due to strong leadership from the First and deputy First Ministers, trust among ministers, and a commitment to improving public services. It is important to note that this mandate operated under the same structures as more recent Executives.

Interviewee D noted that “on the time point alone”, it is worth reconsidering the design of the institutions. It has been 28 years since the B/GFA was signed and six years since New Decade, New Approach. In that time, the Executive ran from 2020-2022, collapsed for two years, and returned in 2024. The [difficulties of governing through Covid](#) and the position of NI post-Windsor Framework have highlighted the challenges of our political system and renewed the discussion about reform.



The following sections include Pivotal’s suggestions for future reforms, both to the Assembly and the Executive. These are offered as proposals for further discussion and debate, with the aim of encouraging greater conversation about achievable reforms which can be actioned in the short- to medium- term. This is not intended to be a definitive or final list of possible reforms.

These ideas were discussed and refined in ten in-depth research interviews. Each section of this report includes a description of the issue it seeks to solve, provides some information about the proposed reform, and offers both their strengths and challenges.

Not every idea was accepted by all our interviewees. Where there is disagreement, or a lack of consensus, we have sought to express their concerns in the ‘challenges’ sections.

NOTE:

Suggestion 05 will have three sub-points, with each one to be considered separately.

Suggested reforms to the Assembly

- 01. Introduction of Bill Committees
- 02. Increased resourcing of the Official Opposition
- 03. Changing the Assembly Business Diary
- 04. Changing the election of the Speaker

Suggested reforms to the Executive

- 05. Changes to the D'Hondt Process
- 06. The use of Executive sub-committees
- 07. Enforce three meeting rule on Executive Business
- 08. Reinforcing the importance of the Programme for Government, Budget and legislative programme

Reforms to the Assembly

Suggestion 01: Bill Committees

Bill Committees are separate ad hoc committees which scrutinise legislation instead of the statutory committee. This would allow for a dedicated space for MLAs to take more time scrutinising Bills, and free up time for the statutory committees to hold ministers and departments to account.

One senior public official called committees the “engine house of the Assembly” where a lot of the most constructive scrutiny work is being done. However, interviewees listed a number of cultural and structural issues: Interviewee A noted that some members “don’t set aside their party allegiances” and some committees have behaved like “lobby groups” for certain industries, Interviewee I said they focus more on scrutiny than assisting in the development of their department’s policies, and Interviewee G said that the questioning of witnesses in committees can be poor.

Furthermore, many of our interviewees recognised that committees were under a lot of pressure from a large workload. Some referred back to the reduction of Executive departments in 2016, noting that a reduction of three departments meant the Assembly lost three committees but, in the words of a former SpAd, “it doesn’t mean that there’s less that has to go to committees”.

This pressure tends to manifest itself most clearly in inadequate legislative scrutiny. Interviewee E, a former minister, said committees have become “jack of all trades, master of none”, highlighting RHI as a prominent example of where a committee lobbied for the legislation they then had to scrutinise, creating a clear conflict of interest.

Introducing Bill Committees into the Assembly would remove some of the pressure from statutory committees, allowing for improved scrutiny of departments and also improved legislative scrutiny. Through this, the Assembly could better hold the Executive to account.

When a bill passes its second stage, an *ad hoc* Bill Committee should be established to scrutinise it. Due to the time constraints on MLAs in a busy Assembly schedule, these committees could be slightly smaller in membership than statutory committees. The Bill Committee would take over the legislative scrutiny role, hearing evidence, questioning witnesses, doing line-by-line scrutiny, and proposing amendments. Once this is complete, there should be a feedback facility to inform the statutory committee of their work (for example, a concurrent sitting of both committees, an evidence session with the Bill Committee clerk, or the sharing of a report). The Committee would then be dissolved once the Bill was ready to move to Consideration Stage.

Bill Committees

Strengths and challenges



Strengths

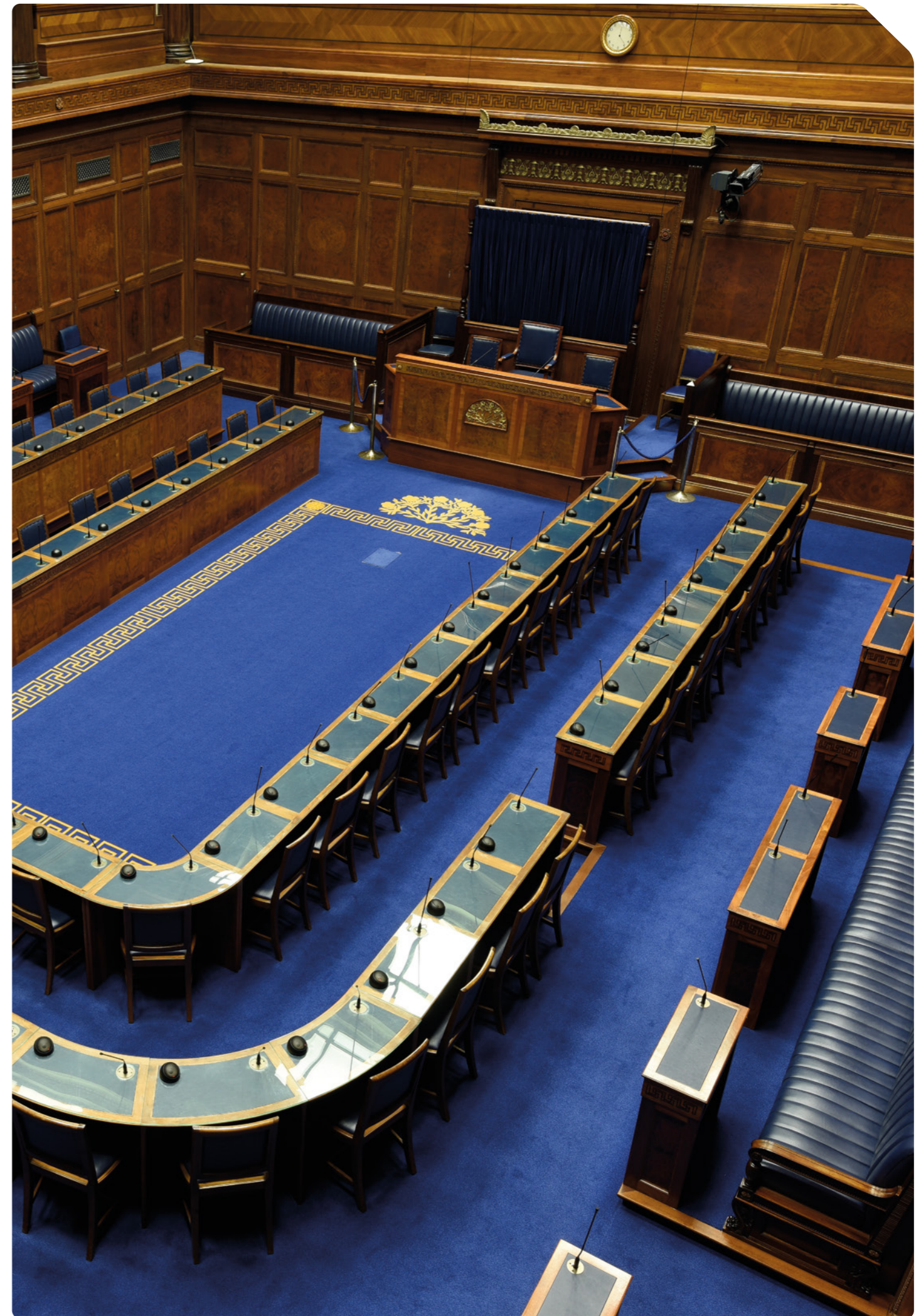
Interviewee H, a former Senior Civil Servant, said that the time allocated to committees to scrutinise legislation is “completely unrealistic”, so the Bill Committee model would offer more time and space to focus on this important task. It would also allow the statutory committee to focus its efforts on deep scrutiny of the actions and strategies of their respective departments and ministers. This should therefore result in stronger legislation and Assembly structures which are better able to hold the Executive to account.

While it is not a frequently used power, statutory committees can introduce bills to the Assembly (as is currently being done by the [Education Committee](#) on allowing girls to wear trousers as part of their school uniform). The current system means that committee members would scrutinise their own legislation. In the Bill Committee model, a different group of MLAs would provide independent scrutiny, reducing the impacts of potential biases.

Challenges

Many of the concerns about the committee system are seen as cultural – whether it is the calibre of members or chairs, the relationships between members, their engagement with the issues, or ability to ask probing constructive questions. These are not solved directly by the Bill Committee model, but it provides a different forum where meaningful scrutiny can take place and some of these behaviours could change.

While interviewees recognised the value in this model, especially the Bill Committee feeding back to the statutory committee, some cautioned that the latter could wish to “redo” the work of the former (Interviewee I), either discounting or overruling their proposed amendments. Clear rules about the role and remit of both committees would need to be established to avoid what Interviewee A called “overlapping structures with conflicting responsibilities”.



Suggestion 02: Resourcing the Official Opposition

Greater resourcing and support would increase the incentives for parties to consider entering the Official Opposition. This could better balance the Assembly and result in more effective scrutiny of the Executive.

The Official Opposition is a relatively new constitutional construct in the Assembly, provided for in the [Assembly and Executive Reform \(Assembly Opposition\) Act 2016](#). Parties entitled to an Executive position or who hold 8% of seats in the Assembly are eligible. It is currently held by the SDLP. There is a significant imbalance between the Official Opposition and the Executive, with one party of eight MLAs in the former, and four parties with 77 MLAs in the latter. The Executive also has the benefit of a Civil Service of around 24,000 people to support its work. While the Official Opposition gets some financial support, it remains significantly under-resourced.

Forming an Official Opposition carries benefits such as the right to respond first to ministerial statements, 10 'Opposition Days' per year in the Assembly calendar, and the chairperson role in the Public Accounts Committee. It is important to note that there is also an 'unofficial' opposition within the Assembly, comprised of the smaller parties who do not meet the Official Opposition threshold.

A better resourced Official Opposition could improve Assembly scrutiny and could incentivise other parties to join rather than take an Executive ministry. A larger, stronger, better resourced Opposition would significantly change the dynamics in the Assembly. Interviewee B, a former MLA, called for a review into what levels of funding the Official Opposition should have, which could be carried out by the Independent Remuneration Board and Assembly Commission. This could include pay increases for the Leader (and Deputy Leader) of the Opposition and other resourcing issues. Interviewee C said the Official Opposition should be given a research team as "real opposition is driven by information, information is found by research". However, others preferred simply increased funding, allowing them to choose how to spend the money.

Resourcing the Official Opposition Strengths and challenges



Strengths

Increased resourcing for the Official Opposition could allow them to better hold the Executive to account in the chamber and in committees. This may make it more attractive for other parties to consider joining the Opposition, better balancing the Assembly between Executive and Opposition and increasing their capacity to scrutinise ministers.

Interviewee D, an academic, said that a multi-party Opposition could, over time, "move things away from the constitutional emphasis" in elections and "open the space for actual policy discussion and accountability voting".

A cross-community Official Opposition could act as an 'alternative government' and be a vehicle for moving elections away from tribal voting.

Interviewee G said "the language of 'Executive and Assembly' obscures the reality of 'government and opposition'".

A more balanced Assembly with a greater Opposition presence could help delineate between the actions of the Assembly and the actions of the Executive.

Challenges

Interviewee F asked whether an Opposition of eight MLAs should get the same support as one which was larger, arguing that incentivising a bigger Opposition through improved resourcing is better to normalise the parliamentary process. This was echoed by a number of interviewees, however a former SpAd made clear that giving up an Executive position to enter Opposition is "down to political bravery".

Interviewee D was in favour of "giving a cross-community opposition the chance to breathe, develop, embed in people's minds" over time. This would assist in normalising its inclusion in the Assembly and act as a further incentive to joining an Official Opposition. However, while there is

provision for an Opposition, it is not guaranteed as parties may either not reach the threshold or choose to join the Executive. This makes it more difficult to build up and embed this structure as part of a healthy parliamentary culture. Each mandate would have to adapt to the changing party system and the unpredictability of election results.

Successful incentives to join the Official Opposition would likely result in a party or parties forgoing their entitlement to an Executive position. Some interviewees argued that a more inclusive Executive maintains wider trust and can lead to more stable government, while others said smaller Executives work better.

Suggestion 03: Changing the Assembly Business Diary

By restricting the number of non-binding Private Members' Motions debated in the Assembly, MLAs would have more time to hold the Executive to account and focus on their actions. If the Executive introduced more legislation, this would get priority over non-binding motions and create a healthier scrutiny culture.

Since the institutions returned over two years ago, there have been a lot of media reports about the quality of scrutiny and types of debates held in the Assembly chamber. Many feel MLAs [do not spend enough time debating legislation](#) or effectively questioning ministers, and spend too much time debating non-binding motions about [areas outside their control such as foreign policy](#). The [Speaker even issued a statement](#) criticising MLAs for only attending debates to post a soundbite on social media. This was a view strongly reflected in our interviews. Interviewee C said too much Assembly time is being "taken up by Private Members' debates which are peacocking for social media" and that "the politician who says a lot but doesn't change much is the one who's more likely to get elected in Northern Ireland". This, they said, amounts to "theatrics... not governance".

It is unreasonable to ask MLAs to speak only on strictly relevant or devolved issues. One former Minister pointed to the value that Private Members' Motions can have with an example from Westminster: "if it hadn't been for the Backbench Business Committee [which allows non-government MPs to bring forward debates], the issue of contaminated blood would never have been the subject

of a parliamentary debate". Having adequate provision to give 'backbench' MLAs the opportunity to bring forward debates is more than "constitutional feng shui", they said, "it actually does matter".

It is clear, however, that the Assembly Business Diary has too many non-binding Private Members' Motions which crowd out more meaningful scrutiny. Putting limits on the number of these motions that can be debated (for example one per sitting day or week) could allow the Assembly to spend more time debating matters of substance on devolved policy issues, scrutinising legislation, and holding ministers to account. There may be space to work within or amend rules on [Members' Statements](#) or [Matters of the Day](#) which would allow MLAs to discuss issues like foreign policy or other matters.

Some Interviewees pointed out that Executive business always gets priority. Interviewee F noted that "there can be entire days whenever there is not a single piece of Executive legislation coming through and that's not good enough". If ministers proposed more legislation or motions, this would allow for more substantive scrutiny without imposing a rule restricting Private Members' Motions.

Changing the Assembly Business Diary Strengths and challenges



Strengths

Changing the rules around the Assembly Business Diary could create a more effective Assembly and improve Executive accountability through greater scrutiny of ministers and legislation.

Fewer non-binding motions could reduce the amount of time the Assembly sits in plenary, which could allow more opportunities for committees to meet. This would be particularly beneficial if the Assembly introduced Bill Committees (see pp. 13-14).

Interviewee A was in favour of "organic" reforms where possible, rather than changes imposed by new rules or structures. If the Executive tabled more legislation, this would take up more Assembly time, and would be an "organic" improvement for this issue. Interviewee I said "the Assembly should take a good look at itself and focus on its primary role of being the legislature instead of debating endless, meaningless motions".

Challenges

A senior public official said that if the Assembly limited the number of non-binding motions, there would be days when "business would start at 2pm with Question Time and it would end at 2.45pm with the end of Question Time", highlighting the fact that there is simply not enough legislation coming from the Executive as it stands for MLAs to scrutinise. He warned that if the chamber had to sit much less because of this, it would be "like the

emperor's new clothes" and would "undermine public confidence in the Assembly even more".

Some MLAs may voice opposition to being restricted in the issues they can bring to the Assembly for debate and how often, particularly if these are issues constituents feel strongly about.

Suggestion 04: Election of the Speaker

Electing the Speaker by a two-thirds majority rather than through cross-community support would make it much harder for a single party to hold up the formation of the Assembly. It would also allow the Assembly to sit without the Executive. Electing the Speaker via blind ballot would bring us in line with Dublin and London.

The Speaker has an important role in exercising “[authority and impartiality](#)” in the Assembly. Electing a Speaker is the first order of business when the Assembly returns after an election. Without this, no further business can take place.

Rather than being selected by MLAs as the representative of their authority, however, we were told that the Speaker is chosen through the “nudge, nudge, wink, wink” of political brokerage between the largest two parties (Interviewee F). Because the two largest parties have such control over the election of the Speaker, they can withhold their support, stopping the Assembly from sitting and therefore [blocking an Executive from being formed](#). A former MLA said that “we have toppled parliamentary culture on its head” and inverted the authority of the Assembly.

Interviewee G, a former MLA, recalled Speakers who retained a “party allegiance” as the Speaker remains a party MLA, and must [seek their party’s approval to run in future Assembly elections](#).

There was consensus across our interviewees in favour of electing the Speaker through a weighted majority vote rather than a cross-community vote. The [Northern Ireland Affairs Committee](#) recommended a two-thirds majority. Interviewee F said “if you don’t resolve the election of a Speaker, basically we’re nowhere”. Many also supported election via a secret ballot. Interviewee B suggested that the Speaker should no longer be a constituency MLA, in which case their constituency would then become a ‘four-seater’ at the next election with the Speaker automatically returned, as is the case in the Dáil.

Election of the Speaker Strengths and challenges



Strengths

Changing the election of the Speaker “means the Assembly can function and it’s up to the Executive whether it can come into being or not” (Interviewee B). It would be much harder for the two main parties to block the election of a Speaker under a two-thirds majority rule, making clear that the Executive sits at the pleasure of the Assembly, not the other way around. It would allow MLAs to sit, for debates to be held, for ad hoc committees to be established, and for Private Members’ Bills (PMBs) to be proposed, albeit without an Executive. This would bring proceedings closer to the principle of the Assembly being the “[prime source of authority](#)” as set out in the B/GFA.

A former Minister pointed out that the Speaker is supported and kept in check by well-established procedures, rules, and deputy Speakers and clerks, meaning there isn’t such a need for “insistence purely on cross-community support” for the

position. They went on to say that a secret ballot is a “good point of principle” that mirrors Westminster and the Dáil, but it does not necessarily stop the parties whipping votes.

A Speaker who had the explicit mandate of the Assembly rather than just the blessing of the two largest parties could be more inclined to set aside party affiliations while in the role.

Interviewees G and J pointed to the recent controversies surrounding the Speaker’s choice of amendments for legislation, on the [School Uniforms Bill](#) and on [Mother and Baby Homes redress](#). While the Speaker’s decisions are final, there is little transparency about the process of selecting which amendments can be considered, giving him significant unscrutinised power over Bills in the Assembly. A fuller review of the role and remit of the Speaker could accompany a change in their election.

Challenges

An Assembly without an Executive to scrutinise could undermine confidence in the institutions, as important decisions would not be taken and MLAs would be left without a significant part of their work. However, it could also further emphasise the difference between the “Assembly and Executive”, highlighting to the public where the blockages are.

Interviewee J said the Speaker’s constituency could not become a ‘four-seater’ as it might end up “skewing the outcomes” with regards to the representation of Nationalists and Unionists in that area.

If the Assembly sat without the Executive, the number of PMBs would likely increase dramatically in the absence of ministers proposing legislation. Reflecting on the present situation, Interviewee F raised a concern about the current use of PMBs in the Assembly, arguing that it “cannot be good government” to have so many PMBs putting “significant pressures on already stretched budgets”. They suggested the [Scottish Parliament’s](#) system could be considered to filter PMB proposals, requiring cross-party or weighted majority support.

Reforms to the Executive

Suggestion 05: Changes to the D'Hondt process

05.1 Incorporating justice into the D'Hondt process

Instead of the Justice Minister being selected via cross-community support, the position would be part of the D'Hondt formula like other ministerial posts. This would make it much easier for any Executive party to hold the portfolio and “normalise” Justice within the political system.

“Interviewee B, a former MLA, noted that by the next Assembly Election in 2027, it will have been ‘17 years that we’ve in effect said “no Nationalists need apply”’.”

Justice has been devolved to Northern Ireland since the Hillsborough Castle Agreement of 2010. However, the Minister is not selected through the D'Hondt formula like other departmental ministries. Rather, they are chosen through a cross-community vote of the Assembly, which was judged to be appropriate to reflect the contentious nature of the role at the time.

Interviewee B, a former MLA, noted that by the next Assembly Election in 2027, it will have been “17 years that we’ve in effect said ‘no Nationalists need apply’”, where [some Republican MLAs have been considered “bogeymen”](#) for the role. The position has therefore mostly been held by the Alliance Party, and once by an Independent Unionist. Alliance, Sinn Féin and the SDLP [called for all Executive ministries to be decided through D'Hondt](#).

Over a decade and a half on from the devolution of Justice, it is worth considering incorporating it into the regular D'Hondt process. A number of interviewees recognised that Northern Ireland has “come a long way” since the Hillsborough Castle Agreement.

Incorporating justice into the D'Hondt process

Strengths and challenges



Strengths

Any party who is eligible for an Executive ministry could take the Justice portfolio. This would be a meaningful exercise in demonstrating goodwill and trust between Nationalist and Unionist parties in the Executive. A former Senior Civil Servant called this an “issue of democracy”. They made the case that the two traditional communities should be able to work together constructively, including with those who do not feel they belong to either group, across all ministerial portfolios.

Interviewee D suggested that the cross-community requirement puts pressure on Alliance to enter the Executive or risk the institutions not being able to function. By opening up the position for other parties to take, this would also allow Alliance to choose other departments, or join the Official Opposition.

This would also allow for a transition to potential other suggested changes to D'Hondt (see pages 26-29). With all other departments under D'Hondt (except the Executive Office), it would be easier to run the formula as a single process for ministers and committees, and also to implement an Executive threshold for inclusion in the process.

A number of interviewees said this change would be important to “normalise” both the system of government and the position of Justice Minister. While there are still many contentious issues around the past and the legacy of the Troubles, after almost three decades since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, and 16 years after the devolution of justice, many interviewees felt it is time to take a step forward in this area and open up the role of Justice Minister.

Challenges

Interviewees frequently pointed out that Unionist parties may still be uneasy about a Nationalist holding the Justice portfolio, with some questioning whether the DUP would enter government with a Sinn Féin Justice Minister. Some of those who served in the security forces during the Troubles or their families could also voice concerns.

There are, however various checks and balances which could reassure them. The role of the Policing Board, the operational independence of the PSNI, and the Justice Committee all provide safeguards on the Justice Minister's actions. Interviewee I also pointed to the “huge amount of attention” that would be placed on a Nationalist Justice minister.

The Executive portfolios chosen by the two main parties are often decided through political brokerage in advance. If one of these parties wished to take the Justice ministry, this would likely form part of these negotiations. The possibility of a Nationalist Justice minister does not guarantee a Nationalist Justice minister (and the same is true for Unionists). Interviewee B suggested that these negotiations could lead to an informal agreement such as a party only holding the position for a single term at a time, for example.



05.2 Run D'Hondt as one process

Instead of running the D'Hondt formula twice, once for ministers and again for committee chairs and deputy chairs, it would be run as one process.

This would allow smaller parties entitled to an Executive position to forgo a department and instead get the chance to select a prominent committee role. It could also result in improved scrutiny of ministers.

On the first sitting day of the Assembly, after the election of the Speaker, Deputy Speakers, and Business Committee, [Executive ministers are nominated](#) by their parties and confirmed. This is done through the D'Hondt formula (except for the First and deputy First Ministers, Junior Ministers and the Justice Minister), which gives parties a proportion of Executive positions based on the number of MLAs they have. It therefore benefits larger parties more than smaller parties, reflecting their successful election results.

Following the selection of Executive ministers, the parties then nominate MLAs to be Chair and Deputy Chair of statutory committees. For this process, the D'Hondt formula is re-applied. Rather than continuing from where the formula ended when apportioning departments, it starts again from the beginning, making it harder for smaller parties to gain a prominent position. For example, at the [second sitting of this mandate in February 2024](#), Sinn Féin received six chair and deputy chair positions on statutory committees, the DUP took five, Alliance took four, the Ulster Unionists took two and the SDLP received one.

A party cannot lead both a department and its relevant committee (i.e. a party cannot hold the positions of Finance Minister and Chair/Deputy Chair of the Finance Committee), but the two largest parties dominate these roles. Currently, five out of the nine statutory committees are chaired by the largest two parties, and in one-third, the chair and minister are representatives of either the DUP or Sinn Féin.

This can cause questions around the quality of scrutiny, where committees descend into what Interviewee J, a former minister, called “bickering” and “confrontational relationships” rather than maintaining the “critical friend” relationship advocated for by Interviewee I. As well as scrutiny, committees have a role in policy development and formation for their department.

Running D'Hondt as one process, rather than on two separate occasions where it restarts, would give smaller parties more opportunity to take Chair or Deputy Chair roles. It would ensure that Assembly scrutiny is shared more between parties, rather than being held largely in the hands of the largest ones.

Run D'Hondt as one process

Strengths and challenges



Strengths

Interviewee B, a former MLA, noted that this change could act as an incentive for the smaller parties entitled to Executive positions to join an Official Opposition. Through the D'Hondt formula, the larger parties get the “big picks” of the departments (in the words of Interviewee D) and the smaller parties are left with fewer options. In this model, a party could decide to forgo an Executive position which was further down the list of choices and take a prominent committee chair role instead. This could enhance the Assembly's scrutiny function in Committees and help to create a stronger Executive/Opposition dynamic.

This change could help create more constructive dialogue and more effective scrutiny as it could make the “confrontational relationships” less likely. It would also improve the balance of roles within the Assembly, giving some of the smaller parties a greater role in holding ministers and departments to account.

Challenges

Interviewee F clarified that a committee chair doesn't have any specific powers. The real authority comes from the committees themselves rather than their chair. Nonetheless, the Chair and Deputy Chair of committees perform important constitutional and scrutiny roles which carry greater prominence than being an ordinary committee member.

The impact of this change would depend on the distribution of seats between parties after each election. For example, based on the current seat

distribution between the parties, if D'Hondt was run for 25 consecutive rounds (for seven ministers, nine chairs and nine deputy chairs), Sinn Féin would have nine positions, the DUP seven, Alliance would have five, the UUP would have two and the SDLP would have two. Overall, the change to the split between the parties is limited compared to the current system. However, small changes in the seat distribution could have significant effects. Including Justice (and potentially in future the First and deputy First Ministers) would also make a difference.

05.3 Executive formation threshold

A lower limit would be set for parties entitled to an Executive position. Only parties whose number of seats is above the threshold would be eligible to go into the D'Hondt process.

The D'Hondt formula decides how many parties qualify for an Executive position. The more seats a party has in the Assembly, the more Executive ministries they will be entitled to. D'Hondt is used for all departments except The Executive Office and the Department of Justice.

Entitlement to Executive positions in D'Hondt depends on each party's number of seats, and therefore varies depending on the election outcome. Since devolution in 1999, the Executive has been made up of either four or five parties, and for a short time only, just two parties with one Independent. A four or five-party Executive requires a significant amount of negotiation to find common ground, and the juggling of so many opposing perspectives can cause [challenges for the effectiveness of government](#). In contrast, Interviewee I, a former Senior Civil Servant,

recalled the 2016-17 Executive (made up of the DUP, Sinn Féin and an Independent MLA) which, although short-lived, was judged to have operated more efficiently and effectively. They suggested that an Executive made up of fewer parties should find consensus more easily and communicate better than one with more parties.

If creating a tighter, potentially more agile government were the objective, setting a threshold on the D'Hondt formula would be an obvious way to do so. This would also allow more parties to enter the Official Opposition to hold the Executive to account, and so create a better government/opposition balance within the Assembly. The threshold could be considered at the start of each Assembly term, or fixed at a certain level (for example, 12 or 15 seats).

Executive formation threshold

Strengths and challenges



Strengths

One former MLA suggested this change would make the Assembly "more cohesive" and "easier to get collective cabinet responsibility". Collective responsibility does not exist in Northern Ireland as it does for the UK Government on account of the power-sharing coalition system, but a more united Executive would benefit good government and policy development. Other coalition governments elsewhere are able to work with a level of collective responsibility which the Northern Ireland Executive has not achieved.

Interviewee H said this change could make government "more easily understood by an electorate". A fixed threshold would make clear what number of MLAs was

needed to enter government, rather than the threshold changing after each election as it does under the current system. Citizens could then "be voting for a government... as opposed to maintaining a tribal balance".

Interviewee D, an academic, referred back to previous Assembly elections, where there was some evidence of, for example, vote transfers between the UUP and SDLP more than between the UUP and DUP. This, they argued, could be seen as citizens who were disappointed in the Executive casting a vote for an "alternative government" rather than voting within their 'traditional' bloc. This kind of voting is common in other political systems and could become a healthy part of elections here.

Challenges

Some interviewees cautioned against this change. Interviewee E warned that such a threshold could "compound the malware from the St Andrews Agreement", i.e. that it would structurally encourage voting for the two main parties to the detriment of the smaller parties and entrench voting on constitutional lines rather than on day-to-day policies.

Some concerns were raised about the impact of not having the smaller parties in the Executive. Interviewee H said the two biggest parties "tend to play the game where a nil-all draw is better than a 2-all draw. Their first priority is to stop the opposition [the other party] scoring". They said this type of relationship "has been a brake on the

Executive's effectiveness". There is a risk that introducing a threshold would hand them greater power and therefore make this type of behaviour more common, without the smaller parties there to temper it. They also said that while a smaller Executive "ought to be more nimble and to agree more easily on some policy questions", politics often comes to the fore and stymies progress.

Interviewees A and I, both former Senior Civil Servants, voiced a preference to "incentivise rather than bring in rules" to change the system in such a way. Interviewee A said that "organic" reforms would be better across the board. A threshold could be seen as arbitrary and artificial rather than "organic".

Suggestion 06: Executive sub-committees

Sub-committees would help the Executive find consensus on difficult issues and create a greater sense of shared ownership of policies between ministers. They may also encourage a culture of collective responsibility.

Due to the different (and often conflicting) perspectives around the Executive table, it can be hard to find consensus and agreement on key issues. Important policies therefore get stuck in the Executive without approval, often for months or even years on end.

While ministers can make decisions on matters affecting their departments, anything considered [significant, controversial, or cross-cutting](#) must be brought to the Executive for approval. The Investment Strategy, for example, which details the long-term infrastructure and capital investment plans for Northern Ireland, is considered sufficiently significant and cross-cutting to go before the wider Executive. However, despite being published in draft form in 2022, it [has not yet been signed off by ministers](#).

“A smaller group can be ‘a bit more nimble, a bit more focused’ than the wider Executive.”

Executive sub-committees could help to unblock some of these issues, and also help engender a greater sense of shared ownership and collective responsibility over important policy decisions. When a significant, controversial, or cross-cutting issue reaches the Executive, or if a decision is coming which they think will be difficult to resolve, a sub-committee of ministers with a sufficient departmental interest would be convened to consider it and find a way forward. Once this consensus is reached, it would then be brought to the wider Executive for approval. This way of screening potential challenges could make the Executive more effective at reaching a shared decision.

Executive sub-committees Strengths and challenges



Strengths

One former Senior Civil Servant recalled a sub-committee being established for the 2012 Economic Strategy which was deemed successful in finding common ground and driving delivery. Ministers with a “clear and particular interest” were members and worked to deliver a shared plan for [“growth and prosperity”](#), which made Executive endorsement much easier. They said subsequent economic strategies “have lacked impact” because there was no sense of ownership across the Executive. Interviewee B said sub-committees drive a “gear change in the departments”. Rather than ministers working in their “fiefdoms”, the model helps in “building relationships”.

Interviewee E pointed to a similar innovation in the early Executives known as the Ministerial Representatives Committee which was made up of SpAds and civil servants and acted as a “filtering mechanism” before Executive meetings. Interviewee I said it took “controversial, politically difficult” issues to the side and worked through them until a consensus was reached before putting them back on the Executive agenda. Executive sub-committees could allow SpAds or Senior Civil Servants to represent their minister.

Challenges

There was some scepticism about whether sub-committees would really unlock progress in areas where there was strong disagreement between the parties. Interviewee C said that sometimes issues remain stuck for political reasons, when ministers “would prefer having the issue to beat another political party around the head with”. Many interviewees cautioned that politics is always a potential challenge to institutional reforms. Interviewee I raised the *realpolitik* of the Executive: “you’re asking people to potentially give up power or influence, and what are you giving them in response?”

They also pointed to the commitment to a Party Leaders’ Forum in New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) which “was meant to deal with issues that were controversial”.

Although it did not have decision-making authority, it could influence ministers strongly. There is little evidence, however, that it lasted long. Some [high-profile meetings](#) showed that political tensions between parties continued within the Forum. This may suggest that formalised high-level committees outside the Executive structure are not always productive.

Interviewee H said that previous uses of Executive sub-committees sometimes involved so many parties that they resembled the Executive itself. A smaller group can be “a bit more nimble, a bit more focused” than the wider Executive. The rules around what would be considered a sufficient departmental interest would need to be well defined and adhered to strictly.

Suggestion 07: Enforce the three-meeting rule on Executive business

Ensuring that issues cannot be blocked for discussion around the Executive table for more than three meetings would allow all ministers a greater chance to have their proposals debated among their colleagues and could drive progress forward on issues which are stuck.

The “three-meeting rule” states that papers proposed by a minister for discussion by the Executive [cannot be blocked for more than three consecutive meetings](#). The First and deputy First Ministers, as chairs, jointly decide each meeting’s agenda. The rule was introduced as a limit on this power, but one former Senior Civil Servant said “it’s never actually enforced”. Interviewee A, also a former Senior Civil Servant, said the main two parties “just ignore” it. This can have huge consequences for policy progression.

In 2021, the Communities Minister’s proposed changes to welfare reform were [blocked almost 40 times](#). The Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Minister has had proposals for an independent [Environmental Protection Agency blocked](#) numerous times in this mandate.

It seems to be having an impact on relationships around the Executive, with this Minister saying it is a “[battle a day](#)” with his colleagues.

Interviewee J, a former Minister, said it seems like the “process of negotiating and compromise is not as evident” among current ministers as it was in previous Executives. They said that even when a common vision was lacking, ministers used to be able to “find a way through” which is no longer the case.

Ensuring the three-meeting rule is properly enforced allows the First and deputy First Ministers to retain their decision-making about the agenda, while ensuring all parties around the Executive table can have their issues heard and discussed.

Enforce the three-meeting rule on Executive business

Strengths and challenges



Strengths

Enforcing the three-meeting rule would allow all parties to have a greater say in Executive agendas. Each minister would be able to propose their legislative or policy changes, and work to find a common position. As well as slowing policy progress, the way the current system is operating at present is evidently harming relationships, particularly between the two largest parties in the Executive and the smaller ones. Properly enforcing the rule and therefore allowing smaller parties to have their voices heard could help stabilise relationships. The First and deputy First Ministers would still have control of the agenda, and could still block issues, but for only three meetings if they chose to do so.

Interviewee J said that often what makes the Executive agenda has been “pre-agreed”, and that meetings therefore simply serve as a rubber-stamping procedure. Difficult issues therefore do not come before the

Executive enough to be solved. Allowing them on the agenda for debate could help with this. A greater use of Executive sub-committees (see pp. 30-31) would also help unlock this.

Interviewee I said that issues are often blocked “for political reasons”. Ministers should work to set aside party allegiances as far as possible within the Executive, and find consensus where they can on contentious issues. Limiting the amount of time issues can be blocked and therefore encouraging debate and deliberation among ministers could improve working relations in the Executive.

Interviewee H suggested that a certain number of days could be set aside where the First and deputy First Ministers “cede control of the agenda” and allow one of the other parties to chair. This could allow their business to be tabled and create a fairer Executive.

Challenges

Some interviewees cautioned that this change wouldn’t necessarily mean faster progress, since getting an issue on the agenda doesn’t always mean it will get meaningful engagement or agreement. Often, issues are tabled for discussion but not for a decision to be made. Interviewee I said that if a contentious issue is put on the table for debate it may not be a constructive conversation, which could reduce trust and goodwill among ministers more.

Both former Senior Civil Servants and former Ministers interviewed said this issue is largely a cultural one, although the structures have a part to play as well. Ministers are not good at working across departments, and the two main parties have decided not to follow the three-meeting rule. Interviewee A said Assembly committees “should really be hammering this Executive... on the conduct of their business”.

Suggestion 08: Reinforcing the importance of the Programme for Government, Budget and legislative programme

Prioritising agreement on a shared Programme for Government, tying a Budget to these commitments, and having a realistic legislative programme which drives delivery of the PfG would create a more cohesive joined-up vision and goals for the Executive.

Many of our interviewees recognised the importance of the Programme for Government as the cornerstone of government in Northern Ireland. It should detail the Executive's policy priorities and serve as a shared vision for the mandate. The Executive's agreed budget should be closely connected to this, showing what policies and programmes will be funded in order to meet the PfG commitments. A former Senior Civil Servant, however, said that these are only "two of the three legs of the stool". The third, they said, is the [legislative programme](#) which documents the Bills ministers plan to table each year.

Despite the significance of having a PfG, budget and agreed legislative agenda, getting agreement on these has proved challenging. It took over a year from the restoration of the Executive before a final PfG was published, which one former MLA said was "designed to answer a media question rather than a governance question". The Finance Minister's draft multi-year budget was rejected by his Executive colleagues, and [departments still have no certainty](#) about their funding situation. Interviewee F said the legislative programme "doesn't seem to be grounded in reality at all".

Ministers should prioritise agreeing the PfG at the start of a mandate, tying it to the budget, and having a deliverable legislative programme which furthers the aims of the PfG. This would improve delivery, centre ministerial relationships around shared policy goals, and create a healthier culture of collective responsibility within the Executive.



Reinforcing the importance of the Programme for Government, Budget and legislative programme Strengths and challenges



Strengths

The [OECD](#) said the "Executive itself could play a greater strategic role in the governance of Northern Ireland if its behavioural norms were to evolve over time into a steward of a 'single government' working toward a common purpose". The PfG is the primary vehicle to achieve this. Interviewee H, a former Senior Civil Servant, said ministers should be given six months to form a PfG. If it isn't agreed by then, "the process of forming an Executive should restart". If that doesn't work, "we should be into an election".

From the outset, then, ministers would be tied to their shared policy, legislative, and financial commitments,

creating a greater sense of joined-up direction and drive within government than we have currently.

Interviewee E pointed to the Ministerial Code, which calls for annual agreement on the PfG and budget. This would ensure "regular approval and scrutiny". This would not interfere with a multi-year budget, rather it allows ministers and MLAs to review progress and, where necessary, amend the direction. Having regular accountability mechanisms for the PfG, budget and legislative programme should be considered.

Challenges

While there was clear support for the importance of an agreed PfG, budget and legislative programme as the basis of all the Executive's work, there was scepticism about whether this would be effective in changing behaviours. Interviewee A said the key to unlocking a "common purpose" in the Executive comes from "having leaders at the top who set standards, whose behaviour can become the norm for others. We're not getting that at the moment". The Paisley/McGuinness and Robinson/McGuinness Executives were highlighted as having these attributes.

Collective responsibility is difficult in Northern Ireland as departments have a strong degree of independence from one another. Interviewee H called on a mechanism to amend the [Departments Order 1999](#) (Article 4 of which makes clear the strategic autonomy of departments) to allow certain functions to be under the direction of the

whole Executive, rather than by individual ministers. This, they said, would require a "cultural step" towards a more cohesive government.

One former MLA said ministers feel "most vulnerable" when they have to pass legislation because the Executive is "a notional majority fractured into four parties", which can act as a brake on bold leadership. Having a stronger legislative programme tied to the mandate of the PfG could help ministers in this endeavour.

There was no consensus among interviewees as to whether the PfG, budget and legislative programme should come before or after an Executive is formed. Some preferred a system where these form the basis of Executive formation, however others said this could delay an Executive coming into being for months on end.

Conclusions

The suggestions on pages 13-35 are not presented as firm recommendations, nor are they to be seen as a solution to all of the problems the institutions face. The aim of this report is to add to the literature around institutional reform and encourage further conversation about the topic.

Pivotal calls for a wider, more meaningful public conversation about institutional reform. It should not be constrained only to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, academic papers, political parties and media studios. The breadth of experiences and observations from the interviewees showed clearly that there is no one way to “do” reform and so any change must be carefully considered, weighed up, discussed and debated among politicians, ministers, civil servants, civic society and the general public. The best way to enact meaningful reform is to ensure buy-in from those inside and outside the institutions.

The proposals suggested in this report are not necessarily a full package of reforms – there may be some which are more effective than others, or which are not immediately implementable. Others may cause disagreement and debate. Each should be considered on their merits as a

potential solution. Through further dialogue and discussion we hope that some of these may be the start of a shared way forward on reform.

Ahead of next year’s election, we particularly recommend action on the following three reforms, allowing them to be ready and in place for the next mandate:

→ **Reinforcing the importance of the Programme for Government, budget and legislative programme**

→ **Enforcing the three-meeting rule on Executive business**

→ **Increased resourcing of the Official Opposition.**

Interviewees and roles

A Former Senior Civil Servant	F Senior public official
B Former MLA	G Former MLA
C Former SpAd	H Former Senior Civil Servant
D Academic	I Former Senior Civil Servant
E Former Minister	J Former Minister

Culture

The one change which was brought up time and again by our interviewees was not about the institutions or the infrastructure around them, but about the people, relationships, culture and behaviours within them. There was a strong sense that when the parties demonstrate commitment, good faith and meaningful engagement, the institutions have functioned well, but that this has been lacking in recent years. The importance of strong leadership was emphasised in order to make NI’s challenging system of government function effectively.

Many interviewees said they felt the quality of relationships between MLAs from different parties had deteriorated in recent years, and that this was having a negative impact on the effectiveness of the Assembly and Executive.

We were clearly told that if ministers worked together on shared issues, and found ways forward where they disagreed, the institutions would be much more effective than they are at present. A culture of attacking Executive colleagues and briefing against other ministers only serves to block progress on key issues. Three leading former Senior Civil Servants submitted evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee’s 2023 review of the institutions, and said that “ethical and bold leadership” is “far more important than formulae, codes, processes and structures”. Institutional reform without cultural reform will likely bear little fruit.

Further consideration

The scope of this report stops short of the removal of the “single-party veto”. We sought to find areas where there is likely to be more chance of consensus and progress in the short- to medium-term while maintaining the core principles of power-sharing as set out in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. We acknowledge that others hold the view that removing the veto is essential for any real progress, but at present we do not judge that there is sufficient cross-party support for such a significant change.

Interviewees suggested many other longer-term reform projects which could be considered in time, including:

- Replacing the single-party veto on Executive formation with a viable alternative
- Removal of community designations in the Assembly
- Structure and configuration of Departments
- The status and role of those who designate as ‘Others’
- Dedicated scrutiny committees for the Programme for Government and Budget
- Reforms to Strands 2 and 3 of the B/GFA
- Public participation: Civic Forum, Citizens’ Assemblies etc
- Electoral reform: the B/GFA text provides for a review of “electoral arrangements” while Interviewee C pointed to the Scottish ‘list system’ and the new Welsh Senedd system

We would like to thank our interviewees for their time and considered responses, which form the basis of this report.

Annex

Previous Reforms

Belfast/Good Friday Agreement

The B/GFA is the cornerstone of governance in Northern Ireland, setting out the core principles of power-sharing government and the overall structures and institutions such as the Assembly and Executive. It was ratified in a referendum with over 70% in favour and continues to retain significant popular support.

1998

St Andrews Agreement

This agreement changed the selection of the First and deputy First Ministers – the former position is given to the largest party in terms of seats and the latter to the largest party of the other designation. Interviewee E said this “directly dented the primacy of the Assembly” and eroded the joint nature of the office and shared nature of the Executive by making the coalition “more mandatory” rather than one of “elective inclusion”.

Since then, the DUP and Sinn Féin firmly established themselves as the two main parties and have maintained this in the following five elections.

2006

Hillsborough Castle Agreement

The Hillsborough Castle Agreement allowed for the devolution of Justice to Stormont. The Assembly elects the Justice Minister by cross-community vote, rather than being selected by D'Hondt like other ministers. Interviewee B said this codified a rule that “no Nationalist need apply”.

2010

Stormont House Agreement

The parties agreed to balance the budget, and to reform and restructure the public sector. Executive departments were reconfigured and reduced in number. They committed to reduce the size of the Assembly from 108 to 90 MLAs from the next election.

2014

Fresh Start Agreement

This allowed the Executive to enact welfare reform mitigations and included a reaffirmed commitment to reducing the size of the Assembly and Executive.

2015

New Decade, New Approach

The Petition of Concern was reformed, and a 24-week window was introduced to restore the institutions following a collapse. A Party Leaders' Forum was established to improve dialogue, flag potentially contentious issues and seek compromise and co-operation. The Fiscal Council was established under this agreement between the UK and Irish Governments.

Interviewees pointed to many of the proposed reforms in NDNA which remain unfulfilled or which were partially enacted. While some parties are critical of elements of the agreement, they each returned to the institutions after it was signed. A full consideration and review of the provisions within NDNA would be a useful step towards institutional reform.

2020

Since 1998, there have been a number of agreements and settlements which have changed the institutions in different ways from the system set out in the B/GFA. This section considers them and the reforms they brought in.

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