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The Executive's last chance to deliver on its mandate

With seven months until the Assembly dissolves, Stormont faces a rush to pass key legislation including the flagship Good Jobs Bill. However, the biggest shortcoming of this year so far is the failure to agree a Budget, leaving departments unable to plan and increasing pressure on already-stretched public services. The next few months represent the Executive's last chance to deliver for the public before the election, according to a new report from think tank Pivotal.

Despite some pockets of progress, as Stormont gets into the closing stretch of this mandate there are real concerns that this Executive will miss its chance to improve outcomes and begin addressing some of Northern Ireland's most persistent issues.

The failure to pass the first multi-year budget in a decade, or even a single year budget, has left departments once more unable to plan for the longer term. Instead, more money has been spent on patchwork fixes. Sustainable policy change becomes harder to implement.

Ignoring tough choices – on hospital reconfiguration, wastewater infrastructure, the Investment Strategy and more – not only delays key and often necessary decisions, but makes these problems harder and more expensive to solve in future.

Northern Ireland faces huge economic and social challenges and, given financial constraints, it would be unrealistic to expect the Executive to have addressed them all. However, the lack of a budget will only exacerbate the strain on public finances and public services, leaving struggling departments in a worse position.

Published today [Tuesday, 1 September] by Pivotal, the independent think tank focused on Northern Ireland, ***Running out of time: the performance of the Northern Ireland Executive in 2026 so far*** says that the Executive has struggled to work together on shared challenges and that increasing tensions risk allowing Northern Ireland's social and economic problems to deteriorate further.

Many of the Executive's flagship policies and priorities show little progress. The Good Jobs Bill is a key part of the Programme for Government (PfG) but remains stuck without Executive agreement. It now faces a race against time to be passed.

This is not the only major piece of legislation at risk of falling by the wayside. Altogether nine planned pieces of Executive legislation have yet to be put to the Assembly. These include the 16-18s in Education or Training Bill, which was in the legislative programme for 2025-26 and still has not been tabled – meanwhile around 23,000 16-24 year olds are Not in Education, Employment or Training, over 4,000 more than last year. The Race Equality Bill has not been introduced, even after the third summer of racially-motivated violence on Northern Ireland's streets.

Other major policy goals are also at risk. The expansion of Magee College is in “jeopardy”, Casement Park's redevelopment has stalled, and blue-green algae continues to plague Lough Neagh.

A review of the Environmental Improvement Plan found its “ambitions, targets and outcomes are largely off track”. There is still no plan to properly invest in the wastewater system. Around 40% of all planned social homes are stalled due to this crisis, which will also lead to an estimated £11bn in lost economic growth by 2040.

With no Budget agreed, several Stormont departments face huge overspending in the current year – including shortfalls of around £250m in Education and £800m in Health.

However, there has been action in some key areas. Significant education reforms are underway, including a major revision of the curriculum and the approval of much-needed SEN capital projects. Some justice reforms appear to be reducing backlogs in the courts. A revised Nutrients Action Programme has been agreed.

Two important pieces of Justice legislation were introduced to the Assembly in the last six months. The Criminal Justice (Sentencing) Bill will create a specific offence of assaulting a public worker and introduce ‘Charlotte's Law’. The Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill will provide various protections for witnesses during and after judicial processes.

The Department of Health's Reset Plan has been published and some of the longest health waits have begun to fall. Endoscopy waits are down 68% from their peak and projected waits of over four years for inpatient surgery reduced by two-thirds.

Nevertheless, Emergency Departments are in “perma-crisis” and over half a million cases are on the waiting list for consultant-led outpatient appointments – with a median waiting time of 60 weeks. There remains no clear plan for hospital reconfiguration and the recent resignation of the Health Minister indicates that there is still political reluctance around Bengoa-type reforms.

Looking at the performance of the Executive as a whole, many previous failures in behaviours and cultures have continued – political point-scoring often crowds out discussion of substantive issues, difficult or unpopular decisions are postponed rather than addressed, and others are blamed for problems rather than the Executive taking responsibility for solutions itself.

Pivotal's report has six key messages for the Executive

1. Agreeing a budget is overdue and urgent.

Passing a budget is a foundation of good governance. In particular, Northern Ireland needs to move away from annual crises and towards a situation where the Executive plans on a more sustainable basis and takes responsibility for its own financial decisions.

2. There is limited time remaining to progress shared priorities

This mandate ends in seven months. Key PfG priorities should be the focus. Cutting health waiting times, improving childcare provision and SEN, growing the economy – meaningful progress is possible on all these and more.

3. Key Executive legislation needs to pass before the end of the mandate

Some complex and significant Executive bills are making their way through the Assembly, such as the Water, Sustainable Drainage and Flood Management Bill, and the Justice Bill, while others such as the Good Jobs Bill have not even been tabled. These are flagship pieces of work but each bill requires proper scrutiny. Work should begin now to ensure there is no last-minute rush, as seen in previous mandates.

4. The Executive lacks plans for many of the biggest long-standing challenges

Several key strategic areas lack credible plans, such as wastewater infrastructure and tackling poverty. It often feels that Ministers commit significant time and energy to issues that are much less consequential in comparison to these longer-term problems.

5. Stop blaming others for problems and take responsibility for decision-making

Executive parties increasingly respond to problems by blaming others. Difficult decisions are avoided, including those which are necessary to address the toughest local problems. Making progress requires the Executive to show leadership, unity and a shared strategic vision.

6. Parties should focus on big policy challenges in the pre-election period

The coming May elections will soon begin to dominate political debate but, rather than just underlining party-political divisions, the Executive parties need to continue working on their stated priorities and other issues of common concern.

Ann Watt, Director of Pivotal, said: “The past seven months has seen the Executive make pockets of progress but ultimately fall short in some big-picture ways.

“Deciding a budget is a basic element of good governance. The inability to do so is a serious failing. Northern Ireland has not had a multi-year budget in over a decade, which has restricted planning for public service delivery and transformation. The absence of even a single year budget at present is catastrophic for public services.

“At the same time, some flagship areas of policy are at risk of stalling. There is a big difference between the planned legislative programme and the number of Executive bills that have come before the Assembly.

“The Executive appears increasingly fragmented and this clearly has an impact on its effectiveness. Instead of divisions and distrust, ministers need to find a path towards unity, common purpose and shared responsibility for improving services for the public.

“Right now, the public struggles to see the difference Stormont is making in their day-to-day lives. There is a risk that the election means more point-scoring and growing divisions along party lines. However, it doesn’t have to be that way. A lot could be done between now and May.

“The Executive has a chance to make real progress on key issues. Some policy areas have already seen successes. By building on those, ministers can make tangible improvements to people’s daily lives and set a more positive tone ahead of the next mandate.”

Pivotal’s tracker report also includes a review of the performance of individual departments so far in 2026:

Health

A further investment of £80m in elective care has seen **some results focused on the areas which had the longest waiting times.** Endoscopy waits are down 68%

from their peak and projected waits of over four years for inpatient surgery reduced by two thirds.

Transformation funding was secured for the ePharmacy scheme and the Neighbourhood Health and Wellbeing framework was launched, driving the “shift left” to community care.

However, over 510,000 cases are still waiting for a consultant-led outpatient appointment. **The median wait time is over 60 weeks.**

No Emergency Department has met its targets for seeing patients, with experts warning of a “perma-crisis” and overcrowding estimated to result in over 1,000 excess deaths.

Delivery of the Reset Plan, including hospital reconfiguration, must be prioritised to ensure effective and sustainable services. There has been little progress on the hospital reconfiguration scheme since its publication in October 2024. Recent controversy about removing Emergency General Surgery at Causeway Hospital highlights the need for proper consultation with communities and clinicians, effective communication and evidence-based decision-making.

This is all in the context of a forecast £800m deficit for the current financial year. The previous Minister committed to a 3.3% pay award, but this will be unaffordable within the current budget. The main nursing union is balloting its members for strike action.

Education

There has been **progress on the tentpole TransformedED policy**, including the launch of a consultation on a new curriculum as well as on assessments, tackling disadvantage and professional development.

SEN reform has also moved forwards, with moves to improve early years classroom assistant training and the development of an enhanced support model, as well as the **approval of a number of crucial SEN capital projects.**

However, some SEN regulations have been delayed in Assembly scrutiny and the EA accused some mainstream schools of “stonewalling” specialist provision. Once again, a number of SEN pupils had no confirmed place in school at the start of the summer, albeit a much smaller number than in previous years.

The Department faces budgetary pressures, with a shortfall of £250m last year set to rise to £1.15bn in 2028-29.

Criticism was aimed at the School Uniforms Act for the absence of provision allowing girls to wear trousers. The Education Committee introduced its own bill to make such a change, which is currently being scrutinised.

Justice

Two flagship pieces of legislation were introduced to the Assembly. The Criminal Justice (Sentencing Etc.) Bill focuses on sentencing, creates a specific offence of assaulting a public worker and includes ‘Charlotte’s Law’ which allows for longer prison sentences for people guilty of murder or manslaughter who don’t disclose the location of a body.

The Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill will lead to the appointment of a Victims and Witnesses Commissioner and provide various protections for witnesses during and after judicial processes.

Further major legislation, the Justice Bill, has completed Consideration Stage after some challenges, but with **the Minister unable to include action on online sexually-explicit deepfakes, and measures to raise the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility blocked by Petition of Concern.**

The review into the killing of Katie Simpson found institutional misogyny and systemic failures in the PSNI, and recommendations from its final report need to be implemented as part of plans to tackle Violence Against Women and Girls. Meanwhile, the second EVAWG plan launched in April but faces budget uncertainty.

The PSNI itself remains significantly underfunded and plans to increase officer numbers are in doubt.

Recommendations from a review of legal aid fees were accepted, including the need to raise fees by 8.66%. The Criminal Bar Association voted for an end to strike action.

Economy

The Good Jobs Bill is one of the Executive’s flagship pieces of legislation, but it has still not been introduced to the Assembly for scrutiny and now faces a race to pass before the end of the mandate.

The PfG target of 10,000 students at UU’s Magee campus by 2032, **despite good progress in recent years, is now “under review”**, with departmental officials raising doubts that the required £40m per year will be provided. At the same time,

Higher Education institutions warn of a decline in student numbers, redundancies and fewer research opportunities due to budget cuts.

The rollout of smart electricity meters from 2028 was announced, which will give households up-to-date information about usage and costs, although the estimated transition cost of £500m will be reflected in consumer bills.

Around 23,000 16-24 year olds are Not in Employment, Education or Training, which is more than 4,000 higher than last year. The department is involved in a Transformation Fund project to tackle this.

The Department is working on various upskilling and employment schemes, including enhanced investment in advanced manufacturing to boost productivity in the sector. Invest NI remains behind in its target of directing 65% of investment outside Belfast.

Infrastructure

The Minister announced plans for voluntary contributions from developers, **part of a three-pronged approach to help tackle the wastewater crisis** – along with more Executive funding and passage of the Water, Flooding and Sustainable Drainage Bill which is currently under scrutiny.

Currently around **40% of all planned social homes are stalled** due to the wastewater crisis, which it has been estimated will lead to **a £11bn in lost economic growth by 2040.**

The High Court decision to block redevelopment of the A5 is under appeal.

The Infrastructure Minister froze Translink fares for the second consecutive year to make public transport an “affordable commuting option” but **Translink says it has been underfunded by £23m in recent years while the fare freezes have cost over £20m.**

An appointment process for independent planning inspectors has been launched, as part of planning reform and transformation, with the broad aim of helping speed up planning applications and reduce backlogs.

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

A revised and co-designed Nutrients Action Programme was brought forward and consultation launched, with the process praised by the Ulster Farmers’

Union. However, relations have since deteriorated, with the UFU calling on the Minister, Permanent Secretary, and Chief Veterinary Officer to resign.

A review of the Environmental Improvement Plan found its **“ambitions, targets and outcomes are largely off track”**. **Of 38 targets and outcomes, good progress is being made on two, missed progress on six and limited progress on 27. Three could not be measured.**

Regulations were approved to establish a Just Transition Commission, which will oversee the Net Zero transition to ensure it is fair for different sectors and communities.

Over £49m has been invested in the Lough Neagh Catchment Area Water Quality programme, aimed at improving water quality and cross-border knowledge sharing. Despite this and some other initiatives aimed at improving water quality, environmentalists have warned that Lough Neagh is “becoming a dead lough”.

Both transformation and Shared Island funding have been received for **cross-border research into bovine TB** – which is **costing farmers an estimated £96m per year** as well as significant emotional impacts.

Communities

The Department is leading a **£16m Transformation project to support people with ill health and disabilities enter and remain in employment**. NI’s economic inactivity levels are amongst the highest in the UK, at over 26%, with disability and ill health the main factor in over a third of cases.

The Warm Healthy Homes Strategy aims to tackle fuel poverty, which affects almost one in four households, with one core aspect **an £150m investment fund designed to modernise energy inefficient homes in the next few years.**

There is still no sign of a revised plan for the Anti-Poverty Strategy, after campaigners criticised the initial document, saying it is “more harmful to have a strategy that will not address poverty, than no strategy at all”.

A total of 1,765 new social homes were started in 2025-26, marking a 17% increase but, despite this progress, housing bodies are concerned targets will not be met.

The 2025-26 capital budget was expected to support less than half of the Department’s housebuilding target, wastewater infrastructure challenges have stalled over 40% of planned social housing developments, at the same time as **the social housing waiting list has surpassed 50,000 – a 30% increase over**

the last ten years. In a further effort to boost construction, the Communities Minister continues to press for borrowing powers for the Housing Executive.

Casement Park has faced more setbacks, with the GAA scaling back plans for redevelopment due to concerns about funding. The Minister should work with the GAA, Government and Executive colleagues to find a way forward on this PfG priority.

Finance

Despite hopes of a multi-year allocation, **a budget for 2026-27 has still not been agreed.** In January, the Finance Minister published proposals for budgeting up to 2028-29 but this was **immediately rejected by other ministers on the basis it would be devastating for public services.**

Agreement was reached with the UK Government in February to cover the 2025-26 overspend through a £400 million reserve claim loan. A subsequent Treasury-led 'Open Book Review' suggested possible annual savings of up to £3bn, but was **roundly rejected by the Executive because of serious questions about the methodology.**

In the absence of an agreed budget, Departments are operating via emergency powers which would allow them to spend up to 95% of last year's budget, which would be catastrophic for public services. This is unlikely to happen, however, as either the Executive or UK Government would likely step in to pass an emergency budget instead. **Overall, current pressures this year are estimated £1.5bn.**

Ministers are united in calls for more funding from the UK Government, based on comparisons with Scotland and Wales where local funding is well above the assessed levels of need. However, **the Fiscal Council warns that repeated pattern of rescue packages for NI risks weakening the incentive for the Executive to balance its own books.**

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; 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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