

Two years of the restored Northern Ireland Executive

pivotal

Pivotal is an independent think tank that aims to contribute to improved policy making in Northern Ireland. This report is offered on that basis.

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Executive summary

January 2026

“In the coming months, the Executive parties need to unite behind common goals that will make life better for people in Northern Ireland”

As the Executive approaches the second anniversary of its restoration in February 2024, how is it delivering for the people of Northern Ireland? With policy crises on many fronts, this report considers whether the Executive is on track to make the progress needed.

Some important steps have been made in childcare, expansion of the Magee campus and public sector pay. Ministers introduced plans for education reform, skills development, disability employment support, and changes to environmental governance. More details on these and other positives are on pages 18-49 of this report.

The current opportunity to set a multi-year budget provides a chance to stabilise and transform public services, after ten years of single year budgets which have not supported longer-term planning and decision-making.

However, the last six months have also seen relationships deteriorate between the Executive parties, alongside delays in some priority areas. While the challenges of operating our system of government are well-known, when day to day debate is taken over by party political point-scoring, it is almost inevitable that the focus on improving services for the public is diminished.

In some important areas like wastewater infrastructure and hospital reconfiguration there is still no agreed

plan for change. Similarly, some major capital projects appear to have ground to a halt. The long overdue Investment Strategy has still not been published. The Finance Minister's proposed draft multi-year budget was immediately rejected by other ministers. The proposed Anti-Poverty Strategy was dismissed by campaigners. Significant elements of the plan to improve Lough Neagh do not have support from all the parties. There is no cross-cutting vision to grow Northern Ireland's economy through increased productivity, innovation and investment.

Continued failure to take decisions in these areas will lead to further deterioration in outcomes. Despite the challenges, the Executive needs to work together to find pragmatic solutions, rather than accepting ongoing stalemate.

Stronger relationships and greater trust between the parties would enable increased engagement in the difficult conversations that are needed.

It remains difficult to properly assess what the Executive has delivered, since it has still not provided plans for how it will report on its achievements against its Programme for Government (PfG) priorities. In Annex A, we set out actions that have been taken on specific PfG issues. Our review of data for some of Northern Ireland's key challenges (see Annex B) does not yet show convincing evidence of improvements.

Pivotal makes key recommendations for the Executive on pages 14-16. Ministers must focus their time and energy on delivering better public services. Despite

a lot of activity in departments, in most cases the public has not yet seen improvements in what they experience day to day. Party politics and the upcoming election should not distract from these goals.

The multi-year budget for 2026-29/30 should be used as a strategic opportunity to set direction and plans for public service improvements through investment and reform. The funding pressures in the coming years will be unprecedented, but nevertheless the Executive needs to work with common cause to get to agreed allocations for departments by the start of the financial year.

Transformation of public services must be prioritised and led at senior level in both the Executive and civil service. Public services as currently configured are unaffordable, as can be seen from poor outcomes and repeated budgetary crises over the past decade. Reform is essential, and this will become an even more pressing priority as the ageing population means increasing demand.

Too many people in Northern Ireland are bearing the impact of poor public services across health, housing, justice, the economy and the environment, particularly those with the lowest incomes and/or other challenges. As the next Assembly election approaches, the public will be looking for evidence that Stormont is delivering for them. Political leaders need to win the public's trust

and confidence - people need to see a clear roadmap for a better future, with an emphasis on improving public services for those facing the greatest difficulties at present.

In the coming months, the Executive parties need to unite behind common goals that will make life better for people in Northern Ireland. While working within a mandatory coalition is undoubtedly difficult, politicians need to show leadership, good faith and ambition in striving for more constructive relationships and increased focus on delivering improved outcomes for the public.

This report considers



01.

The effectiveness of the Executive and its departments in the last six months

02.

Headline cross-cutting messages for the Executive

03.

What each department has delivered and what priorities should be for 2026

04.

Achievements against the targets for 2025 in the Programme for Government

05.

Data which track some of Northern Ireland's key challenges

How effective has the Executive been?

January 2026

In February 2024, the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive were restored following a two year collapse. The early signs were positive, and relationships around the Executive table seemed friendly and constructive.

This good atmosphere has deteriorated over time, especially with the approach of the next Assembly election, and party political differences often get more attention than issues of common concern.

While there have been some examples of progress in the last six months, growing divisions have been a distraction from the Executive's core aim of delivering for the public.

MLAs initially returned with a business-like attitude, aware of the numerous serious challenges they faced. In September 2024, the Executive published its draft Programme for Government (PfG), which outlined its plans to tackle health waiting lists, childcare, the ecological crisis in Lough Neagh, Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), housing and other issues. This marked an important step in the stability and strategic direction of the Executive and, despite some shortcomings, was a welcome announcement. Specific actions to contribute towards PfG goals have included a reset plan for

the health service, a draft childcare strategy, funding for the early stages of a recruitment campaign to increase PSNI numbers, a vision for skills and more (see pages 18 to 49). Pay uplifts have been funded across key services to recognise and reward public sector staff.

However, in the second half of 2025, relationships have weakened alongside a slowdown in progress towards policy goals. Individual ministers reported important issues being 'stuck' because another party would not allow them to appear on the Executive agenda. Parties and ministers seemed increasingly to be operating individually rather than collectively.

Making a power-sharing coalition function is undoubtedly difficult.

Successful periods in the past have relied on strong leadership, trust, and a joint commitment to delivering for the public. The consequence of an increasingly divided Executive is that opportunities to move ahead on difficult issues are being missed.

As a result, progress in some key areas has been lacking. The Executive's Anti-Poverty Strategy was dismissed by campaigners, there is no published plan for hospital reconfiguration, and crumbling wastewater infrastructure continues to halt housing and industrial developments. The development of key infrastructure projects like the A5 and Casement Park has stalled.

There is still no published plan for reporting and scrutiny of delivery

against the PfG priorities. An Investment Strategy setting out a 30 year vision for infrastructure and other capital spending has still not been published.

The Finance Minister published a draft multi-year budget which was immediately rejected by the other Executive parties. With a [minimal cash-terms uplift](#) next year and the likely deduction of overspends in some departments, the trend of tight public finances is set to become even more difficult. Public services in their current configuration are unaffordable, but so far the Executive has avoided the decisions needed about transformation, savings, or revenue raising.

The Executive needs to show a collective commitment to take decisions in areas that are currently stalled.

Letting issues drift will in fact mean problems accumulate and outcomes deteriorate further. While there are significant differences between the parties, they need to work together to find pragmatic solutions rather than settling for continued stalemate. It is striking that both Sinn Féin and Alliance supported an [Opposition motion challenging the Executive](#) on its lack of delivery.

With over a year remaining before the next Assembly election, time is limited for the Executive to make meaningful changes that improve the public services experienced by people day to day. Ministers must find common ground and work collectively to deliver on their PfG commitments. The growing distrust and division between Ministers is alarming

and is delaying progress on important issues. The cost of inaction is continued deterioration of public services and declining public trust in our institutions. A shift in focus is needed towards common goals that unite the parties rather than what divides them.

Key messages for the Executive



01. Prioritise delivering improvements for the public

Public services in Northern Ireland continue to fall far short of what people need. Rather than retreating into party politics, the Executive must work collectively to deliver improvements on the issues that matter to people day to day, including health service waiting times, housing, safer communities, childcare, wastewater infrastructure, and a sustainable environment. Delivering the agreed priorities in the PfG should be the main focus of ministers, despite the approaching election. The Executive must also urgently provide details about how it will report on progress against its PfG priorities.

02. Use the multi-year budget to plan strategically for the future

With the first multi-year funding settlement in a decade, it is up to the Executive to collectively agree departmental allocations by the start of April. It is disappointing that a draft budget did not get Executive approval before consultation. A multi-year budget is an important opportunity which should not be missed to set a strategic

direction for investment, reform and innovation. Change is needed – continuing with existing spending could lead to an overspend of £1bn or more next year. In agreeing a multi-year budget, the Executive must give full consideration to cost savings and efficiencies, longer term transformation, public sector pay policy, and additional revenue raising.

03. Accelerate transformation across public services

Public services are unaffordable in their current configuration, as shown by consistently poor outcomes and repeated budget crises. Transformation must therefore be at the very heart of government as an ambition across the public sector. Rather than just a ring-fenced pot overseen by a Transformation Board, a senior figure with a well-resourced team and a track record of delivery should be appointed, with cross-cutting support from the Executive and departments to lead transformation on the scale that is needed. The additional [transformation support funding](#) in the draft multi-year budget is a positive step.

04. Publish credible, funded plans for long-standing challenges

Despite the progress made in some areas, some of the longest-standing and most difficult challenges facing Northern Ireland remain without a plan for change. The Executive has been back for two years, but has still not published a plan to tackle crumbling wastewater infrastructure, low productivity or health service

reconfiguration. Campaigners said its Anti-Poverty Strategy [would be better off being shelved](#) and the [Investment Strategy remains held up](#) around the Executive table. Ministers must also find a way to resolve policy tensions, such as the conflict between the A5 and climate legislation, and water quality and the agri-food sector.

05. Ensure the progression of key government legislation

The Executive have proposed a number of landmark bills in this mandate. Some are making slow progress through the Assembly, such as the Sign Language and Justice Bills. Some significant and large bills have not yet been introduced to the Assembly, including the Good Jobs Bill and the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill. They must be introduced with appropriate time for sufficient scrutiny and votes before the Assembly is dissolved ahead of the next election.

06. Regain the public's trust and confidence

Rather than party political point-scoring, ministers should focus on dealing with substantive issues and finding pragmatic solutions to complex policy challenges. Day to day divisions risk reinforcing the view that Northern Ireland's system of government is ineffective or even unworkable. Instead of divisive language and actions, ministers should provide leadership, build relationships around the Executive table, and find common ground to improve public services and outcomes for the people of Northern Ireland.



Headline actions since September 2025:

- Some progress on reducing waiting lists
 - £200m allocated for staff pay awards
 - Launched [Cancer Research Strategic Framework](#)
-

Priorities for 2026:

- Prioritise pay at beginning of financial year
- Implement the 'shift left' of services to primary care
- Publish plan for hospital reconfiguration

The Department of Health committed to finding £200m to maintain pay parity with the UK, funded by an [additional £100m from the Executive](#) and an [overspend of £100m](#) by the Department. The forecast [overspend of at least £200m](#) by DoH this year will have significant implications for next year's budget. The Minister must also honour his recent commitment to [prioritise pay awards at the beginning of each financial year](#), to prevent further instability and provide more realistic budgetary management.

The imposition of a funding contract for GPs, despite significant opposition, led to [work to rule](#) and the withdrawal of any non-contractual services. Relations between the Department and GPs have been fraught since the BMA union asked for an additional £80m for their

renewed contract but only received £1m. GPs backed a vote of [no confidence in the Minister](#) and some have discussed leaving the NHS. As the Department seeks to drive a "shift left" towards community-based care, it must restore positive working relations with GPs.

[Funding and focus has meant that some of the longest surgical wait times have reduced](#) and the waiting list tsar has suggested a '[two strikes and you're out](#)' policy to tackle the [growing number of missed appointments](#). However, waiting lists are still growing: well [over half a million people](#) are waiting to see a consultant, some for almost six years. [55.6% of patients](#) are waiting over a year, despite a target that no one should. [Less than a third of those referred with suspected cancer](#) started treatment within the 62 day target. While early

evidence suggests some progress through the [regional breast cancer waiting list](#) system, [many women are still waiting significantly longer](#) than the target. It is concerning that a [third of the money set aside for waiting lists this year was diverted](#) to deal with the departmental overspend.

Despite being a core part of the Bengoa report, there has been little progress on hospital reconfiguration. The Department's [reconfiguration framework](#) was published in October 2024 but there has been no follow-up since. An action plan is urgently needed, detailing which services will change, which hospitals will be affected, funding and timelines.

A review into the ten-year Mental Health Strategy found that only [16% of the necessary funding was allocated](#),

leading to significant failures of delivery. The Mental Health Champion has said this Strategy is "[no longer feasible in its current form](#)".

There was a [surge of flu cases](#) in early December and fears that the health service would struggle to cope. The Department published a [winter preparedness plan](#) which focused on prevention and community care. However, Emergency Department waiting times have remained very long, with [only around a third of people](#) being seen within four hours of arrival against a target of 95%. There are [widespread reports of 'corridor care'](#) with patients waiting or being treated in inappropriate and uncomfortable settings.



Headline actions since September 2025:

- Published Early Learning and Childcare Strategy
 - Legal judgments endorsed Minister's positions on integrated schools and RAISE programme
 - Progress made on TransformED Strategy
-

Priorities for 2026:

- Ensure SEN provision is available and fully funded
- Reduce [schools' estate maintenance backlog](#)
- Continued delivery of TransformED

The Minister published an “ambitious but realistic” [draft Early Learning and Childcare Strategy](#), which aims to subsidise over half of childcare costs by 2032 and provide universal full-time pre-school. Full delivery of the Strategy will cost around £500m per year, but only [£195m is earmarked in the draft Budget](#) over three years. Previous actions have [reduced the cost of full-time childcare](#) from £1054 to £739 per month, with over 23,000 children registered, although some campaigners have said the impact of the subsidy has been partly [offset by increased prices](#) from childcare providers.

The Department's School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill passed its final stage of the Assembly and is awaiting Royal Assent. The Minister shared the relevant [uniform guidelines](#) with schools ahead of the 2026-27

academic year. The guidelines concern affordability, comfort, practicality, sustainability, safety, suitability for all seasons, and also include adjustments for students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. The legislation was granted Executive approval but faced [criticisms from MLAs](#) for being “watered down” and not explicitly providing for girls to wear trousers.

As part of the TransformED plan to support teachers and raise standards, a [£31m fund](#) was established to aid teacher development, as well as a [new teacher induction programme](#), access to [accredited learning programmes](#), and a [bursary for post-primary teachers](#) in STEM and Irish-Medium Education. Consultations have been held on the [future of CCEA qualifications](#) and [school absences](#).

The [High Court dismissed a case](#) from parents of pupils at two Bangor schools, ruling that the Minister was entitled to reject their bids for integrated status as his interpretation of achieving “reasonable numbers” of Catholic and Protestant pupils was correct. The Minister said it “[sets a significant precedent](#)” for future integration proposals. The judgment raises many questions about what is meant by integration, and also the role of the courts in deciding “[blatant policy challenges](#)”. Another judgment found the Department’s programme to tackle underachievement [did not discriminate against Catholic students](#).

The Minister has proposed a £1.7bn [capital investment plan for SEN](#) infrastructure, which would support new builds, expanded provision and

[additional school places](#) – a repeated significant challenge. His SEN reform delivery plan also requires [over £500m to implement](#).

A [backdated pay award](#) of 4% for teachers was announced, although this is contributing to a forecast [£253m overspend](#) by the Department which raised tensions between the [Education and Finance Ministers](#). Like all Departments, the Education Minister must work to reduce the overspend to ensure stability, factor in pay awards early in the year, and ensure his plans are costed and affordable. The Education Minister [criticised the proposed draft multi-year budget](#) for requiring savings which he said were “not achievable”.



Headline actions since September 2025:

- Received £7m for PSNI recruitment and £4.7m for police pay award
 - Funding for domestic and sexual abuse services launched
 - Decision to allow broadcasting of courts
-

Priorities for 2026:

- Provide funding for compensation for PSNI data breach and for recruitment
- Continue progress of Justice Bill and bring forward a Sentencing Bill and Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill
- Publish plan to reduce re-offending

The PSNI has faced significant financial and personnel challenges, with an [estimated £227m in “exceptional pressures”](#) due to the 2023 data breach, holiday pay and pension reforms, and [the lowest officer numbers in its history](#).

The Department received over £11m for PSNI recruitment and an uplift to police pay in the [December monitoring round](#). The Police Federation has called on the Secretary of State to [step in to resolve the issue](#), while the Minister has argued that her department has been [“systematically underfunded”](#).

The UK Treasury [rejected the Executive’s request for a reserve claim](#) to cover the costs of the data breach, in which the details of 9,400 PSNI employees were accidentally released. Treasury argued that the Executive was able to foresee

this additional cost but did not set aside funds to deal with it. Following confusion about whether or not the money was agreed, [£119m is in place to fund the compensation](#) for 2026-27 in the multi-year budget.

Following [continued racist disorder](#) across Northern Ireland, the Minister [reiterated her commitment](#) to tackling hate crimes. She must, therefore, introduce her [Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill](#) to the Assembly, to ensure it can be effectively scrutinised in the remainder of the mandate. The [online and social media driven aspects](#) of the disorder must also be considered by the Department in tackling hate crime. The Department has also committed to Justice and Sentencing Bills; the former of which is in Committee while the latter

is yet to be released. The Minister and Assembly must allow sufficient time for scrutiny of both.

The PfG commits to a “cross-governmental strategy to reduce offending and reoffending”. In 2022-23, [almost a quarter of young people reoffended](#) within their first year of release. While this will require several ministers to work together, the majority of this plan will fall under the Department of Justice. Some [private sector representatives have convened](#) to address employment barriers facing those who have left prison, and the Department must now lead a cross-departmental response.

Following consultation, the Minister has approved the [broadcasting of judges’ sentencing remarks](#) to increase transparency. Victims, witnesses and jurors will not be filmed and it will be subject to judicial discretion. However, any decision on this will occur in the next mandate.

[The average time to complete a trial remains significantly higher](#) than pre-Covid, with Crown Court times at 752 days in 2024-25, 50 days more than the previous year. This continues a concerning upwards trend in recent years. The [indefinite barristers’ strike](#) over stagnant legal aid fees will significantly impact these times.



Headline actions since September 2025:

- Published Skills Action Plan
 - Consultation to increase postgraduate loans
 - One Year On report from the Magee Taskforce published
-

Priorities for 2026:

- Action on Energy Strategy
- Introduce Good Jobs Bill to the Assembly
- Develop a plan to improve productivity and growth

The Minister published a [Skills Action Plan](#), which she said will underpin the Department's four-pillar economic vision of good jobs, raising productivity, decarbonisation and regional balance. The plan has three themes: collaboration with industry and education to “develop new ways of working”, building on the successes of pre-existing institutions and interventions, and “creating an inclusive, forward-looking skills ecosystem that empowers individuals and supports economic transformation”. It comes in the context of [low and stagnant productivity](#), [consistently high economic inactivity](#), and one quarter of all [job vacancies being due to skills shortages](#). Actions include improving skills provision for the childcare and SEN sectors, reform of further education and Invest NI, and cross-border collaborations. The Minister has acknowledged the role

of apprenticeships in addressing skills shortages, but work is needed to [encourage businesses to hire apprentices](#).

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. Their report found it likely that two of its three key targets would be missed, and in one case only 1% of one energy saving target has been achieved so far. Their findings are concerning, especially given the Department's focus on decarbonisation and green energy.

The [Good Jobs Employment Rights](#) Bill is one of the Executive's flagship pieces of legislation, which focuses on terms of employment, pay and benefits, voice and representation, and work-life balance. It

should be introduced in the Assembly soon to allow for sufficient scrutiny through the remainder of the mandate, particularly due to the “grave concerns” of some business organisations about the scale and scope of the legislation and potential additional costs and challenges for employers.

The [RHI \(Closure of Non-Domestic Scheme\) Bill](#) is making its way through the Assembly, which clarifies the Department’s powers to close the scheme. Closure payments to users will be [staggered over 10 years](#), at an anticipated cost of £196m. The delays in closing the scheme have meant £100m of funding for renewable heat programmes has gone unspent.

Following the [20% increase](#) in student maintenance loans for undergraduates

in early 2025, the Department has consulted on [increasing the level of postgraduate tuition fee loans](#) from £6,500 to the Minister’s preference of £10,000, who recognised the [role of higher education](#) in providing the skills and knowledge for innovation and growth. Its regional balance commitment to expanding Ulster University’s Magee campus has made progress this year, with a [21% rise in applications](#) for this academic year and [student numbers higher than their target](#). The [Magee Taskforce’s One Year On report](#) details progress against both capital and student number targets in 2025. However, progress on other elements of regional balance remains challenging, with [94% of inward job creation going to Belfast](#), and only one job going to Derry.



Headline actions since September 2025:

- [Improvements in planning times](#)
 - [Late night public transport pilot approved](#)
 - [Hill Street pedestrianisation](#)
-

Priorities for 2026:

- [Prepare for A5 appeal](#)
- [Action on wastewater infrastructure](#)
- [Respond to NIAO Active Travel report](#)

Despite some [extra funding](#), wastewater infrastructure remains one of the most significant challenges the Executive faces. The [Water, Sustainable Drainage and Flood Management Bill](#) is currently in Committee and the Department has consulted on [Sustainable Drainage Systems](#) for new developments. [Consultation closed in June 2025](#) for its flagship proposal of developer contributions, but no further progress has been announced. Construction companies have repeatedly pointed to the crisis in wastewater, with some foreseeing [closure in the near future](#). Previous reports highlighted the [cost of inaction](#) and [potential solutions](#) to improve wastewater infrastructure. It is therefore concerning that the Infrastructure and Communities Ministers [met just once in the last year](#).

While the [funding in the draft multi-year budget](#) is welcome, long-term transformational solutions are needed.

There have been some improvements in planning times, with a [six week decrease](#) in the average major application processing time to 30 weeks in the first quarter of 2025-26, meeting the target for only the second time since devolution of planning. 77% of planning applications subject to statutory consultation were responded to within the target time, the [highest recorded figures](#) since 2017-18. This shows progress made through the Planning Improvement Programme which was established after a [critical NIAO report](#). However, challenges remain, as local applications are at 19.8 weeks, above the 15 week target and an increase from last year's figures.

A damning [NIAO report on active travel](#) found that the Department's track record is "poor and has had little impact". Delivery of key infrastructure has been lacking and the travel targets for cycling remain unmet: only [2% of people cycle to and/or from work](#). The report states that the Department should be spending around £85m per year on active travel, per the Climate Change Act, but currently only spends an estimated £50m.

The Department approved the [pedestrianisation of Hill Street](#) in Belfast. This follows years of campaigning and delays, despite an [estimated cost of](#)

[only £5,000](#). The new street signs were ignored by some drivers in the early days of the pedestrianisation, with [some arguing it is "symptomatic"](#) of the Executive's "inability to make even the most mildly challenging decisions".

[Delays in the A5 appeal case](#) are a further frustration of a flagship policy. The Infrastructure Minister must work with her colleagues, particularly in Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, to ensure they are properly prepared and that plans can progress when possible.



Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

January 2026

Headline actions since September 2025:

- Published Environmental Governance Review
 - Published a draft [Nature Recovery Strategy](#)
 - Published Environmental Principles Policy Statement
-

Priorities for 2026:

- Work to improve relations with farming bodies on Nutrients Action Programme and other issues
- Continue to deliver on Lough Neagh Action Plan
- Establish independent Environmental Protection Agency

An independent panel established to [review environmental governance](#) recommended the creation of an independent environmental regulator, a commitment made in the 2020 New Decade New Approach agreement. Its 32 recommendations fall under four themes: clarity and coherence, meaningful independence, better compliance, and transparency and accountability. In order to ensure independence from policymaking, the regulator should exist as a Non-Departmental Public Body. The panel's chair said the report is a "[call to action](#)", and that the independent regulator must be accompanied by "broad and meaningful changes" to tackle the climate crisis.

There have been further interventions to tackle the crisis at Lough Neagh,

including a consultation on legislation to ensure the effectiveness of [fines and penalties for pollution](#). This comes as only [16% of the total number of pollution cases](#) where fines could be issued were enforced and [toxins were found in fish in the Lough](#) for the first time. Lough Neagh remains an ecological crisis that may take [decades to resolve](#), but progress must continue to be made against the 37 actions in the [Lough Neagh Action Plan](#). Action must also be taken to tackle the [sewage spills in Belfast Lough](#) to avoid another ecological crisis. Significant and cross-cutting change must be made to reverse the [long-standing pollution of our waterways](#).

The [Ulster Farmers' Union Executive unanimously voted no confidence](#) in the Minister and Department, citing failures to deliver for farmers on the

[Nutrients Action Programme \(NAP\)](#), tackling bovine tuberculosis, sustainable farming, climate change and Lough Neagh. Despite the Minister appointing an external facilitator to the Task and Finish Group, it appears relations failed to improve. The Minister and the Union must work to recover this relationship, and find a shared way forward on the NAP, farming supports and the wider sustainability of the sector.

The [Northern Ireland Environmental Principles Policy Statement](#) was published, which will put environmental considerations at the centre of policy development across the Executive departments. It has provisions to

embed environmental principles into law, including the integration of environmental protection in policy, preventative action, precautions, rectifying environmental damage at source, and the “polluter pays principle”.

The UK Government’s changes to their [inheritance tax proposals](#) will be welcomed by many farmers.

A [Bluetongue Virus \(BTV\) outbreak](#) in livestock was confirmed in December 2025. Testing and restrictions on movement within Temporary Control Zones helped to minimise its spread, leading to a relaxation of the restrictions within a few weeks.



Headline actions since September 2025:

- Published Disability and Work Strategy
 - Reconfigured Housing Association Grant
 - Announced [NI Football Fund](#)
-

Priorities for 2026:

- Increase housebuilding to meet target
- Work with Treasury to get borrowing powers for the Housing Executive
- Provide clarity and leadership on Local Growth Fund

The Department has reduced the [grant given to housing associations](#) to build new homes from 54% to 46%. The Minister said 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 target](#) in 2024-25. Some housing association groups say the reduction raises "[real concerns about the future viability](#)" of many projects", but the Housing Executive said the Department "[made a smart set of decisions](#)".

Northern Ireland house prices are [rising at the fastest rate](#) in the UK, the [social housing waiting list](#) has hit almost 50,000, and over 4,000 households present as homeless.

[Almost 40% of Northern Ireland's economic inactivity rate](#) (the highest in the UK) is due to ill-health or disability. The [Disability and Work Strategy](#) therefore seeks to have an additional 50,000 disabled people in the workforce, and increase the disability employment rate to 50% by March 2036. The Minister [also announced JobStart](#), a £12.4m investment to support those seeking to enter or re-enter work. Unlike previous programmes, it is accessible to all working-age benefit claimants and offers greater flexibility for those who face additional barriers. In its first month, [385 employers had applied](#) to the scheme, offering 1,060 job opportunities.

The Minister has been in [ongoing negotiations with the Treasury](#) to

devolve borrowing powers to the NIHE, which he says could be a “huge game changer” in both increasing funding for housebuilding and renovating their existing homes. However, he said discussions were “going round in circles”.

Consultation on the Executive's [Anti-Poverty Strategy](#) closed in September, with significant criticism from campaigners and [pressure to drop the strategy entirely](#). The Minister welcomed the Chancellor's decision to [scrap the two-child benefit cap](#) in the Autumn Budget which will [help around 50,000 children](#) in Northern Ireland. The Minister must work with the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS)

and other key stakeholders to build on this decision and find a shared way forward to tackle poverty.

The UK Government cut funding to VCS organisations tackling economic inactivity, with a switch to a new Local Growth Fund which will be made up of mostly capital funding (run by the Department for Communities). Community groups have warned that [“communities will suffer”](#) due to these cuts.

The [multi-year budget](#) proposed an inflationary uplift to the funding for Casement Park. After years of delay, progress must be made on this flagship policy.



Headline actions since September 2025:

- December monitoring round allocated funding for pay awards and other pressures (some via overspends)
- Launched consultation for proposed draft multi-year budget for 2026-29/30
- Additional transformation funding announced in draft multi-year budget

Priorities for 2026:

- Work with Executive ministers and departments to agree multi-year budget ahead of the start of 2026-27
- Ensure cost of pay awards is factored into budget allocations at start of financial year
- Manage within budget for 2026-27 and minimise any overspend

Recent months have been dominated by concerns about potential overspends by departments in 2025-26, particularly [Health](#) and [Education](#), which are largely driven by the cost of making public sector pay awards. The long-standing agreement with the UK Government is that an overspend this year is deducted from next year's funding, which Northern Ireland can ill-afford given future budgets are already very overstretched.

At the time of publication, the [latest estimate of the total overspend in 2025-26 is around £400 million](#), although the Finance Minister is continuing to urge reductions in spending where possible.

£276m was allocated in a [December monitoring round](#), with £104m resource DEL within this going toward making pay awards in Health, Education,

Justice and Infrastructure. Capital allocations totalling £162m were made for social housing, water and transport infrastructure. The Executive agreed that Health and Education could overspend their allocations this year in order to fund pay awards. The December monitoring round included [an additional £19m received](#) for 2025-26 from the UK November Budget.

The Finance Minister published his [draft multi-year budget for 2026-29/30 for consultation](#), which proposes allocations for departments of resource and capital DEL funding for the next three years, with an additional fourth year for capital DEL. These proposals were not agreed by the rest of the Executive and were quickly rejected by other Ministers. The total funding available in the next

three years is extremely tight and will put unprecedented pressures on departments' budgets. Nevertheless, it is a basic role of government to set a budget and operate within it, so it will be for the Executive as a whole to work towards an agreed budget by the start of the financial year. Fuller analysis and comment from Pivotal on the draft multi-year budget [can be read here](#).

Following the first tranche of Transformation Fund projects announced in [March 2025](#), a second group of projects are [due to be announced](#). It is important that public service transformation is a priority right

across government, so it is a positive step that [additional funds have been proposed](#) in the multi-year budget to support transformation.

The Finance Minister continued to work with the Treasury towards the agreement of a [final Fiscal Framework](#), which he has said should include the devolution of more tax-raising powers to Northern Ireland.

In September, NISRA launched a new [NI Executive Spending](#) website which provides easily accessible headline data about public expenditure in Northern Ireland.

Achievements against Programme for Government (PfG) 2025 targets

Each PfG priority was accompanied by a target for 2027, and for the year following publication. In this section we use information in the public domain to review what has been achieved so far for each of the nine priorities.

Pivotal remains concerned at the continued absence of any plan for full formal reporting and scrutiny of what has been delivered against the PfG priorities.

Pivotal has already commented on the importance of setting [focused and achievable targets](#) and of the risks around choosing poor targets which can create “[a system where it's all gamed](#)”.

Pivotal supports strong, outcome-focused targets which can be used to hold the Executive accountable. Many of the PfG's targets do not meet this criteria, particularly since they provide only partial information about changes to the PfG outcome.

On the following pages, each of the 2025 targets for the nine priorities is written in blue, with our reporting accompanying it below in black.

Grow a globally competitive and sustainable economy

“Support delivery of the 80% renewable electricity by 2030 target, within the Climate Change Act, by publishing a final design of a Renewable Electricity Support Scheme”

The final design of the scheme [has been published](#), however the Northern Ireland Audit Office found a [35% shortfall](#) in terms of the 2030 renewable electricity target.

“Promote and protect the rights of all workers by consulting on proposals for a new Employment Bill and beginning to draft the legislation”

[Consultation has closed](#) on the Employment Rights Bill and the Minister has said the Department “[continues to work on drafting](#)” the legislation, which faces a [mixed reaction from business groups](#). The Department must introduce it to the Assembly soon to ensure there is time for it to be scrutinised and passed before the next election.

“Work towards expanding the campus at Magee by up to 10,000 students as set out within New Decade New Approach, by working with the Magee Taskforce, and partners, to publish and begin to deliver on an Executive agreed action plan”

An action plan was included in the December 2025 [final report from the Magee Taskforce](#), which [published a detailed progress report](#) in January 2026. The number of students enrolled in Magee for 2025-26 [exceeded the Department's target](#).

“The Economy Minister and Invest NI will have undertaken at least three overseas trade missions to promote NI's market access position to potential overseas investors and importers”

The Economy Minister visited [Germany](#), the [United States](#), and [China](#) in 2025. It is unclear if any visits have directly resulted in increased investments or imports to Northern Ireland.

Deliver more affordable, accessible, high-quality early learning and childcare

“Make sure that the parents of 13,500 eligible children have benefited from a 15% childcare subsidy”

The Education Minister suggested that [up to 24,000 children](#) could benefit from the scheme following a £55m funding package. Further steps are set out in the draft [Early Learning and Childcare Strategy](#) which is out for consultation.

“Complete a scoping exercise of the business support needs of the early years and childcare sector”

The Economy Department [scoped out a business support service](#) for those who provide childcare.

“Provide enhanced funding for existing early years and childcare schemes to better support children facing disadvantage and those with additional needs”

In December 2025, the Education Minister committed [£4.5m to a pre-school inclusion fund](#) to support those with SEN. Pre-school settings are afforded flexibility to suit the needs of SEN pupils.

Cut health waiting times

Invest “£76m to limit further deterioration of cancer and time critical waiting lists. This will allow over 250,000 assessments, diagnostics and treatments appointments for patients with suspected cancer or with life, limb or sight threatening conditions”

£76m for cancer and time critical waiting lists was part of a £215m package earmarked for investment in waiting lists overall, although [£73.5m of this total was used to deal with departmental overspends](#). Between April and October, [100,000 red flag or time critical patients](#) had been seen, diagnosed or treated. However, overall the longest wait for a consultant appointment is [305 weeks](#).

Commence “the development of a refreshed approach to improving health and addressing health inequalities”

The “[Live Better](#)” initiative was piloted in Belfast and Derry-Londonderry, focusing on Starting Well, Living Well and Ageing Well.

Ending Violence Against Women and Girls

“Launch the Power-to-Change campaign with partners in Justice and PSNI to challenge unacceptable attitudes and reduce harmful behaviours of men and boys”

The “[Power to Change](#)” campaign was [launched in January 2025](#). Online targeted [ads](#) and [physical and digital billboards](#) have been used.

“Deliver TEO EVAWG funding through councils to provide investment in grassroots communities from January 2025 onwards”

A [£2m Local Change Fund](#) was shared across the 11 councils and a [£1.2m Regional Change Fund](#) was established to support groups raising awareness. Organisations funded include [White Ribbon NI](#), which challenges harmful attitudes about VAWG, and [Naomh Séamas CLG](#), a sports club which offers information sessions and workshops to their members.

“Establish four key-sectoral working groups by Spring 2025, to improve outcomes for women and girls in education, workplaces, social and nighttime settings”

The working groups are supplemented by [community led reviews](#) which aim to better understand the needs of those facing additional barriers, and research into attitudes of men and boys.

Better support for children and young people with Special Educational Needs

“Establish an Executive agreed SEN Reform Agenda and Delivery Plan which sets out the actions required to transform the education system for children and young people with special educational needs”

The Department of Education published its SEN [Reform Agenda](#) and one-year [Delivery Plan](#) in February 2025, before the publication of the final PfG. The Minister has proposed a [£1.7bn capital investment programme](#) to improve SEN infrastructure. Some children with SEN remain [without a school place](#).

Provide more social, affordable and sustainable housing

“Deliver 847 shared ownership homes”

In March 2025, the Communities Minister announced [£153m of Financial Transactions Capital](#) for the Co-Ownership programme. Co-Ownership's 2024-25 [Social Impact Report](#) shows that 886 homes were purchased through their schemes.

“Launch the Loan to Acquire Move on Accommodation (LAMA) fund of £10m, helping homeless charities purchase properties as a route into housing for those who cannot afford access to permanent social housing or private rented accommodation”

The LAMA fund was [launched in December 2024](#) and will run for five years. It is projected to provide 80-100 units of supported accommodation.

“Complete a public consultation and publish an Executive agreed Fuel Poverty Strategy”

A Fuel Poverty Strategy was [open for consultation](#) from December 2024 until March 2025. The final document has not been published.

Safer communities

“Explore options for expanding the use of Out of Courts Disposals including Community Resolution Notices to speed up the time taken to dispose of those cases, and help to reduce pressure on Courts and other justice agencies”

Community Resolution Notices were used in 6,600 “low-level” crimes last year. A review by the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland found that [more oversight is needed](#) into how they are being used, particularly in cases of domestic abuse.

“Secure Executive agreement for an extension of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme until March 2027”

The Executive [approved the extension of the Programme](#) in September 2024.

“Develop a robust business case that will seek to stabilise, and begin to grow, police officer numbers”

The PSNI have developed a recruitment plan which [costs around £200m](#). This aims to bring numbers up from 6,200 to 7,000. The Department of Justice was given [£7m in the December monitoring round](#) to fund the first year of the workforce recovery plan and the draft multi-year budget [proposes providing further funding](#).

Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment

“Establish robust accountability mechanisms to allow monitoring and reporting of progress on the Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland and consult on a draft Climate Action Plan and publish the third NI Climate Change Adaptation Programme”

The Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Minister has said that publication of the Plan has allowed the Department to move forward with [“monitoring delivery”](#) with some success. The consultation for a [Climate Action Plan](#) ran from June to October 2025, and consultation for the [third Climate Change Adaptation Programme](#) ran from June to August 2025.

“Complete a review of Environmental Governance and following receipt of the findings of the independent panel, DAERA will present a proposed way forward to the Executive for consideration and agreement”

The independent panel's review recommended an [independent environmental regulator](#). The Minister [brought this to the Assembly](#) for agreement, but faces opposition from [some Executive colleagues](#).

“Implement an effective Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) regime across NI and deliver official controls on behalf of the Food Standards Agency (FSA), to protect public health, animal health & welfare, plant health and to support trade and agri-food supply chain sustainability”

A [UK-EU SPS agreement](#) was signed in May 2025. DAERA have [published guidance](#) to support businesses.

Reform and transformation of public services

“Establish a Delivery Unit to drive reform and transformation across government and wider public services”

A [Delivery Unit was established](#) within The Executive Office to drive reform and transformation. It will work on a number of PfG challenges, the first of which is reducing health waiting times. There is little information available about their staffing, resources or remit.

“Address the significant opportunities in emerging technologies such as AI, and better leverage the powers of digital and data, by establishing the Office of AI and Digital. The new Office will sit alongside the Office of Science and Technology and work with the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and other data and digital leaders across the NICS, to advise the Executive”

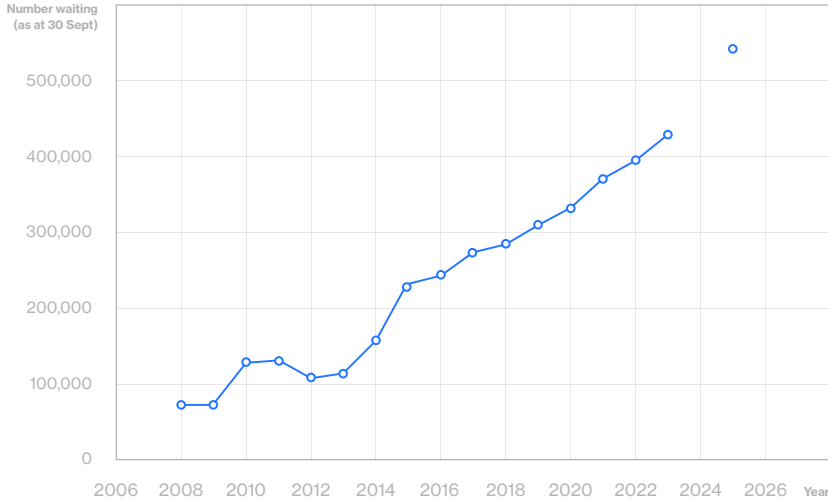
The [Office of AI and Digital](#) was set up to “help improve efficiency and effectiveness in the public sector”. They will work on an AI Strategy and wider AI adoption across the public sector.

“Have an agreed budget sustainability plan and engage with HMT, aiming to agree a detailed methodology for calculating NI’s relative funding per head”

A [budget sustainability plan](#) was published in October 2024, before the publication of the final PfG. In June 2025, [Professor Holtham’s review](#) concluded that Northern Ireland’s level of need sits between 123% and 128%. The Spending Review in June 2025 operated with a [needs-based adjustment factor of 124%](#).

Tracker Data

Health - Chart 01



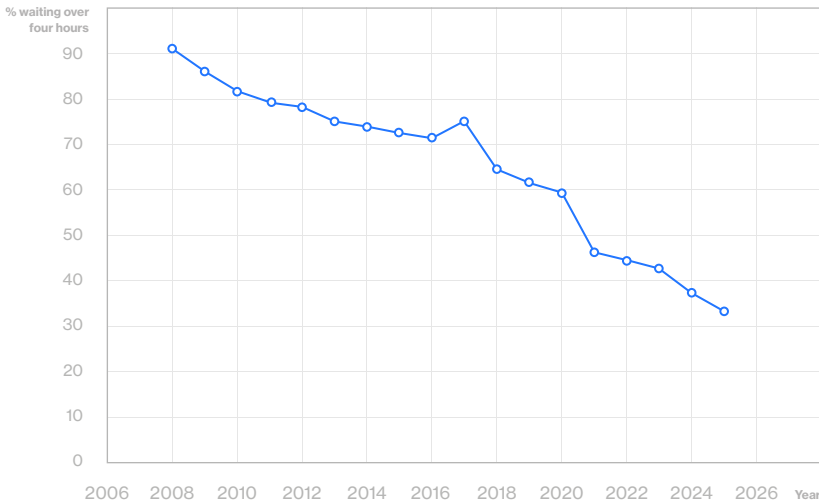
Health - Chart 01

Patients waiting for a first consultant-led outpatient appointment
(September 2008 - September 2025)

The number of people waiting on a first appointment with a consultant has reached 542,451.

Source: [NISRA Northern Ireland outpatient waiting time statistics Sept 2025](#)
Note: Data is unavailable for 2024 due to the transition to encompass.

Health - Chart 02



Health - Chart 02

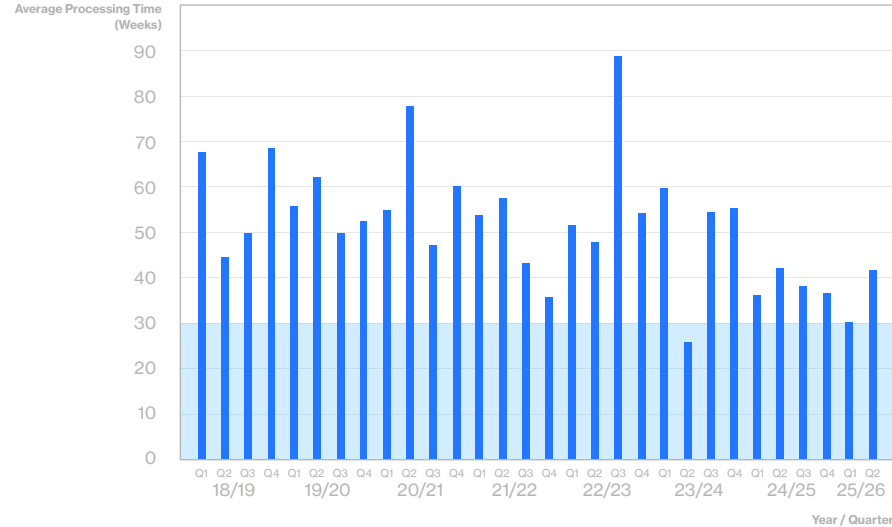
Performance against four hour target at major EDs
(August 2008 - August 2025)

Departmental targets state that 95% of patients are discharged or admitted within four hours. In 2025, 33.7% of people were seen within this period.

Source: [NISRA urgent and emergency care waiting time statistics July-September 2025](#)

Tracker Data

Infrastructure - Chart 03



Infrastructure - Chart 03

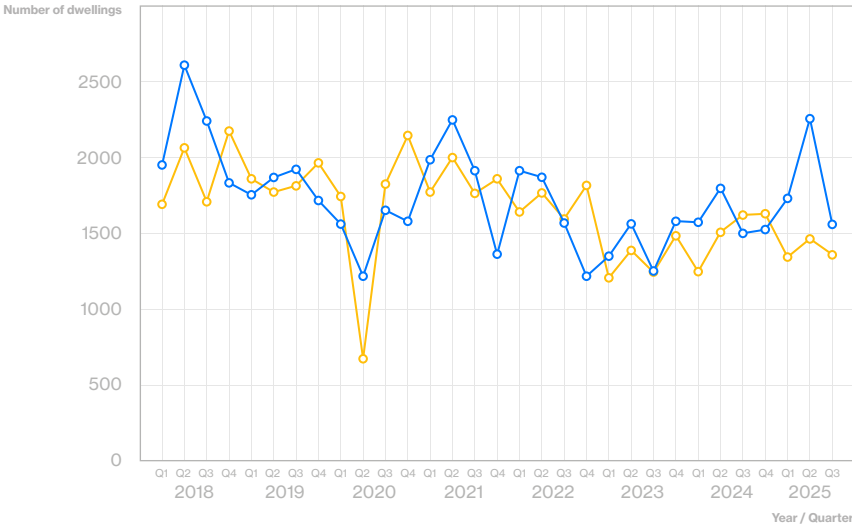
Average planning processing time for major developments
(Q1 2018-19 to Q2 2025-26)

Planning processing times met the 30 week target in Q1 2025 for the second time since powers were devolved but increased again in Q2 2025.

30 Week target

Source: [Northern Ireland planning statistics July-September 2025](#)

Housing - Chart 04



Housing - Chart 04

Annual new dwelling starts and completions
(Q1 2018 to Q3 2025)

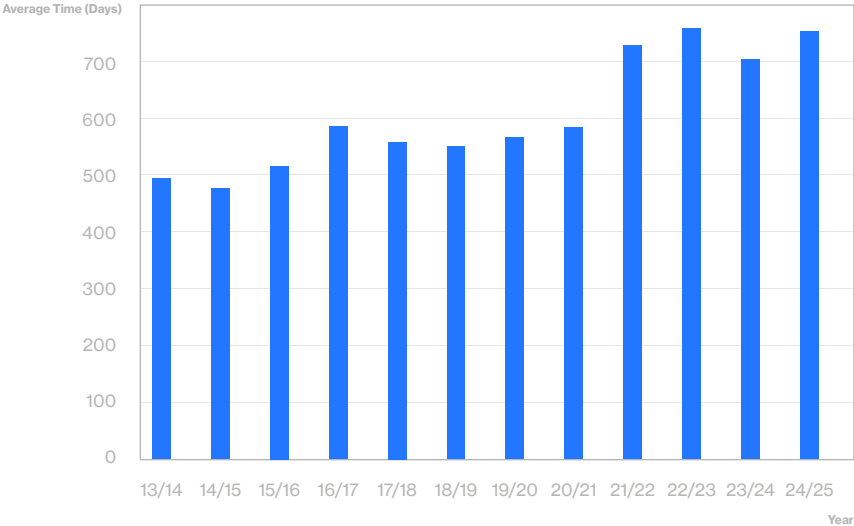
The Communities Minister has said meeting the housebuilding target is “challenging” and the construction industry says wastewater infrastructure is stalling development.

Starts Completions

Source: [DoF new dwelling statistics Q3 2025](#)

Tracker Data

Justice - Chart 05



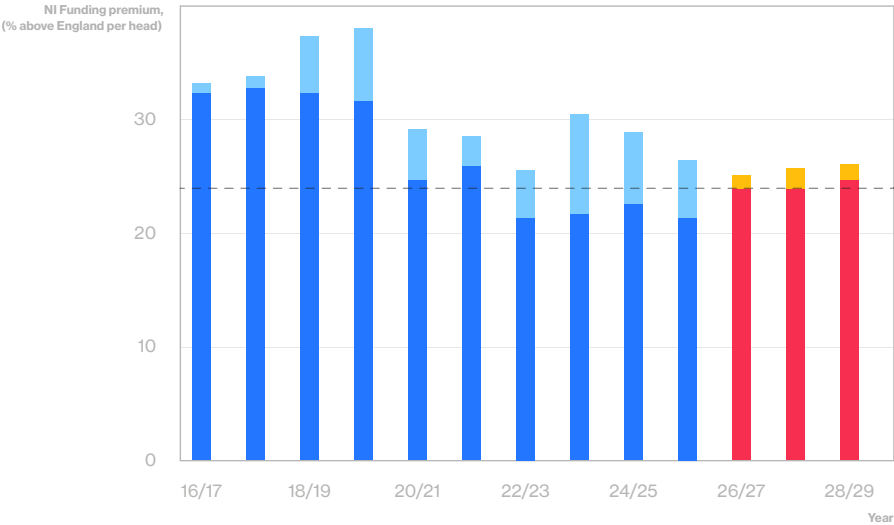
Justice - Chart 05

Average time taken to complete criminal cases in Crown Court
(2013-14 to 2024-25)

The average time to complete a Crown Court trial has been on a concerning upward trend and was 50 days longer in 2024-25 than the year before.

Source: [NISRA Wellbeing Dashboard](#)

Finance - Chart 06



Finance - Chart 06

The Northern Ireland funding premium over time

Northern Ireland has consistently been funded above its estimated level of relative need (24% higher than England's funding per head - see dotted line).

- Historic Barnett allocations
- Historic non-Barnett allocations
- Spending Review Barnett allocations
- Spending Review non-Barnett allocations
- NI 24% Additional Need

Source: [Northern Ireland Fiscal Council response to UK Spending Review](#)

Note: NI funding premium is the percentage by which funding per head in NI is above funding per head in England

pivotal

Pivotal is well established as the independent public policy think tank for Northern Ireland. We help to develop public policy that leads to a positive societal impact for citizens across Northern Ireland, led by evidence and the experiences of people across the community.

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