

18 months of the Northern Ireland Executive: a review



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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The Northern Ireland Executive returned in February 2024 following a prolonged period of collapse. Since then, the institutions have appeared stable, including during some tricky political challenges, and Departments have made progress in some policy areas.

However, there are real and growing concerns about whether the Executive can deliver changes which benefit people here, particularly given the continued poor state of public services, the absence of proper improvement plans, and the failure to make collective decisions about priorities.

“There does not appear to be a recognition that a step-change is needed, and that continuing with current policies will only lead to further deterioration.”

When the Executive was first re-established, Ministers were united in saying they would work hard to improve failing public services and ease the increasing pressures facing individuals, families and communities. After a delay, a Programme for Government was agreed and budgets signed off. Despite this, there remain major shortcomings – including scant improvements in day-to-day services, a lack of proper plans to tackle Northern Ireland’s most difficult policy challenges, and a failure to resolve tensions between some different objectives.

The Executive has promised much but avoided difficult choices about policies, priorities and funding which are essential if real change is to be achieved. The public are yet to see tangible

improvements in health waiting lists, GP access, affordable housing, policing, poverty and more. In fact, many of these areas have got worse over the past 18 months.

No real plans are in place to address some long-term challenges like wastewater infrastructure, productivity and poverty. There does not appear to be recognition that a step-change is needed, and that continuing with current policies will only lead to further deterioration in outcomes. To this end, it is very concerning that the longer-term Investment Strategy, which was due to sit alongside the Programme for Government, has still not been published.

The absence of substantive plans is largely due to the Executive’s continued

inability to reach collective agreement on difficult decisions, to work across departmental silos, and to be honest with the public that choices are needed between different policy aims. Without a doubt Northern Ireland faces many difficult issues, but continuing with current policies will only lead to ever worsening outcomes.

Recent months have exposed an absence of substance behind some headline policy commitments,

particularly in areas with a lack of agreed funding and action plans (for example the anti-poverty strategy, the housing supply strategy and hospital reconfiguration). Unresolved tensions between some major policies have also been revealed, particularly the inconsistency between the A5 update plans and climate change legislation, and the opposition from some parties to the Nutrients Action Programme despite improving water quality being a Programme for Government priority.

This report considers



- 01.** The effectiveness of the Executive and its Departments in 2025 so far
- 02.** Key cross-cutting areas where the Executive should focus its attention

- 03.** What progress has been made against the nine priorities in the Programme for Government
- 04.** Data which illustrate some of Northern Ireland's key challenges

How effective has the Executive been?

September 2025

The Assembly and Executive have been back for over 18 months, and have agreed a Programme for Government (PfG) and budget. Individual Departments have made progress on a range of issues, which are summarised in pages 28-59.

However, a lack of joined-up working, little real prioritisation and growing tensions have resulted in few measurable improvements to their priorities so far. Perhaps most concerning is the lack of urgency about the unsustainable position of some public services.

“There is not yet evidence of any improvement to headline outcomes that will make a difference to people’s experience of public services.”

During its first twelve months, the Executive was praised for its stability and seemingly constructive attitude. As time has gone on, tensions have appeared between the parties, including on [Irish language signage](#) and following the [violence in Ballymena](#). To their credit, these issues have not overwhelmed ministers or threatened to collapse the Executive as they may have done in the past.

There have been some significant announcements, including from the Departments of Health, Education and the Economy. However, these mostly concern actions by individual departments. Progress on cross-cutting issues has been lacking.

The Executive talked about a [strong](#)

[desire to deliver improvements](#) on issues that matter to people like childcare, the economy and housing. These commitments were formalised in the nine priorities within the Programme for Government. While some actions have been taken against each PfG priority, and some additional funding allocated, there is not yet evidence of any improvement to headline outcomes that will make a difference to people’s experience of public services.

The lack of action plans to back up Ministers’ ambitions has become increasingly clear. The Programme for Government sets out policy ambitions but in many cases lacks substantive, specific action plans to achieve them. Similar criticisms can be made of the strategies on [housing](#), [childcare](#) and [poverty](#).

The Executive has continued its previous pattern of failing to agree priority areas for focussed attention, despite the perilous state of some public services. It seems unable to make choices between different policies, instead trying in vain to improve everything at once. This is not realistic given constrained budgets and limited capacity. This risks inadequate or no progress across the board.

Unresolved tensions between different policy areas have also emerged. Progress on the A5 upgrade stalled because of its [incompatibility with the Executive's climate change commitments](#), and efforts to improve water quality in Lough Neagh have been challenged by [opposition to the Nutrients Action Programme](#). These are failures of cooperation and leadership. They show

different Departments and parties unable to work together, make necessary trade-offs, and operate across the Executive with common purpose.

Ministers' actions must be accountable. The Official Opposition has displayed the capacity to hold ministers to account in the chamber, but scrutiny in committees can be poor. Furthermore, ministers, especially the First and deputy First Minister, should make themselves frequently [available to the media](#) to face questions and inform the public on their actions.

Key messages for the Executive



01. Focus on delivering improvements that impact people's lives

The Executive needs to deliver benefits that people can see and feel. The draft PfG was first published a year ago, with the final version approved in March 2025. As set out on pages 16-26, the Executive has taken actions against all nine priorities. However, few people will have seen noticeable progress in their own lives: hospital waiting lists continue to rise, the SEN crisis in schools persists, house-building has ground to a halt in some areas, and ministers are divided on how to revive Lough Neagh. While the PfG commits to annual reporting on outcomes, there is still no information about when this will be available or the form it will take.

02. The Executive needs to show it has credible plans in place to address Northern Ireland's biggest policy challenges

In many important areas the Executive still lacks proper longer-term plans. These include the crisis in wastewater infrastructure, improving productivity, reducing poverty, and increasing affordable housing. Current policies are unsustainable, yet

there are no urgent efforts to drive change. Eighteen months after the Executive returned, the long-term Investment Strategy remains unpublished, despite its strategic importance. Ministers need to provide clear leadership, stop avoiding difficult choices, and work together towards solutions. Too often the Executive, MLAs and the media focus on issues that are tiny in comparison to the scale of these problems.

03. Agree a multi-year budget which enables planning and reform

Following the June Spending Review, the [Budget Sustainability Plan](#) and [Interim Fiscal Framework](#), the Executive has an opportunity to agree its first multi-year budget for more than a decade. This can draw a line under the repeated budget crises of recent years. Ministers must capitalise on this stability and allocate funds according to PfG priorities, with an emphasis on long-term strategy rather than short-term fixes. Budgets remain under significant pressure and difficult choices about spending priorities, transformation and revenue raising are needed.

04. Drive forward public service transformation

Transformation is essential if public services are going to be affordable now and in the future. The Transformation Fund, overseen by the expanded Public Service Transformation Board, should be complemented by the new Office for AI and Digital in leading innovative improvements to public services. However, transformation

must be at the core of everything the Executive does, not limited to the remit of the Transformation Board or the Transformation Fund. There is a particular need for transformation projects that work across different departments to join up public services more effectively.

05. Resolve tensions between priorities and commit to a shared way forward on the Climate Change Act

The landmark A5 ruling in June exposed one of the conflicts present in Northern Ireland's policy landscape – in this case, between environmental policy and improving infrastructure. It is disappointing to see a long-term commitment delayed further because of the failure to adequately consider the impacts of a core piece of recent legislation. Ministers must recognise that they cannot do everything and ensure actions in one area are compatible with commitments in another. They must work together to find a way to protect the environment and drive other necessary policy progress. Designing and developing good legislation, as well as joined-up working across silos and constructive scrutiny, are vital.

06. Prepare for future pressures from an ageing population

Governments everywhere see health and social care taking up an increasing share of total spending, as the population lives longer with increasing numbers of health conditions. In Northern Ireland, health spending rose from [46% of the resource](#)

[DEL in 2020-21](#) to almost [51% in 2024-25](#). The population who are over 85 years is forecast to [increase by 122.2% by 2047](#) (from 2022), while the working age population remains static. This ever-increasing share of spending on health is not sustainable given that it continuously pulls resources away from other essential public services. This emphasises the need for transformation through improved population health, early intervention, prevention, use of technology and AI, and more efficient delivery of services.



The Programme for Government's nine priorities

September 2025

It has been a year since the PfG was published in its draft form, but Ministers have been taking some actions on the nine priorities since they returned in February 2024. While these commitments are for the rest of the mandate (until May 2027), many actions have already been taken. What progress has been made so far?

01. Grow a globally competitive and sustainable economy

These commitments are categorised under the Economy Minister's [four pillar vision](#): productivity, good jobs, regional balance, and reducing carbon emissions.

On productivity, Northern Ireland is [8th of the 12 UK regions](#). £11m has been invested in [SME cluster programmes](#).

These will be supported by the [Derry and Belfast City Deals](#), as well as the Mid South West and Causeway Coast and Glens [Regional Growth Deals](#). There has been, however, [uncertainty about whether](#) some would be approved, and about [projects within](#) them.

On good jobs, the Minister announced a £12m [Skills Fund](#) and a £600k

[Apprenticeship Inclusion Challenge Fund](#), as well as moving forward with the landmark [employment rights legislation](#). There has, however, been [concern from business representatives](#) about aspects of the proposed bill.

Expanding Ulster University's Magee campus has been the main activity on regional balance. The Minister's Taskforce published a [final report and detailed action plan](#) to achieve the target of 10,000 students. The Department has also published its [Sub-Regional Economic Plan](#), and has committed to investing £1.3bn to regenerate areas outside Belfast. It has also released a 10 year [Tourism Vision and Action Plan](#).

The final pillar is decarbonisation. The PfG promises a £15m investment in an

Energy and Resource Efficiency Support Scheme to help businesses reduce bills, which is also in the Department's [2024 Action Plan](#). A £20m [Energy Efficiency Capital Grant](#) was launched in May 2024. The [Circular Economy Strategy](#) remains in draft form since before the Executive's restoration. Despite the commitment to both agri-food and fisheries, the [Sustainable Agriculture Programme](#) is geared more towards the former.

02. Deliver affordable, accessible, high-quality early learning and childcare

The Executive has committed to developing an Early Learning and Childcare Strategy. While this has not yet been published, the creation of the ongoing Childcare Subsidy Scheme has saved a [reported £6.5m for families](#).

The Minister also funded an extension of the scheme to cover [school-age children](#) and has supported services such as Sure Start, Toybox and others. While the Childcare Subsidy Scheme has been welcomed, parent groups have said that childcare costs remain "ludicrous" and that the scheme "[doesn't really touch the sides](#)".

£25m was invested in work towards a standardised provision of 22.5 funded hours per week for all children in their pre-school year. It is the Department's "[intention](#)" to transition around 100 pre-school settings to deliver "full-time" pre-school from September 2025.

03. Cut health waiting times

This is one of the most pressing issues facing Northern Ireland, with Emergency Department waits at a [five year high](#) and over [57% of people waiting more than 12 months](#) for a first consultant-led outpatient appointment.

The PfG commits to improving performance, productivity and quality of care through [elective care centres](#), rapid diagnosis centres, and Mega Clinics. Elective care centres have opened in the Mater Hospital, South West Acute Hospital and Daisy Hill. [Rapid diagnosis centres](#) have been opened in Whiteabbey and Dungannon and there are Mega Clinics in the Belfast and Western Trusts.

[£215m was ringfenced](#) to tackle waiting lists, after [some uncertainty](#) about where this funding would come from. The Minister also announced a [£10m cross border reimbursement scheme](#), allowing qualifying patients to claim back costs on treatments obtained in the Republic of Ireland.

A consultation was held on [reforming adult social care](#). Without a truly viable and sustainable approach to adult social care, the management of acute hospital beds will remain impossible and the current failings in both elective and unscheduled care will continue to get worse.

04. Ending violence against women and girls

The Executive has launched a detailed [strategic framework](#) and [delivery plan](#) to end violence against women and girls, which was successfully co-designed with key stakeholders and partners. A [£1.2m regional change fund](#) was announced for the voluntary sector and a [£2m fund](#) which was shared across the 11 council districts to support organisations working to end violence against women and girls.

Prominent campaigns such as [Power to Change](#), led by the PSNI, focused on men and behaviours which contribute to this problem. There has also been a £425,000 [Small Business Research Initiative](#) which funds six organisations

to use innovative solutions to tackle VAWG. The Departments of Health and Justice have worked together to publish a [Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy](#) and Action Plan. A number of [recent tragedies](#) show the importance of tackling this issue.

05. Better support for children and young people with Special Educational Needs

The Education minister has committed to early intervention and cross-system use of technology, with the [SEN Reform Delivery Plan](#) 2025-30 including a multi-agency cross-departmental Early Intervention Digital Dashboard. The plan also promises to introduce mandatory basic training in SEN for the educational workforce.

The [SEN Capital Programme](#) funds the delivery of up to eight new special schools and upgrades for existing special schools, as well as offering greater in-school supports.

The Economy [Minister's announcements](#) on SEN support post-19, which included a “dedicated transition support service”, were met with some criticism, with the Caleb's Cause campaign group saying the proposals do “[not go far enough](#)”.

The PfG states that “children should be educated in a learning environment which is appropriate to their needs”, but the Education Authority were considering [instructing mainstream schools to take SEN pupils](#) with questions raised about whether supports were in place. In June, 164 pupils were without a place, but

efforts through the summer [reduced this figure to six](#).

06. Provide more social, affordable and sustainable housing

The PfG commits to supporting housing delivery through the planning system. The Minister has made some [amendments to planning legislation](#) to help delivery of projects, as well as receiving [£3m from the Transformation Fund](#) to speed up the Planning Appeals Commission. Major planning times have recently hit their [lowest since the transfer of planning powers in 2015](#).

The Executive's [Housing Supply Strategy](#) was published, committing to 100,000 homes over 15 years, a third of which should be social homes. In 2024-25,

only [1,504 social homes](#) were started, well below the target of [around 2,000](#). Industry leaders have called for [higher targets and increased funding](#) to meet the demand while [many are sceptical](#) the target can be met as it is.

While work to provide the Housing Executive with [borrowing powers is ongoing](#), the number of households presenting as homeless [fell by 11%](#) on last year. However, housing stress has risen by 6% as affordability pressures continue.

The Communities Minister announced £153m in FTC [funding for Co-Ownership](#), and launched the [Intermediate Rent Scheme](#) which provides funding for 300 homes at below market rents. He has also restricted the frequency with which

landlords can [increase rent](#).

The main housing problem, as the [Minister himself has said](#), is “supply”. However, the long-neglected condition of our [wastewater infrastructure](#) is a major obstacle to efforts to improve housing supply which requires urgent and tough decisions, informed by long-term thinking, and supported by joined-up working.

07. Safer communities

One of the primary issues facing the Department is police numbers. The requested [£200m funding package](#) needs to be provided to help bring officer numbers up from 6,200 to 7,000. The PfG commits to increasing the workforce in line with [New Decade,](#)

[New Approach](#), which lists the ideal figure of 7,500. The Chief Constable has previously said that [8,000 officers](#) would be needed to keep people safe.

The Executive agreed to a Speeding up Justice programme which will focus on getting serious cases to court quickly and examine the jurisdiction of the courts, delivering digital efficiencies and lowering demand within the court system. The Department of Justice was awarded [£20.45m of Transformation funding](#) for “reducing delay and maximizing efficiencies”, including out of court disposals and finding new ways to deal with lower-level cases.

The Department has also worked on a [draft Victims and Witnesses of Crime Strategy](#) and a [Victims and Witnesses](#)

[Charter](#) to support them through the justice system. There has also been a consultation to [simplify the sentencing framework](#) for children, part of the Strategic Framework for Youth Justice. There has not yet been a strategy to reduce offending and re-offending.

As part of the commitment to tackle paramilitarism, the Department ran a prominent ‘[Ending the Harm](#)’ campaign across Northern Ireland.

08. Protecting Lough Neagh and the environment

The main environmental policy of this mandate has been the Lough Neagh Action Plan, which was published last year. The Minister said solving the blue-green algae crisis will take “[decades](#)”

and so far only [14 of the 37 actions](#) in the plan have been implemented. Part of this is the launch of a Small Business Research Initiative: a [£450k fund](#) was announced to find innovative solutions to tackle the algae.

The Department is currently consulting on its [Climate Action Plan](#), while consultations are closed on the third [Climate Change Adaptation Programme](#) and [Just Transition Commission](#). The [Green Growth Strategy](#) has been sitting in draft form since before the Executive was restored.

The PfG commits to “continue to implement the Environmental Improvement Plan”. Its 2024-25 targets include the development of an [ammonia strategy and consulting](#) on a clean

air strategy. An ammonia strategy consultation closed in 2023 (changes were reported in [February 2025](#)), while a [clean air consultation](#) closed in 2021. There has been no [shellfish water protected area action plan](#) since 2019. We are also awaiting legislation on bottle lids to have attached caps.

On introducing a phosphorus and nitrogen balance, the department's Nutrients Action Programme has faced a lot of [controversy and criticism](#), from both the agriculture sector and even other Executive parties. It is important that the Executive resolves its internal differences to make urgent and real progress to implement solutions to both Lough Neagh and the climate crisis.

09. Reform and transformation of public services

A Delivery Unit has been set up in the Executive Office, which the PfG says will “ensure the Executive's priorities get the focus needed to bring about lasting change and improvement”. However there has been [little information provided](#) on its staffing, resources, and remit. The Executive has also set up an [Office of AI and Digital](#) to further drive forward transformation, efficiency, and effectiveness of public services.

£129m of the £235m [Transformation Fund](#) has been released for projects including Multi-Disciplinary health Teams, SEN reform, speeding up the criminal justice system and planning reform. The Fund is overseen by a Public

Sector Transformation Board, which has finalised Terms of Reference and has put out a [second call for transformation projects](#).

Transforming and stabilising public finances is a key part of wider public sector transformation. The Department of Finance worked closely with the Treasury to agree a [Budget Sustainability Plan](#), which commits to multi-year funding where possible, consideration of income generation, and future work on securing finances. Furthermore, they agreed an [Interim Fiscal Framework](#), which ensured the 124% fiscal floor for Northern Ireland. The Department of Finance is now in negotiations with the Treasury on a [final Fiscal Framework](#).

Conclusion



Delivery must be the overriding focus for the Executive as we begin to approach the end of the mandate. While there have been lots of aspirations, strategies and funding allocations for PfG commitments, in many cases, we have not seen these translate into improvements in people's day-to-day lives.

Action on childcare, the EVAWG strategy and regional balance has been positive, but the indicators for affordable housing, Lough Neagh and waiting lists can only be described as unacceptable failures of government. The Executive must work collectively and at pace to turn strategy to delivery and make progress on their PfG priorities.

The PfG's [Wellbeing Dashboard](#) sets out data on a number of domains, but largely seem removed from the nine priorities set out above. Having rigorous, up-to-date data is a good thing, but it must be used to further aims and objectives. The information on the Dashboard must be strategically chosen and used to monitor and assess performance of policies.

The Executive will be assessed on its progress on the PfG priorities. They must ensure that hospital waits go down, houses are built, and SEN children are supported. The PfG and the strategies are the basis for action, it is now time to deliver.

Department 01: Health

September 2025

Actions delivered:

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

Priorities ahead:

- Reductions in waiting lists
- Publish specific details about plans for hospital reconfiguration
- [Keep within budget](#) and agree pay settlements.

The Executive committed to cutting health waiting times in the Programme for Government. While the Budget in March set aside £215m to tackle waiting lists, up to £165m of this was taken from [existing DoH funds](#), meaning savings will have to be made elsewhere. The Minister announced a [£10m cross-border reimbursement](#) scheme which will allow some patients who have been waiting over four years to claim back the cost of surgery performed in the Republic of Ireland. Northern Ireland's first [Regional Clinical Director for Elective Care](#) was appointed to oversee the drive to reduce waiting lists, who said the current backlog is “nothing short of a national shame”, as waits for a [first outpatient appointment rose by 12%](#) on last year in the Southern and Western Trusts. There have been some positive steps towards

a ‘shift left’ to the community, [digital transformation](#), and planning for the demanding [winter period](#).

The Department received [£61m from the Transformation Fund](#) to expand Multi-Disciplinary Teams into five new GP federations helping stabilise primary care. This, alongside reform and delivery, are the key themes in the [Health and Social Care Reset Plan](#), which aims to build up primary care in communities to tackle health inequalities through greater prevention, early intervention and avoidance of hospital stays. The reset plan seeks to improve service delivery, data use and collaborative working while making £300m in savings in 2025-26. These aims may be difficult to achieve given the current [decision by GPs to take collective action](#) about their 2025-26

contract. There are also suggestions of [possible industrial action by nurses](#) over this year's pay award.

Some key policy areas have received less attention in 2025 than expected. There has been a headline commitment to [hospital reconfiguration](#) but still no details about what that will mean in practice. [Opposition to some proposed changes](#) to hospitals remain, so it is important specific details about changes are published soon. Issues with Belfast Trust's proposed [maternity](#)

[hospital](#) show the existing problems before reconfiguration is considered. Furthermore, a [series of controversies](#) in the Trust led the Minister to [dismiss its Chair](#).

With demand for healthcare set to continue to rise, the need for significant reforms that bring about a more effective and efficient health service remain. There must be a continued focus on long-term planning as well as shorter-term improvements to health service provision.



Department 02: Education

September 2025

Actions delivered:

- SEN Reform Agenda and Delivery Plan published
 - Expansion of Childcare Subsidy Scheme
 - Published TransformED Delivery Plan for “educational excellence”
-

Priorities ahead:

- Ensure SEN reforms result in sufficient school places
- Publish Early Learning and Childcare Strategy
- Take action on findings of curriculum review report

The cost and availability of childcare has been one of the prominent issues facing the Executive since its return. The Minister acted quickly in setting up the [Childcare Subsidy Scheme](#), and has [extended the programme](#) to cover school-age children. So far, the Department has said the cost of full-time childcare has [reduced from £1054 to £739 per month](#), but some parent groups say that the subsidy scheme has been [offset by increased costs](#). While there have been [many positive steps](#) towards improving childcare provision and affordability, the Department has not yet released its Early Learning and Childcare Strategy.

SEN has proven to be a continuing challenge for the Department. Despite a commitment to tackling it in the PfG, the

publication of the [SEN Reform Agenda and Delivery Plan](#) and a [monitoring framework](#), Northern Ireland still faces what the Chief Executive of the Education Authority called a “[crisis](#)”. 164 SEN pupils were without a school place in June but the Department has [reduced this to six](#). As the number of SEN pupils is [expected to grow](#) rapidly in the coming years, the Department must work to ensure adequate capacity, staffing and resources are in place to accommodate them in appropriate settings.

The Minister announced his strategy for “educational excellence”, [TransformED](#), with a focus on the curriculum, qualifications and assessment, school improvement and tackling disadvantage, the last of which received a [£3.5m investment](#) over two years via the

RAISE initiative. There has also been an [independent review of the curriculum](#), which resulted in a taskforce being set up to oversee a new framework, while a panel of experts was established to [review assessment](#) and another independent panel is [reviewing school funding](#). These proposed changes are significant and would mark a step-change in our education system. The Minister has faced some criticism for not taking action on [academic](#)

[selection](#) at age 11, despite changes being recommended in the previous [Independent Review of Education](#).

Work is ongoing in other significant changes to education, including on keeping young people in [education or training until 18](#), new [key stage assessments](#) modelled on nations like Canada, the US and Japan, and a [mobile phone ban](#) which is being piloted in nine schools with 8,000 students.



Department 03:

Justice

September 2025

Actions delivered:

- Published [Enabling Access to Justice reforms](#)
 - Consulted on actions to speed up justice
 - Transformation funding approved
-

Priorities ahead:

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

PSNI officer numbers has long been a challenge, and these [pressures have been exacerbated](#) by violence on the streets over the last two summers. Officer numbers are at a historic low of 6,200, far short of both the New Decade New Approach commitment of [7,500](#) and the [8,000](#) the Chief Constable says is needed to [investigate crimes, manage offenders and tackle paramilitarism](#). The Justice Minister has therefore called the potential £200m investment in increasing officer numbers a “gamechanger”, so clarity is urgently needed on whether this money is available.

Speeding up the criminal justice system has been a focus of the Minister, who received [£20.45m](#) from the Transformation Fund to reduce

delays in the system and make it more efficient. This is much needed as it took an [average of 190 days](#) to complete a criminal case in 2024, rising to 675 days for sexual cases, a [significant increase](#) on a decade ago. The funding also will be used to find ways to free up capacity for cases such as motoring offences, which took an average of 162 days to complete in 2024. £2.19m of the money was set aside for research into electronic tagging and monitoring of individuals who have been released from prison.

In order to further the aim of speeding up justice, the Department has consulted on [reducing sentences for guilty pleas](#) and on giving additional powers to the PSNI, [diverting cases away](#) from the backlogged courts. In order to restore confidence in the criminal justice system

here, the Minister must oversee a reduction in court waiting times. Many violent crimes are [taking years to make it to court](#), even before a protracted case begins to be heard.

The Minister has continued her commitment to victims and witnesses, with the move to make permanent a pilot which allowed victims to speak with officers [via video call](#) and a consultation on the [Victims and Witnesses of Crime Strategy](#)

2025-30. She also delivered a funding increase through the [Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy Small Grant Scheme](#) to groups who work to reduce abuse.

On ending violence against women and girls, the Minister introduced a Legislative Consent Motion to make [spiking a dedicated offence](#) in Northern Ireland, and launched a consultation to criminalise the [creation and distribution of deepfakes](#).



Department 04: Economy

September 2025

Actions delivered:

- Published Good Jobs Bill
 - Regional Balance Fund launched
 - Announced some new post-19 SEN support
-

Priorities ahead:

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

The Minister's [Good Jobs Bill](#) is the Department's main piece of legislation, and a central part of the economic vision set out when the Executive was restored. Across four themes (terms of employment, pay and benefits, voice and representation, and work-life balance), the bill will aim to end zero hour contracts, increase the role of trade unions and improve access to family-related leave. It will be a significant and ambitious piece of legislation, but business representatives have expressed concern that it adds an [additional burden on businesses](#) who are struggling in an already difficult environment. Some trade union organisations, however, have claimed that the document "[doesn't go far enough](#)".

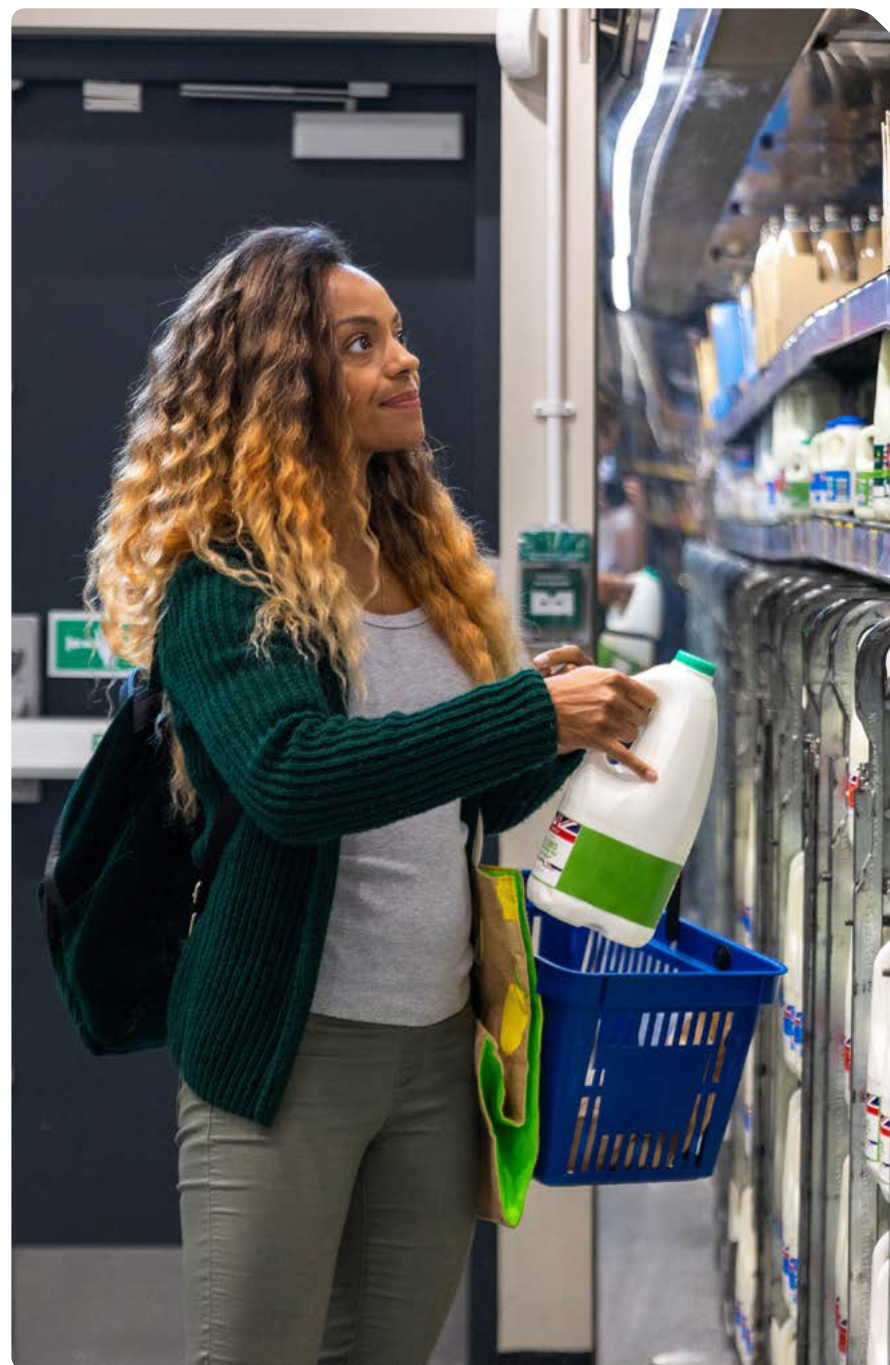
A £45m [Regional Balance Fund](#) was divided between each of the 11 council

districts to drive economic development across Northern Ireland, supporting Local Economic Partnerships as part of the [Sub-regional Economic Plan](#). It will allow councils to identify local needs and tailor support and interventions that will aid economic development. Land has been purchased to drive the [Magee expansion](#), but there has been local concern regarding the need for [increased student housing](#) in the area.

A number of consultations have been opened to decarbonise the economy, including to identify potential areas to develop [offshore energy production](#) and a [renewable electricity support scheme](#). The Minister also launched a [Green Skills Action Plan](#) which will guide employers on the skills needed to drive the net-zero transition.

The Minister announced a series of [post-19 SEN supports](#), including increasing provision of apprenticeships and places in Further Education colleges and a dedicated Transition Support Service. Campaigners say these proposals [do not go far enough](#), and are calling for Northern Ireland to align with England, which offers young people with SEN an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) which sets out their needs until they are 25.

Countries around the world are having to adapt to the US President's tariff regime, and Northern Ireland is in a unique position given its connections both to the UK and EU markets. The Minister set up a [Tariff Working Group](#) to "assess the implications" and work on potential interventions. The UK-US trade agreement is set to [half US tariffs on whiskey](#) from 150% to 75% before a reduction to 40%. It is important that the Minister works to support local businesses and establish measures to assist and ease the pressures this new trading relationship creates, as well as maximising the opportunities it brings.



Department 05: Infrastructure

September 2025

Actions delivered:

- [Consultation on developer contributions to funding water connections](#)
 - [Transport Strategy consultation](#)
 - [Improvements to planning times](#)
-

Priorities ahead:

- [Response to A5 ruling](#)
- [Improve wastewater capacity](#)
- [Meet planning waiting times targets](#)

The condition of wastewater infrastructure is one of the most pressing issues facing Northern Ireland because of the [serious impact](#) it is having on housebuilding and other development. Having ruled out [household water charges](#), the Minister opened a consultation on [developer contributions](#), exploring a voluntary contribution, compulsory levy, or a combination of both. [Most industry experts](#) have said the proposals are insufficient to tackle the scale of the issue. A [number of authoritative reports](#) have stressed the importance of this issue, one of which estimates a [funding gap of more than £2bn](#) for NI Water for 2027-33. The Minister should seriously [consider all options](#) for change, and should not avoid unpopular possibilities like new charges.

The summer's [A5 ruling](#) was a hammer-blow to the long-running challenge of redeveloping the Western Transport Corridor. It highlighted the importance of departments fully ensuring that their plans are compliant with the Assembly's climate laws. The Minister's [continued commitment](#) to the project means efforts must be made to deliver the A5 in a way that does not impinge on other priorities.

Northern Ireland was lagging behind much of the UK with regards to its [planning decision times](#), with waits regularly exceeding targets. The Department's Planning Improvement Programme, however, appears to have made some progress: major applications, while remaining well above the 30 week target (at 39.6 weeks), reached the [lowest processing time](#) since planning

powers were transferred in 2015. Further actions, including [streamlining decision-making](#) and [£3m of transformation funding for the Planning Appeals Commission](#), must continue this progress and reduce waiting times.

The Minister published a draft [10 year Transport Strategy](#) for consultation that she calls “[actionable and adaptable](#)” and that “creates a cleaner and greener foundation for growth”. However, there is no mention in the draft strategy of the A5 upgrade, or of the Belfast Glider, the planned North-South expansion of which has been [scaled back significantly](#).

MOT waiting times were a significant issue when the Executive returned, but the Department successfully [reduced waiting times](#) from over 100 days in May 2024 to 30 days in February 2025. The use of Temporary Exemption Certificates was key to this, and their use has been extended. The Minister is also consulting on [biennial MOTs](#) for some private cars.



Department 06: Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

September 2025

Actions delivered:

- [Sustainable Agriculture Programme published](#)
 - [Bovine TB eradication plan published](#)
 - [Mobuoy Strategy consultation](#)
-

Priorities ahead:

- [Work with Executive colleagues to pass Nutrients Action Programme](#)
- [Work with Infrastructure Minister on response to A5 ruling](#)
- [Respond to the Independent Panel on Environmental Governance's report](#)

The Minister has faced controversy and criticism for his Nutrients Action Programme (NAP) from both the [agriculture sector](#) and from the [other Executive parties](#), despite their commitment to the Lough Neagh Action Plan. Despite calls for the NAP to be scrapped, the Minister established a [task and finish group](#) made up of key stakeholders to analyse the consultation responses, before making proposals on a way forward. Another consultation will then be held. It is important that the Minister works with both the agri-food sector and his Executive colleagues to chart a clear path for the NAP, meeting the department's legal requirements and reducing pollution.

Water quality is a persistent challenge for the department, with little improvement

in our [rivers](#) and [coasts](#) in recent years. With [14 of the 37 measures](#) in the Lough Neagh Action Plan implemented since it was published last year, the Minister must continue to drive this forward and work to improve the situation as the [blue-green algae returned](#) this year. He also launched an interactive [Bathing Water Quality Dashboard](#) which can help the public decide when and where to swim. Following the [sentencing of two men](#) for illegal dumping at Mobuoy, near the River Faughan, the Minister launched a [strategy consultation](#) which aims to protect the river's water quality and the drinking water supply as well as improve the groundwater quality there.

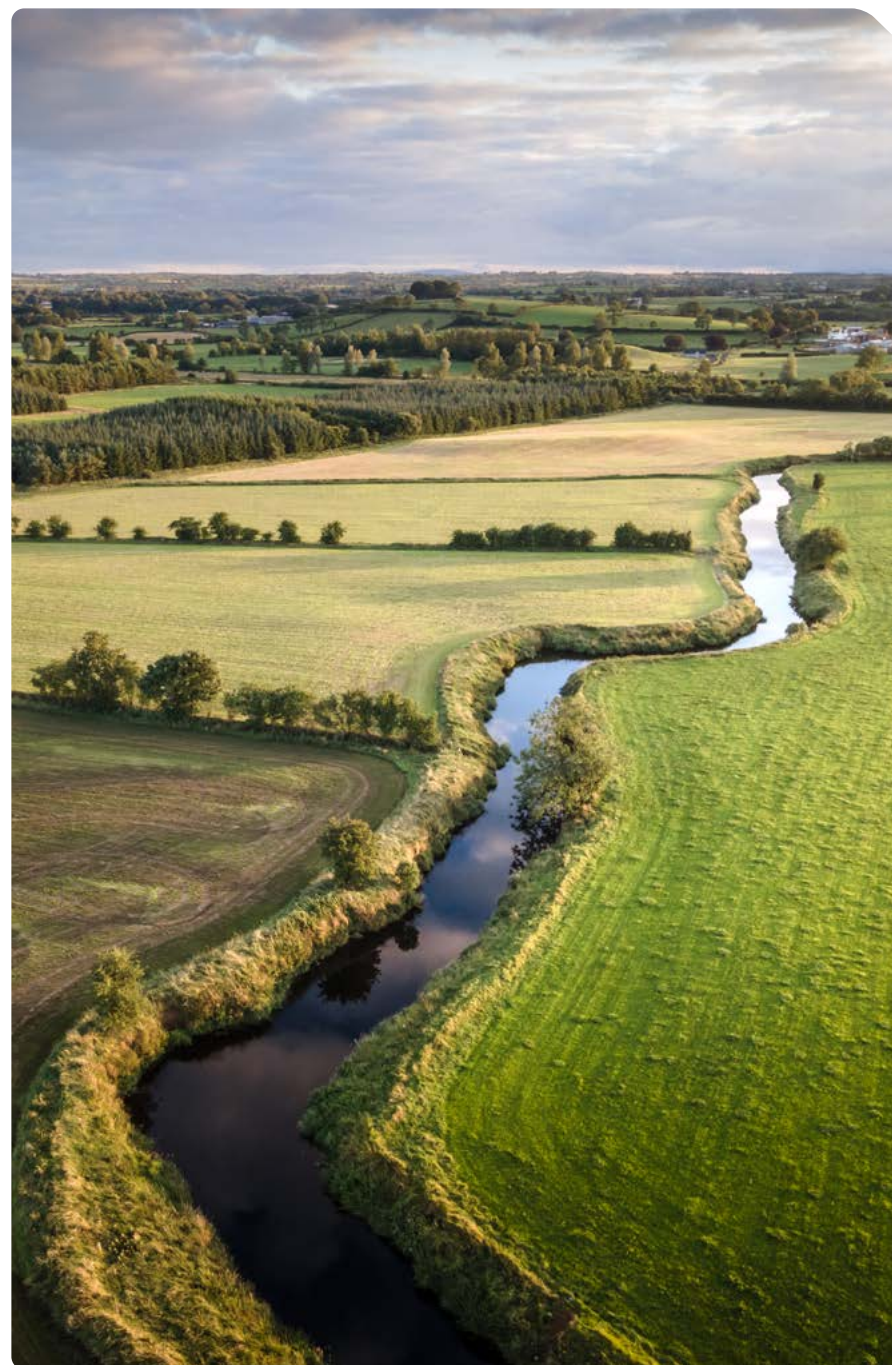
As the lead department for the 2022 Climate Change Act, the Minister must work with his Executive colleagues

to find a way forward following the A5 ruling. The Department reports to have raised [environmental concerns with the Department for Infrastructure](#) before the case was heard. More widely, the Executive must work together to balance their priorities against environmental and climate change commitments.

Working with the Chief Veterinary Officer and the TB Partnership Steering Group, the Minister published a [blueprint for the eradication of Bovine TB](#) (bTB).

The multi-sector group's plan includes regional testing and “evidence-based wildlife interventions”. It focuses on the themes of people, cattle and wildlife.

The Department is currently consulting on its [fourth carbon budget](#) for 2038-42, which helps guide the reduction of carbon emissions on the way to net zero. Experts have [proposed a 77% reduction on 1990 levels](#) for the fourth budget, which is “challenging but achievable”, but will require tough decisions to be taken by the Executive.



Department 07: Communities

September 2025

Actions delivered:

- [Intermediate Rent Scheme](#)
 - [Published Anti-poverty Strategy](#)
 - [Published Housing Supply Strategy](#)
-

Priorities ahead:

- [Work with stakeholders on Anti-poverty Strategy](#)
- [Meet housebuilding targets](#)
- [Take action on developing Casement Park](#)

After 18 years and a [court judgment](#) that the Communities Minister and the First and deputy First Ministers were in breach of their statutory duties, the department published its [anti-poverty strategy](#). Despite the wait, it has faced [strong criticism from campaign groups](#) for its lack of action plans, targets and funding. They have asked the Executive to withdraw their support for the strategy, saying “it is more harmful to have a strategy that will not address poverty, than no strategy at all”. There was the suggestion that parties disagree about the content of the strategy, with the First Minister saying it could “[go further](#)”. The Minister must work with the voluntary sector and other key stakeholders to find a constructive way forward on poverty.

To meet the social housing targets set out in the [Housing Supply Strategy](#), around 2,000 houses a year need to be built but in 2024-25 only [1,504 social homes were started](#). There is a gap between the ambition in the Department’s Strategy and the funding available to deliver new builds. Through the [Intermediate Rent Scheme](#), funding was released to begin construction on 300 homes at an affordable rents. The [Co-Ownership scheme](#) received £153m in funding to help 4,000 households to buy their own homes. A new Housing Executive initiative aims to [reduce the cost of temporary accommodation](#) by £75m over seven years as they purchase up to 600 homes over three years to reduce reliance on B&Bs and hotels. Northern Ireland also received £3.4m from the [Competition and Markets](#)

[Authority](#) to support the delivery of more social housing.

The Minister has developed the department's relationship with the Voluntary and Community Sector, providing a £1500 [support payment](#) to some VCS organisations and launching a new [Partnership Agreement](#) on behalf of the Executive that is "rooted in mutual trust, shared values and collaborative working", including fair funding principles to build good practice and guide funding

relationships in future. The Minister will also launch a £4m [Community Infrastructure Fund](#) to support the VCS to refurbish and improve community facilities.

[Casement Park received £50m](#) from the government's Spending Review, bridging the funding gap but leaving a shortfall of around £90m. This has been a long-standing commitment and so requires the Department to work closely with the GAA and others to resolve.



Department 08:

Finance

September 2025

Actions delivered:

- [Multi-year funding received for 2026-29](#)
 - [2025-26 Budget agreed](#)
 - [Announced transformation funding](#)
-

Priorities ahead:

- [Deliver multi-year budgets for NI Departments](#)
- [Finalise Fiscal Framework](#)
- [Continued emphasis on transformation, including second round of Transformation Fund](#)

The [2025-26 Budget](#) was agreed in March after a consultation period. As well as real terms uplifts for all departments, it included some specific extra funding for the Executive's PfG priorities like waiting times, skills, wastewater infrastructure and social housing. Further project and departmental allocations amounting to £118m were announced in the [June monitoring round](#). It is important that the Executive ensures funding allocations are connected to PfG priorities and projects, and that a clear focus on delivery is maintained.

In her June Spending Review, the Chancellor announced a [three-year funding settlement](#) for Northern Ireland, providing the highest real terms allocation since devolution. Furthermore, following

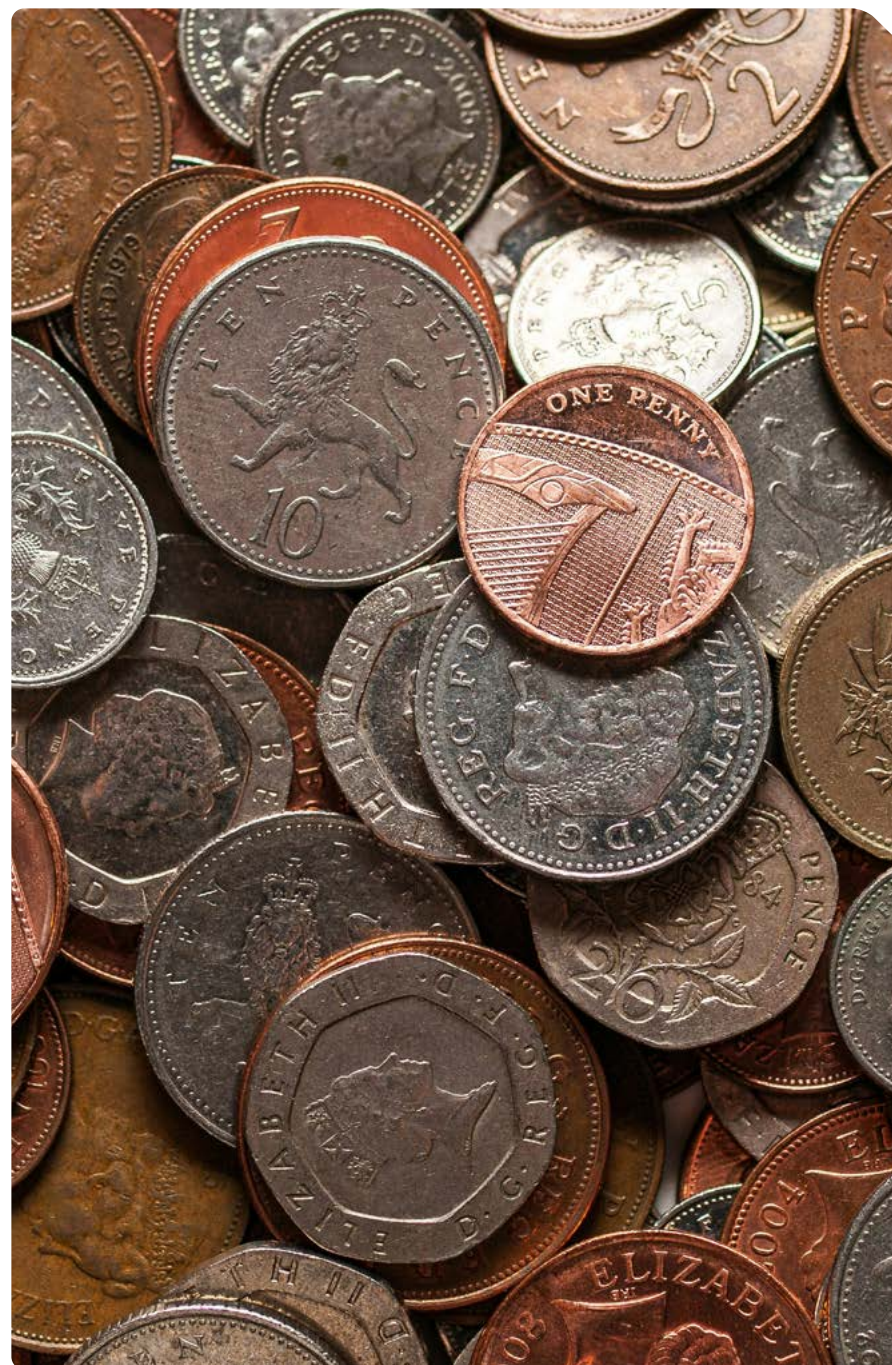
a review, the Treasury and Department of Finance agreed that [NI's relative need will be defined at 124%](#). Together, these provide public finances here with greater stability, and offer the chance to draw a line under the repeated budget crises of recent years. Multi-year funding provides the opportunity for the Executive to think strategically about the issues we face and plan ahead to tackle them. The settlement however is tight, and demand for public services is increasing, so it is still going to require difficult decisions about priorities. The Finance Minister must work with his colleagues to deliver the first multi-year budget for Northern Ireland Departments in over a decade, including proper planning for investment and transformation so that good public services are affordable now and in the future. This should include

thorough consideration of increased revenue raising.

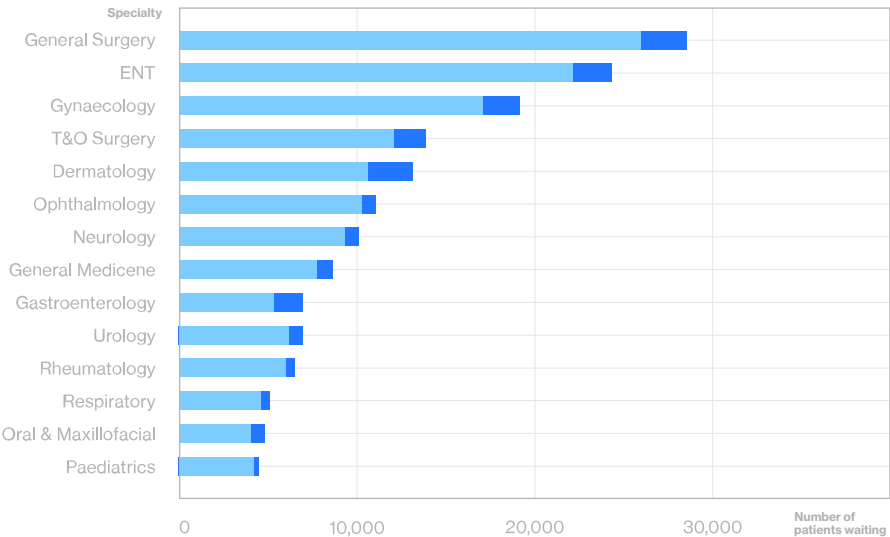
Negotiations are ongoing between the Finance Minister and the Treasury to deliver a full Fiscal Framework for Northern Ireland. This may include borrowing powers for the Housing Executive and renewed conversations about the level of need and fiscal devolution.

The Finance Minister announced [the first tranche of funding from the £235m Transformation Fund](#). £129m was divided between proposals including

Multidisciplinary Teams in primary care, SEN support, speeding up justice, and planning. The Executive Office also received £0.3m to undertake an assessment of digital transformation proposals. A second call for projects has been announced. With [scientific and economic experts appointed](#) to the Public Sector Transformation Board and its Terms of Reference agreed, the Executive must continue to drive forward with transformation. Importantly, this should not be confined to the £235m funding but should become a cross-cutting goal to improve public services across the board.



Health - Chart 01



Health - Chart 01

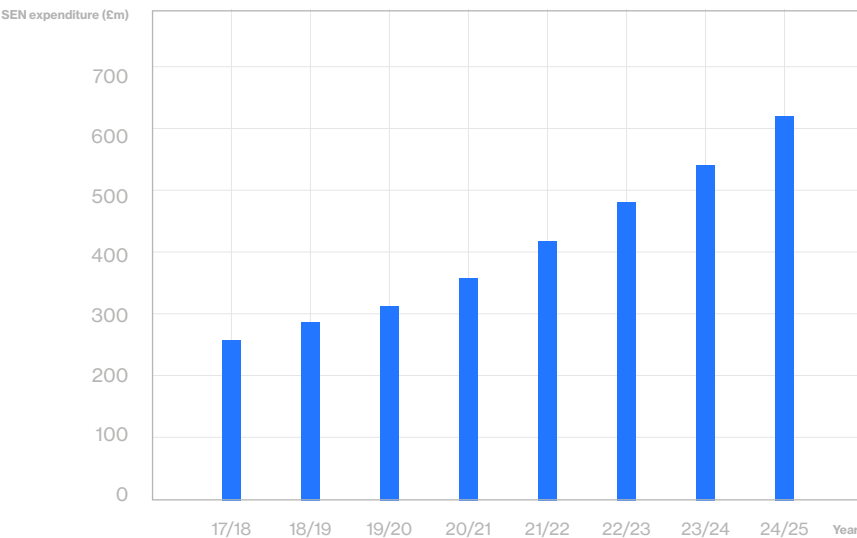
Patients waiting for a first consultant-led outpatient appointment
by specialty (Southern & Western Trusts)

Waiting lists across the board are longer than last year.

31 March 2025 31 March 2024

Source: NISRA - Northern Ireland Outpatient Waiting Time Statistics (31 March 2025)
Note: Due to the rollout of Encompass, the data above represents waits in the Southern and Western trusts only

Special Educational Needs - Chart 02



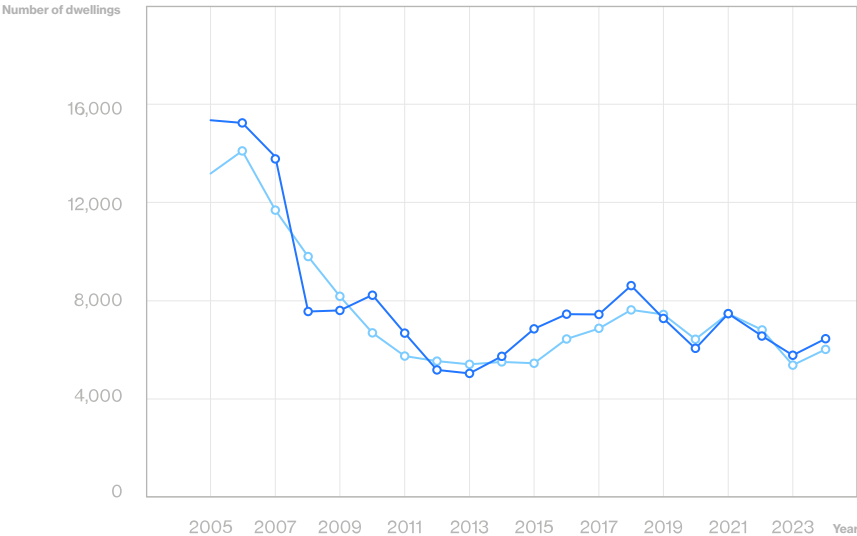
Special Educational Needs - Chart 02

Total SEN expenditure

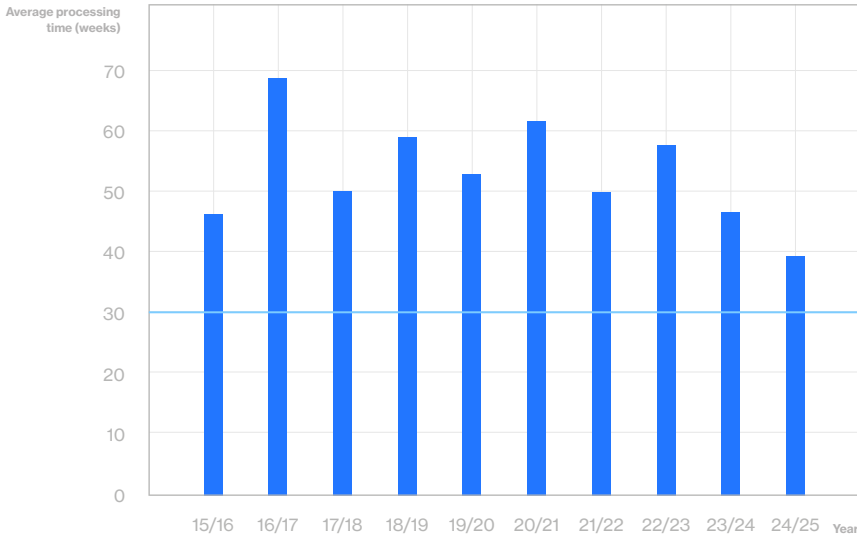
Despite a 145% increase in expenditure since 2017-18, getting appropriate provision for all SEN pupils remains a challenge.

Source: DE - SEN Reform Agenda (February 2025)

Housing - Chart 03



Planning - Chart 04



Housing - Chart 03

Annual new dwelling starts and completions (2005 – 2024)

April-June 2025 marked the busiest period of housing starts since 2018, but almost 38,000 households remain in housing stress.

Total new dwelling starts Total new dwelling completions

Sources: DoF - New Dwelling Statistics (20 August 2025); NISRA - Northern Ireland Housing Bulletin April-June 2025 (21 August 2025)

Planning - Chart 04

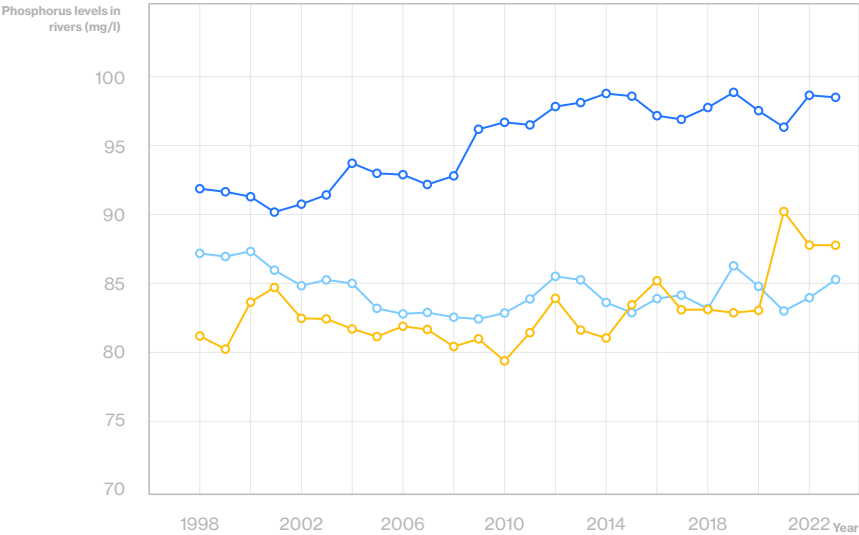
Average planning processing time for major developments

While planning times for major developments have improved in the last two years, it is still above the 30 week target.

Processing time 30 week target

Source: Northern Ireland Planning Statistics April 2024 – March 2025 (26 June 2025)

Productivity - Chart 05



Productivity - Chart 05

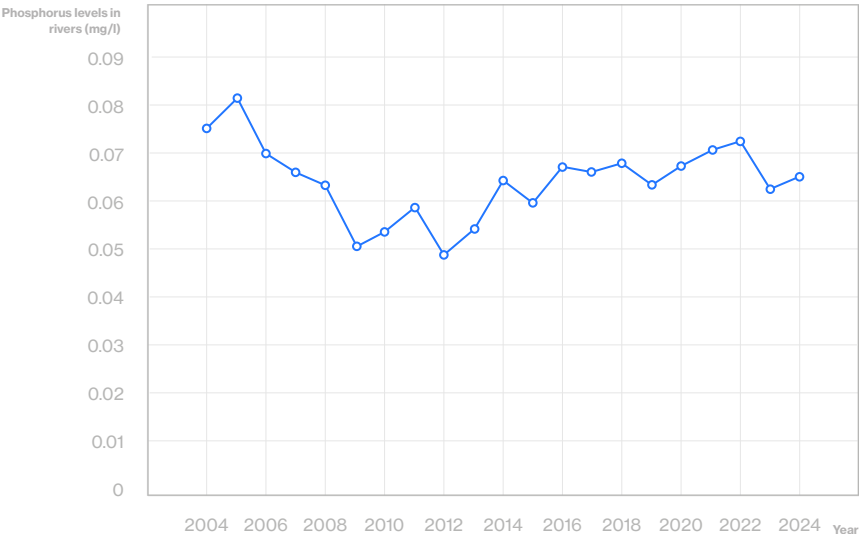
Productivity in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales relative to the UK = 100

While there has been some recent improvement, Northern Ireland's productivity remains over 12% below the UK average.

Scotland Wales Northern Ireland

Sources: ONS Regional Productivity Time Series (19 June 2025)

Water - Chart 06



Water - Chart 06

Phosphorus levels in Northern Ireland's rivers

The draft Nutrients Action Programme, Environmental Improvement Plan and Lough Neagh Action Plan all commit to reducing phosphorus in our rivers.

Source: PfG Wellbeing Framework, River Water Quality (5 June 2025)

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