

New Decade, New Approach

One year on



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Introduction

The restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive in January 2020 was welcomed with enthusiasm, after three years without government. New Decade, New Approach laid out an ambitious agenda for investment and reform in public services, to address both short- and long-term economic and social challenges. No one anticipated that the biggest challenge facing the new administration would be a global pandemic, and that Covid would dominate the new Executive's first year.

Three years without government left Northern Ireland with a growing set of policy challenges. Many of these challenges were long-standing, pre-dating the collapse of the Executive in January 2017. Without ministers to make decisions, problems accumulated: ever-increasing health waiting lists; lack of decisions about compensation for victims of historical abuse; a high-profile nurses' pay dispute; and Brexit. The Head of the Civil Service described this as a period of "stagnation and decay".

Last January, local political parties established a new Executive following the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) deal. NDNA is extremely ambitious, promising large-scale investment and reform across many public services. The deal includes commitments to resolve immediate pressures, for example the nurses' and teachers' pay disputes, and also address long-standing issues like health waiting lists, educational inequality, under-investment in infrastructure and climate change.

As the agenda for the returning Executive, NDNA was welcome in its recognition of the scale of Northern Ireland's economic and social challenges. However, its ambition also created some immediate difficulties. There was no funding package agreed alongside the commitments, which in subsequent weeks became a focus of debate between the Executive and Westminster. NDNA frequently refers to public service transformation, but these discussions centred on funding, rather than how much-needed change

and reform would be delivered. There was no agreed delivery plan, so there was no political agreement on prioritisation between the huge number of different elements within NDNA. To that end, NDNA said there would be quick publication of a Programme for Government setting out what the Executive would deliver over the next three years. However, development of this Programme for Government was postponed because of Covid, and publication has still not happened.

There are more than 80 specific commitments in NDNA. This document explores how some of the main actions were progressed during 2020 and considers the Executive's priorities for 2021.

- **How has the Executive functioned as a government during its first year?**
- **What has the Executive achieved, including compared to headline commitments in New Decade, New Approach?**
- **What should be the Executive's priorities for 2021?**

The Executive's first year

During a very challenging year there were some positive signs of progress, but the Executive must improve how it functions as a government.

What has the Executive delivered?

Efforts to tackle Covid dominated the first year of government. This is true most obviously in health, but the pandemic impacted all areas of the Executive's responsibilities.

In the spring, the healthcare system adjusted rapidly and effectively to deal with the expected surge in Covid cases. Case and death rates in Northern Ireland were then the lowest in the UK (although there were serious concerns about how well care homes were protected). This unfortunately was not sustained and by mid-October case rates were amongst the highest in Europe. This led to repeated on-off restrictions during the autumn. In late December, case rates accelerated again, accompanied by stark warnings about hospital capacity given Covid and other winter pressures.

Looking more broadly, the year saw some progress towards NDNA commitments and other goals. Nurses' and teachers' pay disputes were settled quickly. An Interim Mental Health Champion was appointed, and a mental health strategy consultation was published. Independent reviews have been launched on education provision and on educational underachievement. A discussion document on climate change legislation was published. Key infrastructure projects, like planning permission for the North-South Electricity Interconnector and a feasibility study for high speed rail, have moved forward.

How has Executive functioned as a government?

Pivotal's report Good Government in Northern Ireland raised serious concerns about how previous Executives governed Northern Ireland. On this front, the new Executive has seen some highs and lows.

NDNA and its ambitious agenda were heralded by all major parties. There was an acknowledgement that many of its commitments were long overdue. At the same time, the approaching publication of the RHI Inquiry report overshadowed the early months of 2020, as did the emerging threat from Covid. The impending end of the Brexit transition period, and the huge uncertainty it created for Northern Ireland's businesses and consumers, took up a large amount of political time and energy throughout the year.

During the spring, government functioned well in a time of crisis. The Executive showed common purpose, for example in the reconfiguration of health and other public services. Despite some disagreements during these early months, on the whole the First Minister (FM) and deputy First Minister (dFM) demonstrated good leadership and appeared to develop a better working relationship. Other Ministers led their departments as part of the collective effort and seemed to be supported by their colleagues. Daily press conferences provided transparency and an opportunity for scrutiny that had not happened before. The approach to easing lockdown restrictions in May and June showed the Executive carving its own path based on the medical and scientific evidence in Northern Ireland, rather than just following Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland.

However, the dFM's attendance at a major republican funeral on June 30 led to a serious breakdown in

The Executive must address Northern Ireland's long-standing economic and social challenges like health service reform, low skills and climate change.

relationship between the FM and dFM. The daily joint press conferences ceased, not re-starting for 70 days. The earlier unity and common purpose appeared to be lost. One casualty of this seemed to be the FM and dFM's failure to appoint a new Head of the Civil Service in September, leaving a key leadership position vacant during a crisis.

From August, Covid cases began to accelerate. As a result, restrictions were repeatedly imposed and relaxed, with a focus on preventing the health service becoming overwhelmed. Increasing fractures emerged between Executive ministers, particularly about how to balance measures to protect public health with the pressure to re-open the economy. This culminated in a low-point in mid-November when DUP ministers used a cross-community veto at the Executive to block continued Covid restrictions.

There were some improvements to structures underpinning government during the year. New arrangements for appointing Special Advisors and a strengthened Ministerial Code were published. A Party Leaders' Forum and a Sub-Committee on implementing the RHI Inquiry recommendations were set up, although it remains to be seen how these will contribute to improved government. Other NDNA commitments have yet to happen however, like establishing an independent Fiscal Council or the Joint Board to oversee transformation in health, education and justice.

The UK Government was a key driver behind NDNA and the return of the Executive in January 2020. Since then however there has been a lack of any obvious focus from the UK Government on ensuring that the wide range of commitments in NDNA are delivered.

Looking ahead

While there were some encouraging signs of more effective government in early 2020, it was very disappointing to see even a public health emergency deteriorate into divisions between Executive ministers along old battle-lines. This does

not augur well for the multitude of other economic and social challenges that need to be addressed urgently, such as health waiting lists, low skills and productivity, and climate change.

The Executive must find ways to make government work in Northern Ireland, particularly in a fragile political context where there are frequent opportunities for tension. This is particularly important given the many urgent policy challenges Northern Ireland faces. Coalitions require joint working and compromise. A properly-functioning government works through challenging issues, rather than allowing disagreements to lead to deadlock or the threat of collapse.

Culture change is needed if Stormont is to be effective. The five parties in the Executive should re-commit to working collectively towards a common purpose, set out in an agreed Programme for Government. The Executive needs to plan for the future, and reduce the chance of last-minute disagreements and crises. Collectively they must face the tough choices about investment and reform that are so overdue.

Priorities for 2021

- **The Executive must make coalition government work for the people of Northern Ireland, recognising the need for collective working, long-term planning and compromise.**
- **While managing the ongoing impacts of Covid, priority must be given to long-term economic and social challenges like health service reform, low skills and climate change.**
- **The Executive must urgently agree a multi-year Programme for Government setting out its joint work programme.**

Health

Areas of progress



Settled nurses’ pay dispute



Reconfiguration of health services to tackle Covid



Appointed interim mental health champion and published mental health 10 year strategy consultation document

Spring saw a swift and effective response to Covid. Hospitals were re-configured, GP-led assessment centres set up, some consultations changed to online or phone, and non-urgent procedures and appointments postponed. The challenge entering 2021 will be to continue to handle Covid alongside other winter pressures, plus facilitating a rapid vaccination programme. Concerns are growing about the impact of postponing non-Covid healthcare during 2020 on ever-growing waiting lists and, indeed, quality of life and mortality as new conditions may have gone undiagnosed or untreated.

NDNA put a clear priority on the urgent need for health and social care transformation, a much-discussed issue over the past decade in Northern Ireland but where significant action has been lacking. The re-configuration of healthcare achieved in 2020 shows that rapid change is possible. The priority now is delivering long-term transformation so the system is fit for delivering healthcare into the future. As noted in the Bengoa report, “The choice is not whether to keep services as they are or change to a new model. Put bluntly, there is no meaningful choice to make. The alternatives are either change, or change prompted by crisis.”

NDNA also emphasised Northern Ireland’s excessive waiting times. This included an action plan on waiting lists, and a specific commitment that no one waiting

NDNA actions still to be delivered



Introduce an action plan on waiting times



No one waiting more than a year for planned care on 30/09/19 still to be on waiting list by March 2021



Deliver health and social care reforms as set out in Bengoa, Delivering Together and Power to People reports

over a year for planned care at end September 2019 would still be on a waiting list by March 2021. Covid has prevented significant progress on this front, although steps have been taken to establish new dedicated sites for elective services. Meanwhile, however, waiting times have deteriorated further.

The latest data show 155,497 people in Northern Ireland waiting more than a year for a first consultant-led outpatient appointment (47.5% of all those waiting). In England, which has a population 30 times higher, there are 162,888 people waiting more than a year (3.7% of all those waiting).

Priorities for 2021

- **The Executive must prioritise the long-term transformation of the health and social care system so it is ready for the future.**
- **The Executive must develop an action plan to address the immediate issue of waiting lists, particularly for those waiting more than one year.**
- **In the coming months, the Executive must deal effectively with the Covid threat while rolling out vaccines and managing other winter pressures.**

Education

Areas of progress



Teachers’ pay dispute settled



Two new independent groups to review education provision and to address links between educational underachievement and socio-economic background



Additional funding for schools to deal with costs created by Covid

Children’s education was hugely disrupted during 2020. Schools closed in spring while many pupils missed classroom time in the autumn term. It is vital that the Executive prioritises the educational recovery of children who have struggled in their learning or wellbeing. This applies particularly to already disadvantaged children, who research shows were disproportionately affected by missed schooling. The ‘Engage’ programme provided a small amount of additional funding for schools, but this does appear adequate to address all learning loss.

The launch of two independent expert reviews promised in NDNA is welcome. One will look at the long-standing link between educational attainment and socio-economic background. The second is a broader review of education in Northern Ireland. It is vital that both produce action plans that are followed through to real changes in education outcomes for children and young people.

NDNA included a commitment to a new special educational needs (SEN) framework, to help ensure all children and young people achieve their full potential. In September, the Northern Ireland Audit Office published a report outlining the urgent need to evaluate support for children with SEN, noting that a review of SEN started by the Department of Education 13 years ago had still not been completed. Meanwhile, 89% of statement requests are not finalised within the 26-week limit.

NDNA actions still to be delivered



Address resourcing pressures in schools and ensure each school has a sustainable core budget



A new special educational needs framework



An enhanced approach to careers advice, curriculum, training and apprenticeships to enhance employability

Whilst educational attainment has slowly improved over recent years, many young people do not reach their potential, particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Action is required to address growing skills and training deficits. The NDNA commitment to enhancing careers advice, curriculum, training and apprenticeships, and the upcoming skills strategy are important opportunities to address these long-term problems.

Priorities for 2021

- **The Executive should prioritise the educational recovery of children and young people who have fallen behind due to missed school.**
- **Significant investment and operational re-development is required for Special Education Needs (SEN).**
- **Education, skills and training reform must be central to Northern Ireland’s economic recovery plan, to develop a workforce well set for the future.**

Climate change & environment

Areas of progress



Climate change legislation discussion document published



Forests for our Future programme commits to planting 18 million trees over next ten years



Clean Air Strategy discussion document published

NDNA actions still to be delivered



Climate change strategy, including legislation and targets for reducing carbon emissions



Energy strategy with ambitious targets and actions for a fair and just transition to a zero carbon society



Establish an Independent Environmental Protection Agency

At present, over a decade after the UK Climate Change Act, Northern Ireland has no climate change legislation nor emissions targets. Emissions here fell by just 20% between 1990 and 2018, compared to 43% in the UK as a whole. Meanwhile, momentum is growing globally, with many countries following the UK's lead in committing to achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050.

NDNA contained commitments to "tackle climate change head on" through a climate change strategy including legislation and targets. In February, the Assembly declared a climate change emergency. December saw the publication of a discussion document on climate change legislation, and an energy strategy is due at the end of 2021.

The Executive must give this issue high priority. It should agree a strategy that makes Northern Ireland a world leader in addressing climate change. Local businesses, organisations and individuals are already embracing this challenge in how they work and live. Covid and its impact have made many people re-evaluate the importance of the environment. Recognition of the impending climate crisis is growing. The Executive now needs to seize the chance to work to harness this energy, commitment and ideas.

NDNA commits to an independent environmental protection agency for Northern Ireland. An independent body tasked with implementing protection and regulation

would give clear separation of roles between itself and Executive departments.

Priorities for 2021

- **The Executive should develop a climate change strategy that makes Northern Ireland a world leader in environmental policy.**
- **The forthcoming Energy Strategy must demonstrate a realistic path to net zero which has buy-in across the Executive and all public bodies.**
- **The Executive should establish an independent environmental protection agency to safeguard the natural environment for current and future generations.**

Economy & infrastructure

Areas of progress



Financial support for businesses impacted by Covid through grants, rates relief and advice services



Support for apprenticeships and some free training places for people affected by Covid job losses



North/South Electricity Interconnector planning permission approved and feasibility study launched for high-speed rail link



Independent Infrastructure Commission Panel report published

During 2020 the Executive’s economic focus has been on the short-term response to Covid. That should continue, while a long-term strategy for Northern Ireland is also needed to take on persistent issues like low skills, low-paid jobs, economic inactivity, and poor levels of entrepreneurship, innovation and productivity. This economic strategy should demonstrate vision for the future as the global economy itself changes, and it should be a collective goal shared by all government departments. The strategy should embrace the opportunities and challenges for the Northern Ireland economy arising from the final Brexit deal.

Northern Ireland is held back by underinvestment in key infrastructure, particularly public transport, water, wastewater and roads. Positive steps during 2020 include full planning permission for the North/South Electricity Interconnector, a feasibility study for high speed rail, the ‘Living with Water in Belfast’ consultation, and new investment in blue/green infrastructure. The Executive has received £1.58 billion in capital funding for 2021-22. It urgently needs to agree a set of joint priorities for this investment.

Development of a regionally-balanced economy – another NDNA commitment – is a further priority. Northern Ireland’s economic challenges like low skills, low pay and

NDNA actions still to be delivered



Invest strategically to ensure Northern Ireland has the right mix of skills for a thriving economy



Develop a regionally balanced economy as a top priority



Drive the delivery of essential infrastructure projects, including through a multi-year Programme for Government to prioritise investment in infrastructure



Invest urgently in wastewater infrastructure

high economic inactivity are seen more starkly in areas outside of Belfast where opportunities are lower and infrastructure to support growth may not be in place.

Priorities for 2021

- **The Executive should agree a long-term economic strategy, including a skills transformation programme to prepare the workforce for the future economy.**
- **The Executive should agree joint priorities for investment in essential infrastructure, to stimulate and support economic growth.**
- **Investment, skills training and infrastructure development must support the regional balance of economic activity and employment opportunities.**

Priorities for 2021

The Executive’s first year after restoration was always going to be challenging. Covid made this much tougher. While some progress has been made towards the commitments in NDNA, many remain outstanding.

For 2021 and beyond, the Executive needs to produce an agreed Programme for Government that addresses Northern Ireland’s long-standing economic and social challenges, like health waiting lists, low levels of skills and productivity, educational inequality, and climate change.

While there were some encouraging signs of more effective government early in 2020, it was very disappointing to see even a public health emergency deteriorate into divisions between ministers later in the year.

Success in addressing Northern Ireland’s economic and social challenges will rely on the Executive finding ways to make coalition government work, particularly through more effective joint working, forward planning and strategic decision-making for the future.



How government works

The Executive must make coalition government work for the people of Northern Ireland, recognising the need for collective working, long-term planning and compromise.

While managing the ongoing impacts of Covid, priority must be given to long-term economic and social challenges like health service reform, low skills and climate change.

The Executive must urgently agree a multi-year Programme for Government setting out its joint work programme.



Education

The Executive should prioritise the educational recovery of children and young people who have fallen behind due to missed school.

Significant investment and operational re-development is required for Special Education Needs (SEN).

Education, skills and training reform must be central to an economic recovery plan.



Health

The Executive must prioritise the long-term transformation of the health and social care system so it is ready for the future.

The Executive must develop an action plan to address the immediate issue of waiting lists, particularly for those waiting more than one year.

In the coming months, the Executive must deal effectively with the Covid threat while rolling out vaccines and managing other winter pressures.



Climate change & environment

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The forthcoming Energy Strategy must demonstrate a realistic path to net zero.

The Executive should establish an independent environmental protection agency.



Economy & infrastructure

The Executive should agree a long-term economic strategy, including a skills transformation programme.

The Executive should agree joint priorities for investment in essential infrastructure.

Investment, skills training and infrastructure development must support the regional balance of economic activity.

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