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Time to deliver: the Northern Ireland Executive needs to step up and make a difference in 2025

One year since devolution was restored, the Executive needs to do much more in 2025 to address the huge challenges facing Northern Ireland. The stability of Stormont over the last year, following significant periods of collapse, is welcome – but the pace of actual change has been too slow. Policy development and implementation must accelerate over the next 12 months, according to the latest Executive tracker report from independent think tank Pivotal.

Northern Ireland requires urgent and focussed action on multiple fronts to address immediate pressures in public services, and to work towards solutions for longer-term challenges in society and the economy, according to a new report.

Findings from Pivotal, the independent think tank focused on Northern Ireland, indicate that 2025 must be a year when we see the Executive stepping up to make a difference, given the current crisis in public services and the lack of plans to take on long-standing structural problems.

Stormont showed stability in its first year back after collapse, which was welcome, but too often the Executive makes aspirational announcements that lack detail. Plans for change must be specific, affordable and lead to real change. Political stability is not enough in itself to improve people's day-to-day lives.

Published today [Monday, January 27], *Review of the first year of the restored Northern Ireland Executive* says that, despite progress in a number of areas, the Executive needs to accelerate efforts to tackle a swathe of problems like a weak economy, collapsing health and social care services, the crisis in wastewater infrastructure, and affordable housing.

The report highlights four key areas where progress is needed this year:

- **Delivery of meaningful improvements on the issues that matter to local people's lives day to day, in a way that can be felt by individuals and families.**

- **Agreement and action on plans to address Northern Ireland’s long-standing structural problems.**
- **Transformation plans for public services so they are fit for purpose now and in the future.**
- **Effective management of public finances to get the best for everyone in Northern Ireland.**

The paper reviews actions taken by the Executive and Departments over the last year, including some recent successes. Since Pivotal’s previous tracker report in September last year, some good work has been done.

A draft Programme for Government was published which, despite some criticisms about its lack of detail and measurable targets, was a welcome and necessary step forward. The draft Budget for 2025-26 was agreed without the same level of Executive disagreement that accompanied the previous Budget.

An Environmental Improvement Plan was published. A £25m pot for childcare was announced and rolled out, with 10,000 families accessing this support. There were significant moves to expand special educational needs (SEN) provision, including the announcement of eight new special schools, in response to big increases in demand in recent years. A strategy to End Violence Against Women and Girls was published.

However, the central finding from Pivotal’s new report is that the Executive needs to do much more in 2025. It needs to move from vague aspirations to agreeing actions plans, funding and targets that will result in real change.

Regarding improvements to the things that matter in people’s daily lives, there is a pressing need for the services that people interact with regularly – like the health service, schools, childcare and transport – to get better in a way that the public can feel and appreciate. People have put up with continuing deterioration in many cases, and this must be the year when improvements are delivered that make a difference to both quality and availability of services. The Executive should commit to measurable improvements in key public services, and be held accountable for that.

Northern Ireland has long-standing structural problems that act as a drag on broader progress. While these might not be fixable in the immediate term, realistic plans need to be put in place and the first steps taken to see them move in the right direction.

The list is long: a struggling health and social care system, the crisis in wastewater infrastructure, housing shortages, low productivity, and shortcomings in environmental protections. While the draft PfG mentions many

of these issues, it sets out aspirations for change rather than concrete steps towards solutions. Plans need to be established that are ambitious but realistic, as well as specific, detailed and measurable.

Transformation of public services is essential, not just to improve services that people rely on, but also to ensure they don't deteriorate further in future. Reform and transformation is one of the draft PfG's priorities and it should be at the core of everything the Executive does – starting with placing the Interim Public Service Transformation Board on a permanent footing and demonstrating progress with the recent Transformation Fund.

Underpinning everything else is the need to manage local public finances. The agreement of an Interim Fiscal Framework and a Budget Sustainability Plan are welcome, but the Executive needs to go further to get the best from NI's finances. A laser focus is needed to find potential savings and efficiencies, and proper consideration needs to be given to raising more revenue locally. The UK Budget in October provided a big injection of extra funding in 2025-26, which needs to be used strategically so it leads to improvements in public services here, not just plugging gaps.

Ann Watt, Director of Pivotal, said: "This year is a crucial time for Northern Ireland.

"While some good progress has been made since the re-establishment of the institutions, the Executive needs to go further and faster. There is no easy path for policymakers, but this year they need to demonstrate real improvements that people will notice day to day .

"The publication of a draft Programme for Government was an important milestone but comes with significant caveats. The lack of targets and plans for delivery are concerning. That chimes with a lot of what the Executive says and does – there is a plenty of aspiration, but few concrete plans.

"The scale of the challenge facing the Executive is enormous. The best approach may be to jointly agree a small number of priority areas where it can realistically make a difference in the rest of this mandate.

"It is imperative that the Executive lays out exactly how it will improve public services so that it can be held to those plans. The final Programme for Government is due to be published soon and it must contain meaningful and specific actions and measurable targets.

“Northern Ireland has a litany of structural problems in both social and economic infrastructure. Most of these have been exacerbated by years of inaction. This year we must see tangible first steps towards taking on these problems. Continuing on our current track is not an option – it will just lead to more of the same poor outcomes, or worse.

“Transformation of public services, so that they can meet the needs of today and be sustainable in future, is also essential. The Bengoa Report warned that the options for Health and Social Care were “change or collapse”, and unfortunately we are seeing what “collapse” looks like in practice. Sadly, this dynamic is not limited to the health service.

“None of this is easy. Making positive changes in both short-term outcomes and long-term sustainability at the same time will be difficult. This emphasises the need to get the very best from NI’s public finances, looking closely at short-term efficiencies and longer term reforms. While it is only a part of the answer, the Executive – and, indeed, all MLAs – need to be able to have a proper discussion about the pros and cons of raising or even creating local taxes.

“The UK Budget provided a £1.5bn injection of new funding, but further additions like this to the Block Grant seem unlikely in the next few years. There is a risk that this extra money will just be used to shore up the status quo rather than being spent strategically.

“Ultimately, the only outcome that will result from failing to act is that all Northern Ireland’s problems will continue to grow. There is a need for honest recognition of the scale of the problems, collective commitment to making a tangible difference this year, and for difficult choices to be made.”

Pivotal’s new report also provides a breakdown of headline actions from 2024 and priorities for 2025 for each Executive Department. Some of those details are below:

Health

With over half a million patients waiting for their first outpatient appointment with a consultant, health waiting lists continue to be a major issue for many of Northern Ireland’s population. There must be a funded plan to address this.

The recent Hospital Reconfiguration Framework is a milestone along the road to transforming Health and Social Care, but needs to be progressed to set out what specific changes will be made to how and where services are delivered. This is

one of the leading examples of where the Executive needs to be prepared to make difficult and unpopular choices.

Education

The Childcare Subsidy Scheme was accessed by 10,000 people in its first two weeks. Significant plans are in place to improve SEN provision, including a commitment to build eight new special schools and newly-announced sweeping plans for structural reform. The Minister announced a review of the schools curriculum.

The childcare subsidy cliff edge has been resolved, and funding will continue into the next financial year. In addition, an NI Audit Office report warned of the dire state of the schools estate.

Justice

A Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy was produced, as was a Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls, for which Justice will play a core role. The number of police officers is set to increase significantly, albeit not to the level the Chief Constable believes is required.

Backlogs in the criminal justice system continue to be enormous, with no clear solutions in sight.

Economy

A four-pillar vision for the economy was announced, but more needs to be done to realise it. More specifics are required about what is going to be done to deliver each pillar – especially increased productivity, given that this is the driver of economic growth, and low productivity has plagued the Northern Ireland economy for decades.

Infrastructure

The long-standing lack of investment in the local wastewater system has now become a full-blown crisis, hampering all sorts of capital investment, including the development of housing.

The opening of Grand Central Station means a modern transport hub has been established that should bring widespread benefits, including for both the economy and tourism.

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

The Lough Neagh crisis will take decades to overcome. There has been some progress with the action plan for the lough.

Work needs to continue towards climate change targets, particularly given how far Northern Ireland lags behind in reducing carbon emissions. An Environmental Improvement Plan was published, which will act as NI's first environmental strategy. An independent review of environmental governance was announced.

Communities

Actions include winter fuel payment supports and the welfare mitigations extension. However, the pace of delivery for social housing remains slow, with only 400 homes due to be completed this year, and 47,000 people on the waiting list. The Housing Supply Strategy has a stated aim of building 100,000 homes by 2037, a third of which would be social homes, but this is not actually a target and how it might be funded remains unclear. There is still no Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Finance

The Interim Fiscal Framework provided a lift to the Barnett formula and the Budget Sustainability Plan put in place important steps for better budgetary management. The Executive's draft Budget for 2025-26 was agreed for consultation, without sign of the disagreements that accompanied the previous Budget.

However, public finances remain stretched, with a continued focus needed on finding short-term efficiencies, longer term reforms, and proper consideration of local revenue raising.

ENDS

Notes to Editors

Ann Watt is available for media interviews.

For further information or to schedule an interview, contact Ryan Miller on 07789 552 340 or ryan@millercomms.co.uk

1. Pivotal is an independent think tank launched in September 2019. Pivotal aims to help improve public policy in Northern Ireland
2. Pivotal's published reports are available [here](#)

3. Pivotal's Board of Trustees provides oversight of its work. They are David Gavaghan (Chair); Richard Good; Sarah Creighton; Judith Gillespie; Jarlath Kearney; Sinéad McSweeney; Rosalind Skillen; Andrew McCormick; Seamus McAleavey; Alan Whysall
4. Pivotal's Director Ann Watt is a former senior civil servant with 25 years' experience in public policy development and delivery. Most recently Ann was Head of the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland (2014-2019)
5. Pivotal has received funding and in-kind support from Belfast Harbour Commissioners, The Community Foundation Northern Ireland, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, NICVA, Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University
6. For further information about Pivotal see pivotalppf.org or contact Pivotal's Director Ann Watt on 07932 043835
7. Follow Pivotal on Twitter @pivotalppf