

8 features of an effective Programme for Government

A Programme for Government (PfG) is a summary of the NI Executive's headline objectives, which have been agreed between the parties as their combined aims. It should set out priorities and explain how improvements will be measured and monitored.

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement requires agreement by the Executive of a PfG and Budget, and Assembly approval on a cross-community basis. Once approved, all ministers are obligated to deliver the PfG's contents.

Northern Ireland has not had a PfG since 2015. Following the return of the Assembly and Executive in February 2024, a draft PfG is due to be published soon. To help inform discussion, below are eight features of an effective PfG.

1. A small number of priority objectives



A PfG should contain the Executive's key priorities, with an emphasis on tackling NI's biggest strategic challenges. It should show evidence of agreement between ministers about key areas for improvement, and should not just include everything that departments do. Objectives should be outcomes, not inputs or outputs.

5. Connection to real life



The objectives and indicators in a PfG should be connected to real life, so people can see what improvements will mean for them, for example how hospital waiting times will be reduced, how achievement in education will be increased, or the number of houses that will be built.

2. The PfG should underpin everything ministers and departments do



Strong leadership and commitment are needed to focus on the priorities in the PfG and deliver the improvements in public services that it contains. The First Minister, deputy First Minister and all departmental Ministers should lead the way in showing how the PfG determines what they do.

6. Linkage between the Programme for Government and budget allocations



As the summary of the government's objectives, the PfG should underpin decisions about how funding is allocated, both in the setting of budgets and during in-year monitoring rounds. This should mean funding is targeted towards the PfG objectives, while other lower priority areas receive less.

3. Joint ownership across departments



PfG objectives should be jointly owned by all ministers and departments, not divided up between them. The PfG should recognise how multiple departments contribute to each objective. The Executive parties should be aware of the risk that a PfG that is negotiated between parties with disparate views may end up lacking ambition.

7. Results in actual change in what government departments and agencies do



The PfG should change the work of government departments and agencies, rather than just being a presentational exercise. It should be followed up with clear delivery plans, and then a relentless focus on bringing about improvements. Data and evidence should be used to refine plans, with a continual process of learning and review.

4. Clear information about how success will be measured and scrutinised



Reporting arrangements should be set out clearly, particularly how appropriate timely data will be used. Each PfG element should have headline data and contributing indicators. How and when data will be reported should be provided, together with arrangements for scrutiny and challenge. Targets should be included for how data will improve.

8. Named individuals with responsibility for delivering objectives



The names of ministers and civil servants who have lead responsibility for each element of the PfG should be included.