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The Executive must work together on long-standing social and economic challenges, while still managing the pandemic response – new report from think tank Pivotal

Covid-19 remains a major concern and continues to create multiple challenges for Northern Ireland's government. However, the Executive must now also address other priorities that have been placed on hold during the pandemic. Issues like health service reform, upskilling the workforce, climate change and infrastructure investment are of pressing importance. Yet real progress will only be possible with improvements to how government works, including a Programme for Government with multi-year budgets and finding common ground on the NI Protocol, according to a new report from think tank Pivotal.

Covid-19 has dominated the agenda of Northern Ireland's government for the last 18 months. Although there have been some notable policy successes, the Executive has continued to struggle to operate collectively. While still managing Covid, Stormont must now prioritise transformation of the health system, agreeing ambitious targets to tackle climate change, and making coalition government work for the people of Northern Ireland.

Policymakers and other officials must continue to handle the pandemic while pushing ahead with Northern Ireland's long-standing policy needs, according to a new report from Pivotal, the independent think tank focused on Northern Ireland.

Challenges include rejuvenating and rebalancing an economy that suffered during the pandemic but also has fundamental weaknesses that go back decades; supporting children with their educational and developmental recovery while addressing problems with schools' financing; and investing in creaking water and sewage infrastructure.

The *Pivotal Tracker—priorities for Northern Ireland: September 2021*, published today [Monday, Sept 6] assessed how government in Northern Ireland has functioned so far in 2021 and highlighted what the priorities should be for the rest of this mandate and for the new Executive established after next May's election.

The report found that the Executive has done some good work in 2021, including the rapid and well-organised vaccine rollout, agreeing a ten-year mental health strategy, and an expert review of educational underachievement.

However, there have also been serious shortcomings. Health waiting lists are off the scale, and will continue to grow without serious, sustained investment and reform of the entire health system. Long-standing issues with schools budgets have still not been resolved, and spending per pupil is both lower than in the rest of the UK and lower than it was here ten years ago. The Executive has failed to agree a position on the Northern Ireland Protocol that would then allow it to speak with one voice in the interests of Northern Ireland.

Furthermore, the failure to produce a Programme for Government is a massive shortcoming for government and a symbol of the fact that the Executive struggles to operate collectively.

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Ann Watt, Director of Pivotal, said: “There is no doubt that 2021 has been a difficult year for policymakers, who have faced challenges right across public services because of Covid. While the pandemic remains a huge concern, many other issues are also pressing.

“Health waiting lists are off the charts. These must be brought under control, allowing patients to receive the assessments and treatments they need. At the same time, the health and social care system needs to be transformed along the principles of Bengoa and other independent reports. That is the only way to ensure the system will be viable in the years and decades to come.

“Health is probably the single most important policy priority at this time – and that would be the case even without the pandemic – but reform in how government works is arguably just as important, because this underpins everything else.

“The Executive needs to show unity of purpose and a sense of shared responsibility. Too often when things go wrong, different political parties accuse each other of being at fault. The Executive is a single government and should behave as such.

“It is a major failing that the Executive has not produced an agreed Programme for Government (PfG). While it is now too late for this mandate, given elections are scheduled for May 2022, creating a PfG with a full policy agenda should be the first item on the agenda for the new government.

“That PfG should be underpinned by multi-year budgets, which are another NDNA commitment. The current single-year budgeting process hampers the sort of long-term reforms Northern Ireland needs in order to thrive. Such improvements would provide a better foundation to take on other issues – and there are plenty that need taken on.

“A new economy needs to be crafted, based on better worker skills and more business innovation. Climate change targets and specific, timetabled actions need to be set. The education system also needs significant reform, but it makes sense that the ongoing independent review is completed before plans are drawn up for that.

“The Northern Ireland Protocol is a prime example of an opportunity missed due to political disagreements. Different parties have made their views known but there has been no progress towards an Executive policy that would allow practical discussions about what is best for local businesses and consumers, rather than the party-political squabbling that currently dominates. “The need for sweeping changes in the working of the Executive and civil service was made quite clear by the RHI case. Reforms were promised in *New Decade, New Approach* (NDNA), but these promises have not been fulfilled.

“So far, 2021 could have been better. However, there is still time for some progress to be made ahead of next year’s election – and the formation of a new Executive in May will provide an opportunity to move forward on the breadth of challenges facing Northern Ireland.”

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Priorities for governmental reform identified in the Pivotal Tracker include:

- Prepare for the early agreement of a Programme for Government after next May's election, including multi-year budgets
- Prioritise working together on Northern Ireland's long-term challenges, like low skills, low pay, climate change and infrastructure investment
- Find an agreed negotiating position on the Northern Ireland Protocol that secures the best outcomes for Northern Ireland's businesses and consumers

The Pivotal Tracker also looked at successes and shortcomings in four key policy areas – health, education, climate change and the environment, and economy and infrastructure – and identified the current priorities for government in those areas.

Health

The Covid-19 vaccination programme was rolled out rapidly and successfully. An Elective Care Framework was produced, providing a roadmap to reduce the backlog of people waiting for assessment or treatment. A ten-year mental health strategy was published, setting out a fresh vision for this historically under-resourced area.

However, the reconfiguration of health and social care as envisaged in Bengoa and other independent reports has not progressed well. Waiting times are sky high, with 53.0% of patients waiting more than one year for a first outpatient appointment, compared to 5.6% in England. While the vaccine distribution system was set up rapidly and effectively, the uptake among some groups, including younger people, has been disappointing.

Priorities for the coming year:

- Agree a funded plan for the long-term transformation of the health and social care system so it is able to deliver good quality services now and in the future
- Support the funding, actions and targets needed to radically reduce health waiting times
- Deliver effective health services over the coming winter months

Education

The Engage Programme and other initiatives aimed at restarting children's education and broader development, such as summer schemes, were taken forward. The expert review of educational underachievement was published, highlighting links between social background and underperformance at school. A new special educational needs (SEN) framework was published, and received funding commitment.

The SEN framework is not before time, given the findings of a Public Accounts Committee report in February which said children with extra needs were routinely being failed by the system, including that 85% of statementing assessments are not completed within the statutory 26-week target. A huge number of schools continue to run over budget and spending per pupil is now 20% lower than in Scotland and 5% lower than in England and Wales.

The panel for the broad Independent Review of Education is due to be appointed in September, with the review expected to take 18 months. This must be kept on schedule as significant reforms of the education system are pressing, and the findings of this review should be central to that process.

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Priorities:

- Ensure that pupils are supported to recover from disrupted schooling during Covid, with a targeted approach on the most vulnerable
- Deliver radical improvements in assessment and provision for children with Special Educational Needs
- Ensure every school has a sustainable core budget

Climate change and the environment

Northern Ireland finally took steps towards commitments on carbon emissions and other environmental measures, with two competing climate change bills currently moving through the Assembly. A public consultation has taken place on an energy strategy and decarbonisation strategies. Commitments have been made to craft a Green Growth Strategy and a Climate Action Plan.

However, while these are welcome developments, it remains the case that Northern Ireland has made no climate commitments, has no strategy, and no plans with specific actions. Carbon emissions here have fallen by just 18% since 1990, compared to a reduction of 44% in the UK as a whole. NDNA promised an independent environmental protection agency for Northern Ireland, and this has yet to move forward.

Priorities:

- Legislate for a long-term emissions reduction target with a deliverable plan showing how it will be achieved
- Publish an ambitious energy strategy setting out how Northern Ireland will reach a net zero carbon energy system
- Set up an independent environmental protection agency to safeguard the natural environment

Economy and infrastructure

A new long-term vision for revitalising the local economy, *10X Economy*, was published in May with the ambitious aim of transforming local innovation and skills. The creation of a new Infrastructure Commission was announced in August. The High Street Voucher scheme is being rolled out and could give local retail and hospitality a boost worth over £100m following a terrible 18 months for the sector. A strategic rail review was announced to look at all-island connectivity.

The ambition shown in these various plans is welcome, especially given Northern Ireland's decades of economic underperformance and structural underinvestment, but there is always a risk grand plans do not translate into real-world improvements. Moreover, it is not enough to grow the local economy, this growth has to be shared by everyone (delivering a regionally-balanced economy is another NDNA commitment). Ongoing concerns include how water and sewage infrastructure is at capacity, and the lack of both anti-poverty and childcare strategies.

Priorities:

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- Use newly published strategies to drive a transformation in skills and innovation, ensuring these benefit all sections of the population
- Agree actions that demonstrate a clear commitment to a regionally balanced economy
- Put in place multi-year funding for long-term infrastructure investment

ENDS

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Notes to editors

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1. Pivotal is an independent think tank launched in September 2019. Pivotal aims to help improve public policy in Northern Ireland.
2. Pivotal plans to publish regular updates of this tracker report providing an assessment of policy priorities in Northern Ireland.
3. Pivotal's previous report – *Retaining and regaining talent in Northern Ireland* can be found [here](#)
4. Pivotal's earlier reports – *New Decade, New Approach – one year on* can be found [here](#); *Education, skills and training for young people aged 14-19* can be found [here](#); *Priorities for recovery – a briefing paper for the Northern Ireland Executive's return from recess* can be found [here](#).
5. Earlier reports, *Covid-19 in Northern Ireland - Moving out of lockdown* and *Covid-19 in Northern Ireland - A New Economic Vision* can be found [here](#). These reports looked at how Northern Ireland can best recover from Covid-19.
6. Pivotal's first report *Moving Forward – putting Northern Ireland on track for the future* was published in November 2019. Its second report *Good Government in Northern Ireland* was published on 5 March 2020.
7. Pivotal's Board of Trustees provides oversight of its work. They are Peter Sheridan (Chair), Chief Executive of Cooperation Ireland; Lisa Faulkner Byrne, Project Coordinator, EPIC; Richard Good, public policy consultant; Olwen Lyner, Chief Executive, NIACRO; Seamus McAleavey, Chief Executive, NICVA; and Alan Whysall, Honorary Senior Research Associate, Constitution Unit, University College London.
8. A wider Reference Group has helped steer the development of Pivotal and will provide ongoing guidance.
9. Pivotal's Director Ann Watt is a former senior civil servant with 20 years' experience in public policy development and delivery. Most recently Ann was Head of the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland (2014-2019)
10. 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
11. For further information about Pivotal see pivotalppf.org or contact Pivotal's Director Ann Watt on 07932 043835 .
12. Follow Pivotal on Twitter @pivotalppf .